

ABSTRACT

A Study on Acting Theory and Performance

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This thesis seeks to review the historical context of the evolution of acting, both on stage and through film, as well as the works of acting theorists from around the world in order to analyze a few selected acting techniques. It discusses the shifts in perspectives of acting throughout the Realism Movement in theatre, which first gained momentum in the works of Konstantin Stanislavsky and was perpetuated as film grew in prominence. Finally, this thesis will take this analysis and apply it to my experience of rehearsing and performing in Baylor University's October 2020 production of Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms*, directed by Dr. David Jortner for online streaming presentations, taking a special interest in how adaptations necessary to the play due to COVID-19 restrictions affected the acting styles needed to tell the story. This written portion of the thesis is to be taken in conjunction with the Baylor University Theatre 2020 Production of *She Kills Monsters*.

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A STUDY ON ACTING THEORY AND PERFORMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Though Aristotle's ancient treatise on theatre, *The Poetics*, discussed some element germane to acting, formal methodological writings on the theory of acting, began to appear in the late nineteenth century. Some theorists attempt various techniques as actors themselves and then report the results; others attempt to watch other performers and analyze the success and problems they see. There is also variation in the style of techniques these theorists find helpful. Some, typically Russian and Western theorists, tend to focus on psychological techniques supported by secondary physical training, while Eastern theorists tend to focus on physical techniques that in turn influence the psyche. In this paper, I will be discussing various theories from scholars around the world, and then reporting my findings as I used these theories to inform my performance as Agnes in Baylor Theatre's 2020 production of *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* by Qui Nguyen. Overall, it has become evident that no one theory will be entirely fail proof for any one actor in any one performance. The scholars I discuss in this paper range from Eastern to Western theatre, and span the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries; therefore, they all have very different approaches and define success in different ways. Rather than attempt to diagnose what is the best theory, this essay will take all of these methodologies and discuss how they were helpful when specifically performing the role of Agnes Evans in *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms*

CHAPTER TWO

Acting Methodologists

While theatre has been discussed in technical terms since Aristotle, thinking of the practice of acting itself in these terms became increasingly more commonplace in the late nineteenth century. Many of the most influential acting theorists and methodologists came from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When thinking of what makes a good actor, the first question that comes to a lot of people's minds is "Did I believe their performance?". This, however, was not always the case. There was a time when a style of acting that modern day viewers would dismiss as "melodramatic" or "nonrealistic" was the epitome of a perfect performance. An example of a nineteenth century artist with this style of methodology would be "François Delsarte, a ... French instructor of acting and singing whose system of associating gestures with corresponding emotions was taken up by stage actors in Europe and the United States."¹ Delsarte published his taxonomy of gestures, as he along with many others believed that emotions should have corresponding gestures, and these should be memorized and used by great performers. This methodology, when looked at with a twenty-first century eye, seem "over the top" and "cheesy", but at the time these were some of the greatest actors in the industry. While this may seem odd to

¹ Claudia Springer, Julie Levinson, Victoria Duckett, Arthur Nolletti, and David Sterritt. *Acting*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015. (3)

the modern eye, Delsarte would have considered his method extremely realistic, as these gestures were modelled after common, real life movements that he observed in people. This is one example of how the critical reception of realistic acting has evolved over time.

In contrast to Delsarte, Konstantin Stanislavsky opened an acting school that was revolutionary as it focused on a character's psychology as a pillar of good acting. Stanislavsky was one of the first theorists to place emphasis on an actor's internal self when portraying a character. He taught strategies to access a character's psyche, rather than how to physically portray emotion. Importantly, Remember that while Stanislavsky's new methods accompanied the Realism Movement, previous methodologists like Delsarte would have also described their techniques as realistic. The taxonomy of gestures was created as a way to imitate how people act in real life. What made Stanislavsky revolutionary was that, rather than imitating how people move, he sought to imitate the psychology that moves people. This new approach to acting eventually made its way to America, where Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler popularized his teachings in their acting company "the Group Theatre." Though the Group Theatre disbanded after ten years due to differences in interpretations of Stanislavsky's work, it is credited with spreading Stanislavsky's revolutionary approach throughout the U.S.. After the disbanding of the Group Theatre, Strasberg went on to be the artistic director of the acclaimed American school, the Actors Studio. Both the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio followed Stanislavsky's teachings, the Group Theatre focused much more

heavily on Stanislavsky's use of memory to impact emotion, while the Actors Studio focused more on his ideas about action and reaction. These American practitioners of Stanislavski's methods helped popularize the style of realistic acting, which remains influential today.

