Senior Project

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike

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Senior Project Final Reflection

It is hard to believe that after months and months of hard work this show is over. I have sat with this play for almost half a year and now it is time to let it go. Over the past couple days post-show, I have set my notebook down and took time to step back and mentally reflect. Although I am jumping right into another show I cannot help but find it difficult to let go of Vanya, as it was such a huge part of my summer and my first couple weeks back at school. After all this time, it is now over.

There are many things that I want to touch on in this final reflection, one being the new process. I was taken by surprise when I was notified that this production would be cast a semester before. It was worrying to me because I knew I could not physically be at auditions and I was afraid it would negatively affect my performance. I had never auditioned over Face Time before and it was a bit weird because of the slight delay in communication. Despite all of that, when I was cast I was completely thrilled. I told all my friends in London and they had no idea what I was talking about, but it was still a good feeling. I did not get a chance to get my script until I got back to America and had my first read through. I didn’t really talk about the first read through in my notebook, because at that point I had not decided what I wanted to record my thoughts and process on yet. The first read through was rough for me. I came completely unprepared which is very unlike me. Pronunciations were wrong, very wrong tones, wrong ideas. I had gotten back to the states two days before and I had not re-read the script before the first read. Big mistake. I left that rehearsal feeling very discouraged and in over my head. This made my summer a little more stressful because I never wanted to be unprepared
again. I did all my research (as you can see in my book) and I came back to school feeling prepared. The reason why the show was so solid was because we had that time to do our work. We all work at different paces and having months to sit with the text and figure out our own individual characters before all meeting was absolutely wonderful. Unlike the other first show slots I have been in, I was not struggling to get off book or figure out how I fit in the world. My lines were not a concern of mine going into the process. We were able to work at such a fine level of detail because all of us had the bones of who we were. In order to find all the layers to Masha, I needed time to experiment with different line readings and study what Durang gave me.

Christopher Durang writes in a way that extremely intelligent and rhythmic. I can say from experience that when speaking his lines you immediately know if you are wrong, because it does not sound the same. What I love about this play is that every single line has meaning and purpose. There are no fluffy lines. All of it matters. It is funny because I notice that sometimes characters in the show throw away lines that are actually genius. My favorite example of this is when Masha says “True silence is the rest of the mind; it is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.” This is at the end of Masha and Sonia’s big crying fest. Vanya responds to her with “Who said that?” to which Masha replies “I don’t know. Maybe it was from a play I was in.” This is absolutely brilliant. That quote is from William Penn, the man who founded the province of Pennsylvania and lived in Bucks County. Nobody in this play says anything without serious thought behind it. This is why I feel honored to have acted in this production.
On the subject of Durang, I loved the notes he wrote in the back of the play. This was a big help to me when trying to figure out who Masha was. It is clear that Masha is self-involved and successful, but she also expresses insecurities when speaking about her career. This was intriguing for me as an actor because Masha is not one to fully admit that she is insecure, so it was a challenge for me to let some show but hide all the rest. I love how Durang said, “allow the humanity to come through, but be careful early on to let the audience know that it is okay to laugh.” This was extremely telling when forming my character because Masha is a person with feelings, but sometimes it is okay to laugh at her so called “misery.” When I first read the play I thought that Masha came off as an unlikeable character, but by reading Durang’s notes and then working with my fellow cast, I came to the conclusion that she is not a bad person. She has the shortest fuse out of any other character in the play, but she is not the villain. I love that he said to allow Masha’s humanity to show through because I think that encompasses all that she is. Masha is a person who has lived a relatively full life but still suffers from some of the same problems that her siblings do, just in a different way. It is not until the end that everyone lets their guard down to embrace what they really need, each other.

Masha’s arc is arguably one of the biggest and drastic in the show. She comes in and steals all the air out of the room, unapologetically, and proceeds to talk about herself and her own accomplishments. She wants to show off her new boy toy and prove to Vanya and Sonia that she is doing all the greatest things in the world and that she is perfectly happy with her life. We come to find out that none of that is true. Masha changes at the end because she lets go of Spike with not much of a
battle, and ends up being happier with the people who have been there all along. Her objectives change throughout the show, from wanting to impress to wanting to belong. Masha’s relationships have all failed her and she starts to become more and more vulnerable as the show goes on. It was interesting to see the characters unfold at the same time, because they are all so different. We see Sonia gaining confidence in her costume while Masha looses confidence in the one she thought would steal the show. All of the different paths that we each took were clear and all happening at the same time. Masha is the kind of person that you would expect to never let her guard down but in the end she does. This completes her arc from start to finish, and she is changed and ends happier.

