



## Writ 201 Advanced Writing Seminar Sample Student Essay

### The Acting Craft: Molding a Communal Language and Identity

I am an actor. I am currently a freshman college student training in an intensive BFA Acting program at Marymount Manhattan College. In embodying this “actor” title, I cannot dismiss the community of actors that have shaped how I view and cultivate my art today. Some of those influencers include my acting coach, Michigan actor and director Bailey Boudreau, as well as my current acting professor Ellen Orenstein. These talented and credible figures who have enhanced my craft have had their own sets of teachers who taught them their craft. The intergenerational passage of knowledge can lead back to the birth of the art itself. Similar in every generation of actors, at the heart of our work, we explore human behavior with a goal to truthfully portray life on stage. The question then arises: how can we bring this goal to fruition as modern artists and creative storytellers? Although there are dozens of prominent acting figures with their own distinct methods of training, my interest throughout this paper lies in where and how the commonalities come into play amongst actors. This paper, then, examines the evolving shape of communal discourse and teaching processes in acting training, and argues that actors and their craft have been molded through the intergenerational influence of a community-based language and identity.

There are clear commonalities present in the language of acting teachers and the ideologies they pass down. Orenstein and Boudreau share some of these parallels. With this in

mind, I've asked questions like if there can truly be a communal language and identity in the acting circle. How has language been mechanized and constructed to ingrain the training into the actor? How has the passage of training concretized yet also evolved generationally? How has the integrity of the art remained intact in spite of this evolution? Scholars have tackled these thoughts as well, working in tandem as they explore, through various lenses, the evolving technical process of becoming an actor and the acting community collectively.

In beginning to explore this inquiry, I want to highlight the importance of language as it relates to my own acting work. In my college acting class with Ellen Orenstein, we are taught a variety of terms for various concepts. For example, "indicating", in the context of acting, means that you are blatantly and falsely physicalizing how you are feeling or what you want. Once in class, during a scene where my character was upset, Ellen would repeatedly reprimand me for clenching my jaw as it is just "indicating" the anger my character was feeling. She said that my own conceptualization of how I should portray anger manifested in my jaw. She made me run the stairs 5 times to get out of my head and loosen the tension in my jaw. Another phrase she uses is "Object of attention". This signifies the area of space your head is focused in during a scene or performance. If your focus is not on your scene partner but on the audience, your "object of attention" is on the audience. We use these terms collectively as a class in rehearsal settings. Amongst the 12 actors, we have formed our own little communal language that only we understand. The communal language guides our thought processes and the precise diction allows each actor to communicate with concision. Actors have developed a shared artistic language, a vehicle to unite artists in their thoughts. Multiple scholars highlight the crucial value of language in the same way, emphasizing language's impact on shaping the actor through the generations. In

“Acting French: Drama Techniques in the Second Language Classroom”, Patricia Dickson makes the claim that the craft of acting parallels second-language learning. Language learners and actors both must have a strong grasp on their language in order to effectively convey messages to their audiences or listeners, just as directors and language teachers must supply those very linguistic tools. Dickson contends that “Acting is a way of learning by experience. Drama techniques integrate body, mind, and emotions and motivate students by allowing them to use their own personalities and experiences as resources for language production” (300). She makes it clear that language is so significant in the actors’ process and how delving into its nuances broadens the actor’s sense of self. I would agree here; the nuances in my inflections, the way I phrase my words, and the way I emphasize my diction all play into how my emotion is being conveyed in my performances.

Additionally, in “Stanislavsky and the Ethos of Acting”, William Worthen builds on the significance of employing language as a vehicle in propelling the communal language of actors, but specifically incorporates fragments of language used by one of the all-time acting greats, Konstantin Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky propels an artistic language, “the sense of ‘I am’” (36). Another phrase used is the “I am not”, what takes away from the authenticity of the role: mechanical stage habits, inattention, and personal worries about the audience’s opinions. It’s evident that these phrases act as tools to help teach an individual a craft that is, and I can attest to, so abstract and complex to tackle. I believe that being able to compartmentalize these concepts in the craft with precise word choice helps to gear the actor’s training collectively with other artists. This idea of attuning the language in the actor’s training is mentioned again when Atay Citron, in “The Chekhov Technique Today”, details how Michael Chekhov’s students

Merlin, Cutting, and Straight, use direct language passed down from Chekhov's instruction and incorporate it in their own unique and personalized teachings. Citron provides an example, saying, "As the students work, Cutting encourages them to radiate, 'to feel the earth', to embrace the whole world.' This imagistic terminology is similar to that which Chekhov used in his books" (94). We can analyze how this vivid use of language can be used as a mechanism to communalize the thought processes behind the training. If a group of actors all hear the same clear imagistic diction, it can trigger a clear imaginative path in their brains, essentially melding their minds together. Communal thought is a plausible concept.