Following Stanislavsky's methods came the influence of Richard Boleslavsky, another very respected Russian acting methodologist. Boleslavsky was actually a dropout of the Moscow Art Theatre who came to America and began to introduce Stanislavsky's teachings to the country. Among Boleslavsky's American students was Lee Strasberg, who, as was mentioned earlier, was one of the founding members of the Group Theatre, which is credited with the widespread acceptance of Stanislavsky's method in the United States.² Boleslavsky also published his work, *The First Six Lessons*, which will be discussed later in the paper.

American theorist Sanford Meisner was an extremely influential methodologist who taught his own variations on the methods of Stanislavsky. Meisner performed as a company member at the Group Theatre alongside Stella Adler and under Lee Strasberg's direction, however he ended up adopting more of Adler's ideas as the Group Theatre disbanded shortly after Adler visited Paris to study under Stanislavsky himself. Adler came back to America claiming that Stanislavsky no longer focused on Emotion

² Marowitz, Charles. "Getting Stanislavsky Wrong." *New Theatre Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2014): 210–12. doi:10.1017/S0266464X14000438. (1)

Memory, but rather the concept of “playing the action.”² Meisner agreed with Adler, and later denounced the idea of Emotion Memory, and claimed that Stanislavsky did as well in his later years. Meisner’s central focuses were on the uses of imagination and real action, as well as relating and reacting to one’s acting partner. Meisner went on to teach at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, and taught notable film actors Joanne Woodward, Gregory Peck, and Robert Duvall, as well as playwright David Mamet.³

Another twentieth century theatre artist whose methodologies influenced acting was German director Bertolt Brecht. Unlike Stanislavsky and Boleslavsky, Brecht placed little emphasis on “realism,” as this fooled the audience into an escapism mindset, excusing them from any real thought, from his point of view. Brecht preferred methods that prevented audiences from becoming extremely emotionally engaged by the play, in order to inspire critical thought and self-reflection about the play instead. Also, unlike Stanislavsky and Boleslavsky, Brecht was not an actor, but a playwright and director. Many even view him as “Europe’s most famous Marxist playwright, director, and theatre theorist.” He is even referred to as “Germany’s answer to Shakespeare, but with a political twist.” Brecht most valued the idea of forcing the audience to walk away from a production with new thought. Some of the defining characteristics of Brecht’s works are “separation of actor and character... overt engagement with the audience... [and]

³ “Meisner Sanford (1905–97).” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

satirical engagement with society.”⁴ While it is fairly rare to find a purely Brechtian production today, his methods are widely respected and used by both directors and actors even into the twenty-first century. One of Brecht’s most famous plays was *Mother Courage*, which Meryl Streep starred in in 2006.

Japanese theatre artist Yoshi Oida was a Japanese actor and director who was trained in Kyôgen and Kabuki, which are two very physically specific and precise traditional theatre forms popular in Japan. In the 1960s, Oida was invited by Peter Brook to study and perform in France, which gave Oida a very interesting and internationally influenced view of acting. Oida’s theories are a fascinating blend of common Japanese and Western methods, as well as a blend of classical and contemporary theatre. Oida argues that this blend of techniques is most useful for the actor, and that an actor should use any combination of techniques “depending on the text, context, and theatrical style.”⁵ Oida’s practices are much more physically based than the other theorists discussed in this thesis, as physicality is extremely important in Asian acting methods. He is an advocate for the actor being hyperaware of every part of their body at all time, and the importance of the subtlety of movement.

The final methodologist this thesis will analyze is Anne Bogart, who is a currently active theatre artist whose career has spanned the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

⁴ Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (Routledge 2008).