Masha’s age was somewhat of an obstacle for me to play onstage. Going into it I knew that it would be difficult to play older. The ages of the characters are crucial to the story, but there is something endearing about students like us playing these roles. We are the exact generation that Vanya talks about, yet we are here playing 50 something’s. The age of Masha is important and I wanted to make sure that I was not neglecting her age. I tried to make my physicality more tall and proper. I sat up straight in the hopes of mimicking a person of high status. I took long strides in my walking all over the set with my head up. Even though I am not 50 something, I used my body to try and make myself not look 21. My vocal tone was deeper than my actual voice, which hopefully added to the allusion of me playing an older woman. I struggled with finding her voice and physicality, but I think by the end I got there.
Throughout the process my vocal quality and tone was not where it was during performances. I held a lot of tension in my jaw during rehearsals, which made my forward facial posture nonexistent. The tension that I was holding was preventing me from projecting and producing quality sound. My dialect session with Helen helped me, and I eventually got rid of the tension and could produce the right tone at a nice volume. This was an obstacle that I had to get through but I have learned from it and I know how to fix it.

In that same vein, I developed a lot of anxiety during the process. This was a big concern of mine because I felt that my performance during rehearsals was affected by my anxiety. I did not journal much about having anxiety, mainly because I did not feel comfortable sharing. Anxiety has become a part of my life since college and has not left. I am a naturally high-strung person and the pressure of the show made me very tense. I wanted so badly to do a good job and I was nervous that I was not delivering. I have been waiting for my senior project for years, as it is a compilation of everything I have learned. Throughout the process I found little ways to calm myself down. Before rehearsals I always stepped away from the group and hummed to myself in the wings of the theatre. This helped me focus and get my breathing in check. I felt that my mind was in a better place when I was not around lots of people before having to go onstage. I liked to be quiet by myself before. I carried this routine into performances as well. I still struggle with anxiety, but I am trying to work on it. This production helped me to figure out what methods help to calm myself, and I will use the same methods in Little Shop.
I wanted to touch briefly on my senior project proposal. I proposed this show, but the character I argued for was Sonia. I wrote my proposal overseas, and I was very disconnected from my home here at UMW Theatre. It felt odd to write such a big proposal from so far away but it had to be done. I read the show online and I liked the character of Sonia. I still love the character. Of course, I did have Masha on my radar but I decided against her. I chose Sonia because she was a person with many layers and thoughts. I was afraid of Masha because when I first read the play, I read her like she was the villain. I did not want to play a mean girl, so I went for Sonia. I wish I had given more thought to Masha instead of casting her off as the mean girl, because Masha was a good fit for me. Masha is thoughtful, strong, smart, and confident. I should not have assumed what I did about her when I first read the play. The pure bliss that comes with taking on a new character is that I gave a little bit of myself to Masha, and she gave a little bit of herself to me. Masha and I are very similar but also different, and I enjoyed discovering who she was throughout the past months. Looking back, I wish I had proposed Masha.

Finally, I wanted to explain why I chose to complete my senior project rather unconventionally with a journal instead of a blog. I actually created a blog early on in the summer. I named it Masha and Masha and Masha and Masha. As I started my journey to the stage I found myself gravitating towards writing all my research down instead of typing all of it. I went to the library and coffee shops to research at least two times a week, always with my notebook. I used the exact same pen for the whole process when writing. At some point, I had filled up a significant amount of pages in my book and started to think. Did I want to transfer all of this to a blog? My
instinct was to write, the old fashioned way, with a pen and paper. I came to the
conclusion that I should follow my instinct even though I had not heard of anyone
writing in a journal. This play is about change. Change in people, in the world, in the
weather. Everyone uses technology because it has become a necessity in our society.
I cannot lie, technology has been incorporated in my everyday life and I would be
lost without it. But despite all of that, I still had the urge to write. This notebook
traveled with my everywhere. I never left the house without it. It became my second
cell phone. I wrote after every rehearsal. I jotted down ideas as I thought of them.
The portability of my journal was attractive to me. It is fitting that I did my project
this way, because Vanya speaks about how in today's society we have all of this
technology and the simple things have been lost. Taking the time to write things
down was one of the points he spoke about in his monologue at the end. I took my
time with my process. I did not rush it. I sat down and took time to write out all my
thoughts, analysis, and research. I felt even more connected to the play because I
recorded my project this way. A blog would have negated the entire message that
Vanya gets so heated about; the message that the old ways are gone and the new
ways have taken over. Using a journal to record my thoughts, blocking, ideas,
themes, etc is something that I will carry with me for my future shows. This works
for me and I am grateful to have found a process that does so. All in all, this show
was an absolute pleasure to work on and I feel extremely lucky to have had this
opportunity. In my opinion we had an amazing cast and we all worked so well
together. I have gained confidence from this show more than my other ones here
and I learned so much. This is something I will never forget, because I feel like a
better actor now that it is over. There is really no way to wrap up something like this, but the only thing I can think to say is thank you.