These scholars view language as a pivotal asset in the framing of the actor's communal dialogue, and I strongly agree with all three. Dickson touches on an entirely different educational subject— language-learning—and synthesizes the language-learner's process with that of the actor's. While the overarching concept that language is an instrumental vehicle in uniting actors' artistic vernacular and stream of knowledge remains at the forefront of these three articles' purposes, Worthen and Citron's articles weave together in a way apart from Dickson's article. They specifically highlight one prominent acting teacher and delve into how each teacher's consistent diction choices elongate a like-minded process of learning that can then pass generationally.

Without neglecting language's vital role in furthering the artist's communal consciousness, I want to also shed light on judgement's role. I argue that actors have communalized their thoughts through the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity. Conventional wisdom has it that the acting craft is a subjective and seemingly immeasurable art form. However, numerous scholars have challenged the full extent of this notion, claiming that acting

can be judged with an objective and concrete eye. In “The Reliability of Judgments of Acting Performance”, John C. Tolch and Theodore Clevenger take a statistical approach. In an experiment they conducted, they explored whether or not theatrically trained students could come to a collective point of thought in their judgements of various individuals who performed for the students within the course of two consecutive nights. The 10 individuals performing all had various amounts of experience; some were in acting programs or graduated from those programs, while others had no acting training at all. Through mathematical inquiry, Tolch and Clevenger conclude that “graduate students in theatre can rank-order a heterogeneous group of acting performances with relatively high reliability on any given night” (322). Although both scholars do not say so directly, they apparently assume that there is a collective consciousness and discourse used to objectively perceive theatre and measure its quality. Once the artist gains that objective training common amongst other artists, it can be replicated generationally.

With the same objective eye, Garff B. Wilson asserts the need for measurable qualifications in what constitutes a “good actor”. In “Levels of Achievement in Acting”, Wilson details that there’s not enough differentiation in reviews when critics assess various performers; the less experienced college acting student is not on an equal playing field with a Broadway novice. So why are they both being judged as if they were? When he compares critic reviews for both groups of actors, the diction used in describing their performances was strikingly similar. Wilson suggests that “it is time to examine our critical jargon, to clarify our standards, and to inquire if there are not definable levels of achievement in acting to which our judgements can be referred” (230). To do so, Wilson proceeds by detailing what he perceives as the five levels of achievement in acting.

Like Tolch and Clevenger, Wilson is creating an objective method of measurement in validating the complexity of the craft and just how nuanced the artist's work must be to achieve the level of acting that is deemed as "good acting". Wilson wants to preserve the dignity of the profession through instilling intelligent critical standards with his five-step layout. With both of the articles' findings, other artists can see that the structure of acting training should be seen as objectively as it is subjectively. Both articles satisfy the idea that the objectivity is what has ongoingly propelled the methodic mental process and communal language of actors generationally. However, both articles differ in their approach in proving the same thesis. Torch and Clevenger take a statistical approach in highlighting the objectivity of acting quality, whereas Wilson's very process of the five-step layout is evidence in itself that objectivity in measuring acting quality exists. I am of two minds about Torch and Clevenger's claim that acting can be judged with an objective eye. On the one hand, I do not object that students can successfully rank-order the performances with high reliability. On the other hand, I am hesitant about neglecting the presence of subjectivity in the craft or considering it less significant than the objective aspects Torch and Clevenger sought to amplify. I believe that subjectivity is what gives the art such distinct and creative perspectives; not every artist will agree that one actor is in fact a "good actor", evidenced by varying critic reviews in Wilson's article. Wilson's article provides us with evidence that there would not be discrepancies in these reviews in the first place if we as artists were not subjective in our thoughts. Of course, some readers may challenge my view by insisting that objectivity is at the forefront in analytically critiquing actors. Graduate students from intensive BFA programs like my own have more experience with the concepts and concrete methodologies of the craft than myself. I may not even have the skill yet to objectively analyze

the acting showcased in Torch and Clevenger's experiment. But I recognize the value in both subjectivity and objectivity in their own ways, as should the artist that are reading this. I believe that all of these researchers are developing their own means of artistic measurement, finding a communal opinion in rating the actor's achievement that works. Again, we can see communal thought coming into play here; those thoughts can help us steer our craft in the intended direction we want it to go. Simultaneously, however, we cannot dismiss what makes the art subjective.

Not only can the craft be subjective in how one critiques it, the craft can be subjective in how it is transferred from the teacher to the actor. Acting is a craft that has been transformed and transmitted through generations of artists on a global scale. Numerous scholars claim that these teachings can be transferred generationally, but all knowledge redemption is organic and varies from actor to actor. Looking back at Citron's journal article, he highlights the acting methods of Michael Chekhov and his heirs. He claims that the transmission process is the act of passing down a structured rhetoric or a like-minded viewpoint on acting itself. Contrastly, he acknowledges that the subjectivity of the craft inevitably bridges gap between various artists who teach or learn the method because they make it their own, both linguistically and methodically. Citron provides an example, saying, "Stanislavsky is reputed to have considered Vakhtangov and then Chekhov as an heir, yet neither of them practiced this technique in its own original form; each developed a personal approach to acting" (92). Everyone has a personal approach and experience with the training they garner. When I caught up with my old acting coach Bailey Boudreau, I talked him through the various concepts I was learning with Ellen Orenstein, like the "object of attention". At first, Bailey was unfamiliar with the terminology, but as I explained the exercise, Bailey exclaimed, "Oh, focal points!" Both teachers were taught the same concept but

describe and teach the concepts with different names attached. Thus, both artists learned the same concept but applied their own creative twist and incorporated it in training their actors, just as Vakhtangov took a creative turn from what Stanislavski taught him. I believe that the craft does in fact reshape itself in each generation.