⁵ “Oida Yoshi (b. Kobe, Japan, 26 July 1933).” *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting*, 2015.

Bogart has spent her career as both a teacher and director, focusing on “embrac[ing] mainstream needs while simultaneously challenging conventional perceptions.” Bogart was heavily influenced by Jerzy Grotowski, a 1960s theatre artist who specialized in very experimental theatre. Similar to Brecht, she has experimented heavily with audience engagement, such as separating her audience by men and women in order to elicit specific responses. This paper will focus on Bogart’s ideas of key motivators in theatre, specifically love and fear. According to Bogart, these are two of the most powerful and prominent motivators in any piece of art, as well as in life. ⁶

⁶ Lampe, Eelka. "From the Battle to the Gift: The Directing of Anne Bogart." *TDR (1988-)* 36, no. 1 (1992): 14-47. Accessed April 15, 2021. doi:10.2307/1146178. (28)

CHAPTER THREE

Acting Methodologies

Konstantin Stanislavsky

The works of Konstantin Stanislavsky are a starting point for virtually all Western acting practitioners. As a young actor, Stanislavsky was discontent with his performances along with the standard of acting as a whole. Stanislavsky criticized the concept of “ham acting,” or acting with little substance. Unhappy with what he calls “Stock in Trade” style acting, which basically implies that the actor has a set of tricks or gimmicks that they know will work to convey what they are attempting to portray, rather than living in the moment and reacting naturally to the given circumstances of the play to achieve this success, Stanislavsky decided to study both himself and his fellow actors to discover how to solve what he felt was a problem in the industry. The result of these studies was the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre, which was a combination theatre and acting school owned, directed, and taught by Stanislavsky and his partner, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. This also resulted in some of the most studied texts in the Western world of acting, most notably *An Actor’s Work*⁷, written by Stanislavsky. In this book, Stanislavsky stresses the psychological gateways to great acting through techniques such as “The If” statement and “Emotion Memory.” The concept of “The If” statement is that the actor utilizes their imagination to create a circumstance in their mind that would help them relate to the given circumstances of the play or scene. For example, should the actor

⁷ Stanislavsky, Konstantin, and Jean. Benedetti. *An Actor’s Work on a Role* London ;: Routledge, 2010.

need to enter a scene in an emotional state of intense grief, they might imagine to themselves what it would feel like *if* their significant other had just died. Another technique is used by many actors under the name “substitution,” as you substitute, in your imagination, a loved one into the circumstances of the play in order to enter a more realistic emotional state. This was derived from Stanislavsky’s ideas of Emotion Memory, as the actor is using their own life and emotions to inform their performance. This concept went on to be the basis for many American techniques in which the actor, in preparation for the scene, vividly creates a situation in their mind that might produce a particular emotion. This concept will be discussed in the section on Sanford Meisner, but it is important to note that it was directly influenced by Stanislavsky’s Method. When brought over to America, however, Stanislavsky’s methods did take many different forms and courses. Many Americans are relatively familiar with the term “Method Acting,” however this term can refer to many different methodologies. Originally, it was Stanislavsky’s Method as taught by the Group Theatre, which was directly based on Stanislavsky’s work. As the Group Theatre disbanded, many other acting studios interpreted the Method in different ways. Some focused more heavily on his emphasis on Emotion Memory, which is the idea that memories are a great access point for emotion, while others, such as Sanford Meisner, created their own techniques or exercises as extensions of Stanislavsky’s methodologies. While there are many very valid and healthy forms of “Method Acting,” some use the term to refer to a fairly unhealthy misconception of Stanislavsky’s teachings. There were a few small theatres and studios that used his teachings to justify abusing actors’ minds and bodies, and this is when actors seem to be hurting themselves physically, mentally, or emotionally in order to embody a role.

