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ACTING TECHNIQUE AND *CLYBOURNE PARK*

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The relationship between the general public and actors is one of the most interesting in the world. Everyone is very kind and loving towards those who are already established, towards those who have made a name for themselves and are finding success. However, when people learn of a young adult studying theater, whether it be high school or college, then there can be some animosity. There is often a questioning in the decisions of young actors, doubting their ability to be able to go out into the world and make something of themselves. I believe one of the main reasons for that is the fact that many people don't know of the training actors go through, especially in a university setting. A college's theater program is just as intensive as any other program in a university, its classes just as important to the discipline. And while the theater program may not have exams in the academic sense, everything that is learned in the classroom still must be applied in a very important place: the rehearsal space for a show. Everything learned must be remembered during rehearsal, and then applied to the production. My work during *Clybourne Park*, written by Bruce Norris, was no different. In this paper, I will explain much of the information I have learned from my theater classes, and how I was able to apply it to the rehearsal process for *Clybourne Park*.

The first thing a young actor should ascertain is the style of the play. In this respect, *Clybourne Park* falls under the realm of realism. Realism came largely as a result of the work of Henrik Ibsen in the late 1900s. According to Brockett and Hildy, Ibsen "refined Scribe's 'well-

made play' formula and made it more fitting to the realistic style. Ibsen discarded asides, soliloquies, and other nonrealistic devices, and was careful to motivate all exposition" (392). Before Ibsen came along, plays were very melodramatic. With the introduction of realism, life onstage started to resemble real life. *Clybourne Park* subscribes to this idea, though the direction by Segun Ojewuyi had elements of magic realism in it, especially relating to the house itself and the box of Kenneth's possessions. What makes *Clybourne Park* unique is that it acts as an unofficial sequel to the play *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. There is only one character that serves as a bridge between the two texts, and that is Karl Lindner. Coincidentally, it is Karl's character that provides the most insight into each play, so he is the character one should pay special attention to in the play. A knowledge of *Raisin in the Sun* is imperative to acting in *Clybourne Park*, because a lot of the information in *Clybourne Park* is merely only touched upon in *Raisin in the Sun*. What Bruce Norris has done is take a lot of minor things in *Raisin in the Sun* and given them more detail. We know Mama is buying the house at a discount in *Raisin in the Sun* when she says, "I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family" (*Raisin Act 2. Scene 1*). However, we never quite learn why in the play it is going for so little money. In *Clybourne Park*, Bruce Norris gives us the reason: Russ's son has committed suicide in the house. Desperate to get out the house, Russ offers up the house for far less than it is worth, which is exemplified in Karl's line: "As opposed to the amount for which *you* offered the property, Russ, which was *far* below the assessor's value..." (*Clybourne Park act 1*). To see what Bruce Norris has put into the play, and taking his own creative license, is a very interesting part of *Clybourne Park*, and is one of the facts an actor must look at while researching a part.

One of the most important things learned early in an actor's training is the Stanislavski acting technique, which is one of the most common acting techniques taught to actors, and also

the technique I was taught in my first few years here at SIU. One of the most important ideas that an actor must remember from the Stanislavski system is the 'Magic If'. The 'Magic If' is the question, "If I was this character in this situation with these given circumstances, what would I do?" (Sawoski 7). The given circumstances are another important point in this acting technique, which is defined as, "The plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of the action, the way of life" (Routledge 52). So, to carefully craft a character, an actor must take all of the information in a script and use it, as a character, to inform all of their decisions and their moods. It was through this method that I was able to create my own version of the character Russ, a much older man in the first act of *Clybourne Park*. Russ is a man in his late 40s who has lost his son, and in the wake of it, is now selling his house because he cannot deal with the grief. Much of the script already tells you how a character is to say a line in the stage directions. Examples include "slightly irritated" and "contemptuous" (*Clybourne Park* act 1). While these stage directions tell you how lines are said, it is up to the actor to decide on the specific emotions that go behind them. This, combined with the subtext, is what helps deepen a character and make them more relatable to the audience. The subtext is defined as "the meaning lying underneath the text/dialogue" (Sawoski 9). Stanislavski himself even said, "Spectators come to the theatre to hear the subtext. They can read the text at home" (Moore 28). Therefore, one of the most crucial things in any actor's life is their analysis of a text. Using *Clybourne Park*, there is one specific moment of subtext that I, along with the other actors, chose to look at and attribute a large amount of meaning to. At one point, Karl says, "And Jim: source of great comfort for us during all that" (*Clybourne Park* act 1). Karl's child had died in childbirth, and Jim had helped him during that; this is in the given circumstances. However, from the subtext, I decided that Jim had not helped Russ because Russ's son had committed suicide. Since Jim is a minister, suicide fell under a gray area for him, so he elected not to help Russ. Upon hearing this line, I, as Russ, gave

