My Fair Lady: A Culmination of Knowledge; A Lesson in Patience
An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

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Abstract

Performance studies in the techniques of playing the roles of ensemble, fight captain, and understudy to a faculty member in the Department of Theatre and Dance’s My Fair Lady, 2009-2010 production season. A description of the struggles of maintaining professor student relationships, juggling the responsibilities of a performer, and the skill sets required to do so. Directed by Dr. Michael O’Hara, Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts, Musically Directed by Dr. Robert Kvam, Dean of the College of Fine Arts, and the understudied role, Professor Henry Higgins, played by Dr. Harold Mortimer, Musical Theatre Coordinator in the Department of Theatre & Dance.

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- I would like to thank my family for their patience in my college career, their support in my pursuit of a dream, and the love that contains both of these things and more.
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At the start of this semester, I originally had a different thesis in mind – an exploration of live theatre and its ontological significance, steeped primarily in Phillip Auslander’s *Liveness*. As the semester progressed, I began to realize that writing a full length play, initial dramaturgy work for a play for the next season, performing in *My Fair Lady* in University Theatre, searching for employment after graduation – the things that come to a head for a graduating senior – had taken over my life, almost forbidding me to work on my original topic. With the approval of my advisor, I shifted my attention to a thorough examination of the surprisingly extensive work I was already doing, which turned out to be a neigh graduate conservatory understudy experience. Would I take the semester back, if I could? I see no reason to do so, even if I were able to coerce the fourth dimension into submission.

When I was cast in *My Fair Lady*, I was given the task of understudy for the role of Henry Higgins (played by Dr. Harold Mortimer), a task I found later to require extensive patience and study. On top of that, I was charged with learning the general ensemble pieces. As time progressed it became clear that our production needed a fight captain to monitor comedic bits and physical work in order to insure actor safety – I was also charged with this. So, in a grand total of my work, I learned all of the lines and music for Henry Higgins, the general ensemble, and was able to intellectually understand the mechanics of every physical bit in the show. Furthermore, I am not a musical theatre major, yet have been in two musicals in my senior year. Thus, halfway through the process, I not only was able to reiterate why performance

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1 Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture.*. 2008-02-14, 2008. Print
is my favorite part of theatre, but the patience, diligence, and effort for this production would be thesis worthy.

The first task I set myself to tackle was to relearn how to read bass clef. I played saxophone for seven years between middle and high school and was very well versed in treble clef and music theory (I received the Louis Armstrong award my sophomore year for my jazz musicianship). As I eventually recalled, it turns out reading bass clef is like adjusting notes for alto/baritone saxophone for concert pitch – adjust the notes two notes up. What appears to be a “G” is actually a “B.”

Then the research came – Edwardian England, George Bernard Shaw, the International Phonetic Alphabet, dialect work, production history, character research, choices. This task was exceedingly difficult given that *My Fair Lady* is such a well known show – the Rex Harrison portrayal of Henry Higgins is possibly the most well known. So, added to Dr. Mortimer’s character choices, Dr. O’Hara’s acting direction, and Dr. Kvam’s music direction is the weight of history…slightly intimidating to a twenty-three year old.

I was also thankful I had been heavily involved in musicals in high school when the task of learning to dance arrived. I had never even heard of a “bourrée” until the dance choreographer, Jules Shumate, answered my question with “moving on your tip toes.” It reminded me of marching backwards in marching band in high school. Thank goodness that my high school’s band program was rich in that area as well – the Northview Marching Knights were the 2005 Class B state champions.
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So far, I am certain this sounds like a typical show for an acting major – research, brushing up skills, learning new skills, etc. Compared to the other eight shows I have performed in during my Ball State career, I would agree with you. What made this semester different, different than even my understudy work in Polaroid Stories with Karen Kessler, was understudying a faculty member.

As an acting option major in the Department of Theatre and Dance, I had never previously worked with Dr. Mortimer as I was never subject to voice lessons since they are not part of my curriculum. So, not only was I understudying a faculty member, but one I had only shared pleasantries with. Thus, I had two characters to study and figure out the inner workings of: Henry Higgins and Dr. Harold Mortimer.

At first, the experience was fairly straightforward – listen to the music direction, take notes, learn what I can about singing through observation, and ask questions when there was time. Dr. Mortimer shined in this portion of rehearsals – he has an excellent voice, was on par with Dean Kvam in musical knowledge and could pick apart the inner workings of a vocal piece in minutes.

When the time came to rehearse scenes with memorized lines, however, the dynamic of rehearsal began to shift. Before judgments are made, I want to be clear as to the situation: Dr. Mortimer was on course overload; assisting the Provost; starting the process of handing Musical Theatre Coordinator to a new professor; was instructing half again as many voice students as his normal load (for a total of thirty) due to our guests from South Africa, a product of his hard work earlier in his career here at Ball State; and, from what I had inferred from parts of the situation,
some personal issues I was not and should not be privy to. So, to say he had a lot on his mind in an understatement.

As time went on, there was an uncertainty of whether or not I may have had to fill in the role. While this is normal for any understudy (as it is their job), this position required a bit more finesse than my previous experience understudying. In the “real world,” there are understudy rehearsals. Furthermore, in our run of the show here at Ball State, the understudy for Eliza, Allison Sill, was going to have a performance – thus, an understudy rehearsal. Were I to go on, I would have little to no rehearsal. There was the issue of respect for a faculty member, a desire to lend aid where I could, and in consideration of Dr. Mortimer’s situation, a significant amount of patience was required. I understood that, were things to go south after spring break, I might only have a week of rehearsal to prepare a character rather than the full six to eight weeks normally allotted.

In the end Dr. Mortimer pulled everything off – teaching in overload, building the character, his personal issues – and I was happy for him to succeed. During the process, however, my obligation was to be ever vigilant. The work required for this led me to approach Dr. O’Hara if this could be my thesis, as building a character without rehearsal requires an amalgamation of skills ranging from improvisation, intensive research, careful observation/notation, and a familiarity with each of the other actors playing principle characters.

Aside from the artistic dedication and preparation required (which took me five years to build up a skill set capable of handling this Herculean task), the sheer technical knowledge of scene transitions, costume changes, and prop locations/shifts was mind boggling. Thankfully,
had I been required to play the role, the costumers and run crew were ready and able to help me – I would not have been alone.

All of the classes I have taken in my time at Ball State were utilized in my preparation for this production: voice, movement, acting, theatre history, make-up, and stagecraft. Even my work in my camera and film classes aided, as the key difference in stage acting and film acting is usually rehearsal time; stage has weeks of preparation whereas film has literally hours if not minutes. I had to be ready to bring active choices and character decisions to the table were I to fill Dr. Mortimer’s shoes – choices constrained by the work of my peers, Dr. O’Hara and Dr. Kvam’s direction, and the choices of Dr. Mortimer himself. A curveball line reading had the potential of throwing a wrench in the gears of the show, dragging it to a complete stop.

So, at the end of the run, I felt exhausted, happy, and content to know that my work was there, ready to be utilized. Now, as Angels in America approaches, my peers are coming to me for advice on understudying a faculty member. While their experiences will be different – different show, different people, and different circumstances – I give them one piece of advice, perhaps the true thesis of this work: patience. Patience with frustration, patience with the process, and patience to the extent of being content that, as the understudy, sometimes you are the unsung hero of a production. They seem a bit baffled by what I have to say, but they leave with a resolve in their eyes; a good state to be in, given our careers will consist primarily of rejection. I wish them the best, both pedagogically and artistically.