Richard Boleslavsky

Richard Boleslavsky's ideas are extremely similar to those of Stanislavsky. In his work, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*⁸, he addresses many important ways to approach the acting process, however in this thesis I will be focusing on his ideas in the chapter entitled *Characterization*. In this work, he discusses the importance of creating a completely unique, specific character. Unlike other teachers, Boleslavsky feels that the physical aspect of the character should be one of the final steps for an actor, perfected in the last few days of rehearsal. He seems to feel that if the actor begins to adopt physical characterization too early in the process, they risk inaccuracy since they have not fully researched and lived in the character. He claims physical characterization work should be done "as a rule, the last two or three days of rehearsal... Not before you are well settled in the part, and know its structure well... Some actors prefer to start with characterization. It is more difficult, that is all. And the result is not so subtle, the choice of elements not so wise as it might be if you followed the inward thread of the part first." In this chapter he also begins to stress the importance of observation, something he expands upon in the next chapter, claiming that "the gift of observation must be cultivated in every part of your body, not only in your sight, and memory." Based on his description, characterization is a learned behavior, and therefore each aspect of a character's physicality can be borrowed from others. He uses Ophelia, and the importance of her nobility and desire to maintain dignity and how that manifests itself physically, as an example. The idea of using physicality to access a character is a common one. There

⁸ Boleslavsky, Richard. *Acting : the First Six Lessons* New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1998. (65)

are psychological bases for how physicality can affect your emotional state. The issue with this method does become, however, that the actor must avoid choosing postures that are simply cliché's for emotional attitudes. No actor, unless it is strategic, wants to simply reenforce a stereotype, however a general idea of how people move based on their life situation can be helpful.

Bertolt Brecht

Brecht's ideas are based on the idea that it is not the audience's desire to relate to characters, but to be able to witness their strangeness. This prompts the actor not to find something in the character that they can relate to or cling to, but rather to find in the character what makes them an outcast, and concentrate on that. In one compilation of his writings entitled *Brecht on Theatre*⁹, he mentions what he calls the "Alienation Effect," or "A-Effect." The A-Effect is meant to alienate the audience so that they might criticize the incident, rather than the incident be an illusion of life. This involved the actor living as long as possible as a "reader," rather than attempting to live the life of her character. Brecht asks the actor to memorize their first impression of the character. This forces the actor to understand and remember what makes this character stand out – what makes them different from everyone else. It also helps the actor to know that this will most likely be the audience's first impression of the character as well. He asks the actor to memorize what surprises them about the character before memorizing the words. This connects back to what he said about embracing the character's strangeness. If the actor

⁹ Brecht, Bertolt, Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn, and Jack Davis. *Brecht on Theatre* Third edition. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. (136)

understands and remembers their impression of what made the character noteworthy or different, they will understand how the audience might feel about the character when encountering the work for the first time. He also places a great emphasis on choice. As an actor, you must view everything the character does as an intentional choice, and consider that it was entirely possible for the character to choose to do the opposite. This makes the character much more active than if we simply dismiss her actions/words as something that was inevitable or forced. Additionally, similar to Boleslavsky, he feels that every emotion should manifest itself into a gesture. He also touched on the importance of culture and class, as that will affect gesture and clarity of speech as well as dialect.

Yoshi Oida

Oida's work *The Invisible Actor*¹⁰ concentrates on the actor's absolute awareness of the body. He discusses concentration exercises similar to those that Stanislavsky and Boleslavsky suggest; exercises meant to challenge the actor to give their complete and undivided concentration to a simple task for an extended period of time. Then, once the actor is equipped to direct their concentration, once they have control over their mind, the actor shifts should shift their focus into isolating important parts of the actor's body. Even down to the strength of a gaze, every body part is essential. This is meant to help the actor have an extremely intentional performance, and as I will discuss in a later chapter was extremely useful in my performance of *She Kills Monsters* as it was filmed, so that every glance was clearly seen.

¹⁰ Oida, Yoshi., and Lorna Marshall. *The Invisible Actor* London: Methuen, 1997. (23)

Oida claims that while these movements do not have to be in a religious context, many specific movements “generate a sense of heightened spirituality.” While this was not a religious play, this did pose an interesting question for me as an actor: does every character, whether they are religious or not, have certain movements or gestures that feel sacred, or center them in some way? This was an interesting thing to think about as it allows the actor to create specificity in their movement. What gesture brings them back to center? What movement might be able to calm them down? What body position holds their essence?