Jim a dirty look. To know that Jim helped out Karl, and not Russ, caused a lot of anger and hurt in my character. However, just hearing this line, most audience members would not think much of it. By analyzing the subtext and then looking into the given circumstances, any actor can craft a believable character.

In Act 2, Bruce Norris does something rather unconventional: he skips ahead fifty years in the timeline of the script, to the year 2009. In this second act, I played the character of Dan, which was a much smaller part, but holds his own level of significance. Since Dan was a smaller character with not as many lines, I took a very different acting approach to him. Dan was a construction worker, and many of his lines were fairly straightforward, with less underlying subtext within his lines. Due to this, I tried to take a more physical approach to Dan, which went more along the lines of the Meisner technique of acting. In the Meisner technique, instead of using the lines and subtext to craft a character, it relies much more on “creating the specific physical characteristics of each character the actor played” (About the Meisner Acting Technique). For example: To create an entirely new character for Dan, I came up with a specific walk for him. I would spend most of the second act walking around as him, creating a gait that I believe embodied that character. From there, many of Dan’s mannerisms showed themselves, such as constantly sticking a thumb in his belt loop and snapping his fingers at the other characters on stage. By using a much different acting technique, it was much easier for me to create an entirely new character for the second act. Any actor should have the ability to switch between acting techniques when necessary, and perhaps even blend them together, in order to create the most believable character possible.

Another useful tool in the actor’s line of work is to have some knowledge of directing. With that knowledge, not only is it easier to understand what a director is saying and where they

are coming from, that knowledge can also be used to craft a character and help tell a better story, which is the ultimate goal for any show: to tell a story. One specific piece of information to remember is that which pertains to stage pictures, or how actors are arranged on stage. Through the use of stage pictures, every single arrangement of actors should tell its own story. Focus is especially important in stage pictures. Eric Trumbull defines focus as the “arrangement of stage picture so as to direct audience’s attention to the appropriate character, object, or event” (Trumbull). With this in mind, an actor should always be careful to know how the stage picture looks at any given moment, while asking themselves the question: Does this picture properly tell the story the director is trying to tell? A good example comes from act 2 of *Clybourne Park*. Near the middle, Dan brings in a large box that was buried outside. Upon dragging the box inside and bringing it center stage, every takes a step back from Dan. This creates a stage picture that tells a very specific story, in that everyone is immediately trying to get away from Dan. He is an intrusion on their meeting, and he literally digs up the past and reintroduces it, and so everyone instinctively takes a step back. If someone were to take a picture at that exact moment, they would immediately understand what is happening in the story of the play.

Schooling is very important to everyone, but it is especially important for actors. No one is born immediately knowing what given circumstances are or about the Meisner technique; like with any other discipline, acting is something that must be taught, and subsequently, practiced. The homework may be very different, but the amount of overall work is still the same. At any moment, something you have learned in your time at school may be needed to help you with a show, which is what I have explained in this paper here. There is a lot of work that needs to go into acting to create a finished product up on stage, which requires immense amounts of preparation, and an intimate knowledge of theater and acting techniques. By using these

techniques, actors are able to create characters that are not only believable, but also a joy for an audience to watch.

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