Similarly, Lee Strasberg and Richard Schechner, in “Working with Live Material,” emphasize that the craft cannot be identically replicated generationally, saying, “Vakhtangov’s work was skillfully done, his use of the Method even more brilliant and more imaginative than Stanislavski’s, yet Vakhtangov achieved totally different results” (118). Both articles emphasize that even though there is a generational passage of training and acting techniques, the craft is organic with each new artist. Strasberg and Citron, in the context of their research, would both agree that actors shape their work based on their own individual identities. In both articles, they use Vakhtangov to exemplify their thesis that the craft can generationally be passed but in an organic way. They are surely right about artists paving their own paths of work through the training they transmit, as evidenced by my experiences with my coach and professor.

Not only has there been an evolution through the training of the actor, but the acting craft has evolved stylistically as well. In spite of how the styles have changed, we cannot neglect the core fundamentals of the craft. Acting is about integrity and authenticity before anything else. Those unfamiliar with this school of thought may be interested to know that it basically boils down to just investing in the other person on stage at all times as much as you possibly can. In “Style, Stylization, and Styles of Acting”, George Kernodle argues that stylization in modern theatre should not be neglected. He asserts that when the actor loses fear of techniques from old traditions and overthinking about what’s deemed as inauthentic, the artist can produce their best



and most creative work (261). He details how style has evolved historically and how naturalism has had a big impact on today's work. He makes it clear that artists cannot be jaded by one construct of style, as their performance will be impacted. I would agree with this assertion. Artists allocate their time on perfecting a specific style of acting, a style of forming words or emphasizing certain portions of scenes. By doing so, they are straying from what every actor's main goal should be, taking me back to the initial acting goal I presented in my introductory thoughts—truthfully portraying life onstage. Professor Orenstein stresses to me that if I'm busy concerning myself with how I'm speaking the lines, what cadence I'm using, or in other words, what style I'm approaching the text with, I am already failing the essential objective. In her words, that objective is to accurately observe the other person's current physical state and make changes accordingly to successfully get what you want. This objective directly coincides with truthfully portraying life onstage. Most would likely agree with me in assuming that a human being always actively wants something. Physicalities and language are tools to get those things.

In keeping with the themes that Kernodle touched on, Ralph Richardson, in "II. The Actor", highlights the artistic nuances and styles that have evolved over time but in British theatre, and how the art must be tackled in order to keep it alive and fresh with modern audiences. With a historical layout, Richardson details how Britain has a golden chain of acting in their country that roots back far, with "vagabonds" that performed in monasteries, and later "court players" that entertained King Richard III. As actors began to be recognized individually as artists, the state of keeping the art alive generationally became more vital. Richardson claims, "If a long tradition of acting is to be kept alive in a country the audiences must possess hearts that can beat fast, a tenderness of nature, and a laughter easily aroused" (432). Both articles

attempt to outline an entire passage of time in the craft through separate avenues, one of style and one of British acting history. Ultimately, however, their objectives are both to find solutions in keeping the craft fresh and reeling in audiences generationally. Both articles serve a purpose to highlight how this evolving artistic identity continues to impact artists today. Kernodle and Richardson are right in saying that actors can only treat stylistic choices as secondary to the core of human wants and desires. We want to be as truthful as possible as artists to connect with our audiences in the most authentic way we can. I know that is my essential objective as an actor, if not most actors' essential objective.

These discoveries and analyses I have made and collected are geared towards an audience of actors. But how can this research benefit artists who are in a constant pursuit to heighten their work? Well, my examination will have hopefully shaped how they appreciate and execute their craft. With a better sense of how language is instrumental in communalizing thought processes, actors can explore communal discourse as it applies to actually helping them become better actors individually. With a better understanding of subjectivity and objectivity, and the interplay between the two within the acting field, actors can more keenly tackle the work and observe the work with both concepts in mind. With a better sense of the craft's intergenerational transmission, actors can more efficiently grasp the historical implications of acting and how they can preserve the integrity behind the work moving forward. Acting is a timeless art form that continuously demands to be remolded and explored through each generation. It is up to modern artists to value the craft's past and, with that communal knowledge, mold an even stronger communal identity for the coming generations to inherit. The cycle must continue if we want the art to remain intact.

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