Sanford Meisner

As previously mentioned, Stanislavsky’s work directly influenced many American methodologists, and the overarching name for the American version of his technique became known as “The Method.” Meisner was one of the notable acting teachers at this time, and went on to teach classes at The Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, as well as publish his own works on acting such as *Sanford Meisner on Acting*.¹¹ Unlike some of his contemporaries, Meisner chose to make Stanislavsky’s teachings on imagination the focus of his method, rather than his focus on memory. He also focused heavily on Stanislavsky’s teachings on action. Stanislavsky focused heavily on making sure his actors were actively participating in the scene, and any action which took place on stage had to be committed to and actually done, rather than pantomimed or pretended. Similarly, Meisner focused on “The Reality of Doing,” in his work. He stressed to his

¹¹ Luddy, Thomas E. “Sanford Meisner on Acting.” *Library Journal*. Library Journals, LLC, 1987. (90)

students that anything they do on stage, they should actually do as themselves, not pretend to do as a character. Meisner also denounced a lot of Stanislavsky's teachings on Emotion Memory, stating that "I don't use it, and neither did he after thirty years of experimentation. The reason? If you are twenty and work in a delicatessen, the chances are very slim that you can remember that glorious night you had with Sophia Lauren." Meisner felt that memory was unreliable when it comes to consistent success. Instead, he felt that "your imagination is, in all likelihood, deeper and more persuasive than the real experience." Meisner taught his interpretation of Stanislavsky's teachings on imagination. He refers to this as preparation, claiming that "preparation is that device which permits you to start your scene or play in a condition of emotional aliveness. The purpose of preparation is so that you do not come in emotionally empty." This method required two elements: an element of truth in an imaginary circumstance. The point of this is "self-stimulation," something that will inspire emotion specifically for you as the actor, but not necessarily for anyone else should they use the same circumstance. Using the same example from the "magic if" section in the Stanislavsky chapter, rather than simply thinking to themselves, "How might it feel if my significant other suddenly passed away," the actor might take some time to vividly imagine getting the phone call that there had been an accident, and they needed to come to the hospital immediately. They then might imagine arriving at the hospital, hearing the flatline, and getting the news from the doctor in that moment. They would then immediately go into the scene, stop thinking about the imaginary circumstance that got them to that emotional state, and begin the scene. The important part to remember about this technique is that there is an element of imagination. After the scene, the actor can call their significant other, they will answer,

and there is no psychological damage because they can confirm that their loved one did not, in fact, die in a car accident.

Meisner also concentrated his teachings in Stanislavsky's emphasis on the "reality of doing."¹¹ Meisner believed that acting is rooted in action. Therefore, rather than concentrating heavily on evoking a particular emotion in a scene, Meisner asked his students to concentrate their efforts on trying to *do* something to someone else. This could be trying to guilt them, shame them, console them, etc. This also carried over into literal and physical action. Meisner stressed the importance of actually doing any action you are required to do on stage, with the full intention of finishing the task, and only stop when something is important enough to make you stop.

Anne Bogart

Bogart is a prominent contemporary American director. While at first glance, her work *Terror, Disorientation, and Difficulty*¹² is more helpful to directors than actors, her ideas can be used in both fields. The premise of this work is that terror should be at the root of all art. Fear and love are two of the most powerful motivators for humanity. Almost everything is done either directly because of these emotions, or out of a desire for them. It is possible that these two emotions/motivators can be found in nearly every character an actor might play. Finding them, and figuring out how they affect the character, is key. She also claims that disorientation is compelling, that the audience need not understand

¹² Ronn Smith. "Anne Bogart: Viewpoints." *New England theatre journal* 7 (1996): 120–122.

what is happening. This is in direct contrast to Boleslavsky, who constantly reiterates the importance of being clear and concise. She later says that it is important that you have “one hand firmly grasping the specific, and the other the unknown,” which I think can also be applied to Stanislavsky’s *An Actors Work*. Similar to Stanislavsky, Bogart stresses the importance of the imagination, used to free the artist from the limitations of reality, alongside the importance of truth, used to tether the art back to earth. She also discusses fear of conflict. While she discussed it in the context of collaboration, I think it serves as a nice reminder for character work: no sane person wants to fight for the sake of fighting, so this begs the actor to ask themselves, “When is your character trying not to fight, and if they do fight, what makes them break? What do they consider worth the fight?”

Finally, Bogart states, which can be compared to Boleslavsky’s chapter on Characterization, that “our awareness of the differences between things touches upon the source of our terror.” While Boleslavsky’s goal is not terror, he does stress that the importance of characterization is the distinct differences between every human alive, stating that “we are all human, we have the same number of arms and legs and our noses are placed respectively in the same positions. Yet, as there are no two oak leaves alike, there are no two human beings alike. And when an actor creates a human soul in the form of a character, he must follow the same wise rule of Nature and make that soul unique and individual.” It is this idea that no two people are alike, and that these differences cause the terror that she claims is a great motivator, that Bogart finds compelling.

CHAPTER FOUR

She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms

In the fall of 2020, I was cast as the lead role of Agnes Evans in Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* at Baylor University. This task offered many challenges, as not only was the role an emotionally taxing one, but due to COVID-19 the play had to be moved to a film like format, with none of the cast members actually filming in the same room. While some of these theorists were useful in my process, others were more difficult to employ in these specific circumstances.

In the show, Agnes, a seventeen-year-old cheerleader, is the older sister of Tilly Evans, who has recently died in a car accident. The play follows Agnes in the aftermath of this tragedy as she searches for some sort of connection to her sister, as they did not get along in life. She finds this connection when she finds Tilly's homespun module – the journal where she created games for Dungeons and Dragons. While Agnes has always found her sister's interests nerdy and weird, she decides to play the game her sister wrote up in order to feel closer to her. Through this experience, Agnes not only learns new things about her sister, but eventually, for the first time in her life, feels that she understands her. My first step in my acting process is to identify my character's super-objective. This is the character's overarching goal that she is trying to achieve throughout the entire play. Once the super-objective is identified, each scene and even line can be broken down into tactics and more minor goals that are all pointed towards this super-objective. Anne Bogart's ideas, while not specifically helpful throughout the process, did help in this initial step. Her ideas about love and terror got me to thinking about how relevant these

are to a 17-year-old girl in grieving. From this starting place, I came to identify her super-objective of the show as trying to understand and feel a connection to the sister that she never connected to while she was alive.

After identifying the super-objective, I sought to outline Agnes' character arch throughout the show. She begins the show as a painfully average teenager who cares about little more than her popularity, looks, and her boyfriend. By the end of the play, however, she was independent and confident enough to stand up to two girls who were just like her, break up with her boyfriend, and throw all of the superficial parts of high school away to fully invest herself in a game she once deemed as nerdy and lame. My job was to figure out how that arch happened. I had determined the climax of her arch to be when she stands up to the two cheerleaders who bullied her sister. Based on the play, it seemed to me that at one point in time, maybe even as recently as the introduction scene, Agnes was exactly like these girls – popular, mean, fake, and concerned entirely with appearances. However, by this point in the play, she calls them out for being bullies and superficial. This seemed to be a significant turning point for Agnes. She was done with the falsities of popularity, and cared entirely about her super-objective – connecting to her sister.

I found a lot of use in Meisner's methods as most of my previous training is rooted in these two artists. I particularly found use in a combination of Meisner's emphasis on action and reaction and Stanislavsky's use of "The If". Due to the extreme nature of the highs and lows of Agnes' emotions, it was difficult for me to pull those reactions out of

nowhere, therefore I had to concentrate on what was being done to me by the other actors. For example, in the scene where Agnes confronts the two cheerleaders that used to bully her sister that I had determined was the climax of her arch, she experienced one of the most extreme points of anger in the show. As a kid friendly show, it is notable that it is in this scene that Agnes uses more profane language, indicating the climactic nature of the scene. This is the moment where she loses control. She drops the “cool girl” façade and actually speaks her mind – something that is extremely difficult for a teenage girl to do. This climax could not come from nowhere. I had to fully register the past realizations that Agnes has made throughout the play, make those connections with the information she was now receiving, recognize what the actresses who were playing the cheerleaders were saying, and recognize that it did not match up with how Tilly claimed they acted towards her in her life. Through all of these realizations, anger would have to rise as Agnes realized what the cheerleaders were actually doing – trying to use Tilly’s death to their own benefit, as they actually bullied her while she was alive. All of these things culminating together resulted in the explosive anger that Agnes demonstrates in this scene. If I had simply imitated what I think anger looks like, the scene would have come across as the “ham acting” that both Stanislavsky and Meisner denounce. However, when that anger arises out of something that is real as a reaction to what is happening right in front of me, it is justified to the audience and plays as “realistic.” It required a combination of focusing on the given circumstances of the play/scene to imagine what it would feel like *if* these things happened to me, and focusing on the actions of the other actors and reacting to them in the moment, to create a realistic scene. In the beginning of the process, when I was first attempting to understand Agnes as a character, I did struggle

with this scene as it is a very short time period to build to that explosion. However, as I began to grasp Agnes and her feelings for Tilly, and utilized the previously stated method of substitution with my own sister, what was happening in the scene began to affect me in a real way that made that explosion justified.

The first challenge this show presented made itself apparently fairly early on in the process. As Agnes was in every scene, and towards the end each of those scenes became more and more emotionally climactic, I found myself physically and emotionally exhausted by the end of the first read through. This show asks the actor to fulfill an emotional range from your typical, mildly annoyed teenage girl, to explosive anger, to despair and grief. This was likely one of the biggest emotional ranges I have ever had to go through in a show. In order to achieve this, I had to find a connection to the show. For me, this connection was the relationship between the two sisters. While I have never had to go through the grief of losing a sister, I do have a sister who, while we are very close now, once had a relationship very similar to that of Tilly and Agnes. Once I found this connection, I used Stanislavsky's method of "substitution" to achieve much of the emotional weight of the play. In scenes that involved the pain of a grieving sister, I substituted, in my imagination, Tilly Evans for my own sister. For example, in the first scene where Agnes sees Tilly in the game, I substituted the idea that I was seeing my own sister for the first time in a year, and this helped me reach a place of extreme excitement. Similarly, when the cheerleaders who bullied Tilly claimed that they could be like sisters to Agnes, I used that word, which is also a very meaningful word to me, to trigger my emotional response, resulting in extreme anger. This involved use of "The If" that was

previously discussed in the Stanislavsky section. How would I feel if my own sister died before we could have established a good relationship? This remained psychologically safe because rather than using real trauma from my life, I was able to use my imagination to create a firm but safe connection to the character I was portraying.

One of the other challenges of this show was the fact that it had to be filmed due to COVID-19 restrictions. This created a few obstacles. The first was that we filmed out of order. This amplified my first challenge tenfold, as I then had to jump in at any point of this extremely exhausting arch, and play it with the same intensity as I would have if we were performing the show chronologically. Preparation was the key element to overcoming this. In fact, in hindsight, I feel that I could have prepared a lot more for this challenge, as I had never been in a film of this magnitude before. This required more than simply memorization of lines, I had to memorize my arch to the point where I knew exactly where in that arch I was at all times, even when filming out of order. One way that I tackled the emotional challenge of this was concentrating more on the scene arcs, making sure that I had a build in every scene, which helped me remember where I needed to start in the next scene emotionally.

Another issue that film presented was outside disturbances. I remember one time we had been working on a scene for quite some time, and when we had finally achieved a near perfect take, a fire truck drove down my street with the sirens on. Everyone in the room had palpable frustration, anger, and disbelief. However, at the end of the day that take was unusable and we had to get another one. As the actor, I had to overcome this by

compartmentalizing my frustration, tapping back into the connection and intensity I had before, and replicating the take.

Another struggle I had throughout the play was the physicality of it. This struggle was heightened by a number of things. First of all, the filmed nature of the play limited movement a lot. We were attempting to create the illusion that this Dungeon and Dragons session was held on zoom, therefore our movement was contained within a small frame at desks, on beds, or in front of a greenscreen. In this challenge, the works of Yoshi Oida became very helpful. While his theories were one of the more difficult ones to grasp for me, I found use in his ideas of connection to the body. Because I had a limited range of movement, his theory of isolation was helpful in making small movements more impactful. This also connects to the evolution of film acting. Due to the realist movement, large movements that would be passable on a stage with an audience thirty feet away read as dramatic and unrealistic on film. This means that Oida's concept of the power of a simple gaze, if you are truly connected to it, is significantly more impactful on film. This helped me find moments of stillness as well as moments of impactful movement throughout the show. This could be seen in simple moments, as well as climactic moments. For example, many of my scenes were filmed with me sitting on my bed, as it was meant to create the illusion of kids on facetime, zoom, discord, or some other communication device. Simple movements such as sitting up when Agnes' boyfriend entered the scene communicated relationships and values, as it showed what got Agnes excited or when she had to pretend to be something that she is not. In one scene, Agnes was speaking with her best friend, and for this moment I remained leaned

back in the bed, distracted by my phone. However, when the actor playing Agnes' boyfriend joined the call, I chose to sit up, as Agnes was still in the stage of her life where things like this were very important to her. However, when Agnes was having a scene with Chuck, the dungeon master helping her through the game her sister created, I remained sitting up, fully attentive, and then when her boyfriend entered the scene, I chose to let her sink back, as she was now disappointed that her old life was leaking into something she deemed much more important. I also found use in the idea of "heightened spirituality" in movement that was previously discussed. I wish I had played with this more during the rehearsal process, but Agnes had so many moments of emotional highs, it would have been interesting to find some sort of subtle movement that brings her back to center, even if it was nothing more than a certain breath pattern, a slight movement of her fingers, or even something unseen like a tension in her toes – anything consistent to her that felt like a spiritual center.

I also found Boleslavsky's theories of physicality and characterization helpful. While I could not really demonstrate this through movement, I found use in it when working with Agnes's posture. Towards the beginning of the show, I used my observations both as someone who once was a teenage girl and who has seen and been friends with many teenage girls to determine that Agnes, while at the beginning of her arch, would likely stand like any other average teenager. It is common for girls her age to keep their weight on mostly one hip, frequently using either defensive poses such as crossed arms. By the end of her arch, however, I found her needing to stand more similarly to Tilly. She stood strong, her feet shoulder width apart, weight evenly placed, with more challenging and

open poses, unafraid to stand out from others. This, to me, related back to Boleslavsky's claim about all humans being distinctly different. He teaches his student this concept by informing her that her body during a performance of Ophelia "was that of a young girl, but not Ophelia's." It was important to me to make sure that Agnes' body was her own, informed by all of her given circumstances, and not the simple imitation of a stereotypical cliché girl.

CONCLUSION

My experience rehearsing and performing in *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms*, directed by Dr. David Jortner, was one that forced a lot of study and growth as an actor. Through the study of these methodologists, I have come to fully agree with Oida when he claims that the knowledge of many methods is important.

Through Stanislavsky and Meisner, I was able to find ways to ground my work in reality in order to truly connect to the character. This grounding sometimes came from Stanislavsky's use of "The If," in which I would connect to the character's given circumstances through an "If Statement," and sometimes would come through Meisner's emphasis on "the reality of doing," as I found my connection more in concentrating on what I was doing to my acting partners.

Through study of Boleslavsky I was able to explore the physicality of Agnes in a way that I have never really concentrated on before. Focusing on and being specific about the

way my character moves helped me fully embody a character I was struggling with for a while in a way that really took me by surprise.

Even Oida, whose methods I probably struggled to understand the most, proved very helpful in that I was able to connect with my body in order to make the most subtle movements impactful, which is extremely important on film. I feel that this helped me grow as an actor who wishes to pursue a career in film, as I truly understood the importance of choosing each movement intentionally and carefully.

Overall, I feel that this process has proven that intelligent and precise acting comes from the study, knowledge, and practice of multiple methodologies and how they work specifically for the actor, the character, and the script at that time. All of these methods are extremely fluid and are meant to act as tools for the actor whenever they are needed, whether by themselves or in combination.

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