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GOOD ENOUGH IS GREAT: Exploring Acting Through Vulnerability and Mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of vulnerability. I've been fascinated by this subject ever since I was introduced to the studies of Brené Brown. Her work focuses on different ways in which we can build shame-resilience and open ourselves to vulnerability. As an actor I was fascinated by this idea and wanted to synthesize it with my interests of contemporary masculinity and mindfulness. Brown's work does not focus on actors and the expectations of vulnerability that we are forced to have so I chose to explore how her teachings exist within the Penn State Musical Theatre Program. I found the toxic effects that masculinity has on effective acting and the benefits that mindfulness can have. Through a combination of personal storytelling and research I've found that vulnerability is an invaluable asset not only to actors, but every other person regardless of their profession, race, gender, or political beliefs.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the year and a half that I've been planning this thesis, it has changed as much as I have. I have made it through three major phases and you're reading Phase IV. However, knowledge of the first three are key to understanding this paper. I started thinking about Phase I in the fall of 2015. I was going to create and perform a one-man show based around the music of Alex Clare, an English songwriter. His poetic lyrics revolve around complicated heartbreaks and explore the intricacies that connect all of us. Since I was going through a messy break up at the time and clinging to my friends for support, it was a very fitting proposal. As senior year began, I realized I wanted something that would provide research as well as artistic creation.

In Phase II, I wanted to explore different forms of connection between character and actor in front of an audience. I had an artistic goal, but needed help making it academic so I went to my honors advisor, Susan Russell. Our discussion led me to masculinity. Guided by Michael Kimmel's *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, I began to notice the insidious social constructs of masculinity constantly at work in our society. I also became aware of how they were affecting my own artistic behavior and began to explore the practical effects of masculinity in classes and productions.

Phase III was an unexpected turn in development. In early January I asked my grandfather Jack Zimmerman for advice on how to compile my research on masculinity into a cohesive and interesting narrative. He applied his extensive experience of Council, a form of therapy based on ancient Native American practices, spirituality, and gender politics to our discussion and from there the thesis evolved once again.

Phase III explored tenets of Council and applied them to the relationship between character and actor. Council encourages participants to treat their relationship as a third entity, which could help an

actor identify the attributes that they share with a character, increase their empathy and enhance their ability to be mindful. Through mindfulness the actor can fully invest in the scene while also holding their actor's thoughts in balance and remaining present. This is a difficult tightrope to balance upon, yet can be practiced through meditation allowing the mind to be still, receptive, and focused.

I began writing in Phase III and halfway through I found that vulnerability was what I truly wanted to write about. This final phase takes key concepts of mindfulness and masculinity that I'd learned and integrates them into the research of Brené Brown. Brown is a fear and shame researcher and her books *Daring Greatly* and *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)* have changed my life. Brown manages to put words to feelings I've never been able to articulate. All of her themes are applicable to actors, yet her published research has not bridged that gap yet, so I decided to try.

From my own experience I have found that the largest personal obstacles between myself and the characters I inhabit are those that I can trace back to social constructions of masculinity and its effects on vulnerability. We've created strict constructs for men and women that emerged from fear and are only recently starting to be upended. After thousands of years of conditioning, the main necessity for masculinity is a lack of feeling. Boys constantly hear phrases like "be a man" throughout their childhood and adolescence, causing them to emerge into an emotionally stunted adulthood. My parents strongly encouraged emotional availability, but I am still deeply held by what I hold to be masculine. I believe the way to break free of these constraints is by encouraging vulnerability. Vulnerability removes interpersonal power by expressing intimacy through honest, respectful communication. There is no way to be a connected, truthful actor if one cannot access their own stores of vulnerability and what better way to practice than through mindfulness and meditation. I believe that by exploring these relationships and by identifying the corrosive nature of hegemonic masculinity and fear, there will be applications that will be beneficial not just for those in theatre, but for people everywhere.

Chapter 2

Vulnerability in Acting

This section has proven remarkably challenging to write because whenever I ask myself why vulnerability is important to good acting, I can't seem to separate the two. They are inextricably intertwined in my mind and there is no way to have one without the other. I figured the best way to explore the subject is to explain the various ways in which theatre has enhanced my understanding of vulnerability. Vulnerability means being open. You must set aside your pride and give up your control to truly look at another person and give them a part of yourself. We are taught an acting exercise here at Penn State that illuminates the necessity of this principle.

Imagine you have a key hidden somewhere on your body. Take that key, stick it into your sternum, and give it a strong turn. Feel your chest unlock and reach your fingers into the opening that you created. Pull open one side, slowly and with resistance, before opening to the other. This physical symbolism better prepares you to act. You're a receptive beacon, a lightning rod for truth. Now that you are available, you can receive. Whatever is happening around you can't affect you if you aren't aware and if you aren't constantly mindful. This receptivity lets you truly communicate with someone. With an open chest and an open mind, words can truly affect you, something that most people are afraid of. It is a frightening proposition to give up your own control, but it is also liberating. Honest listening and responding comprises truly great acting.

Most people cannot qualify what makes a great actor. They don't have the vocabulary, and yet they know. We've all seen acting where something feels off. That unnamable discomfort is created by our neurons. The American Psychological Association defines mirror neurons as "a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action"

(Winerman). This explains why we have physical reactions to seeing or hearing about someone else's experiences. And this may be why we can distinguish great acting from bad acting. If we watch terrific acting, our mirror neurons fire because we also feel the emotions that the performer on stage is experiencing and we leave the theater changed. If we remain unmoved and unstimulated, our bodies will not believe the behaviors of the actor onstage, we can't empathize and empathy is key. It is what we all seek. We are going through the world looking for connection. When audiences are moved to sadness or tears it is usually because of the empathetic relationship that has been created with the person on the stage. And since we are all self-critics it is much easier to empathize with someone else's choices than our own.

If we use this principle, it can be argued that it is easier to empathize with a character you are playing if there is an element of space between you. The slight divide must be ignored once you reach the stage, but it is a sensible way to discover how you feel about your character's actions. The word 'if' plays a large part in this. Asking yourself "what would I do if I were in that situation?" is very different than "how would I feel if my loved one was in that situation?" We give our loved ones more grace and leeway than we give ourselves. We cannot find the similarities and differences between ourselves and those we are playing without authentically listening and responding in a place free of judgement. We must never judge our characters. If they commit acts that we ourselves would never do, we must be brave our darkest thoughts to try and understand what could drive us to do unspeakable acts. We must offer empathy and justification in the way we would to someone we love unconditionally and love our characters in spite of their flaws. Of course, this is not an easy thing and something that I still haven't fully grasped, but my experiences over the years have taught me so much about understanding viewpoints different than my own. From animals, to dying elderly men, to angst-filled teens and carefree puppets, I've been able to confront how I would behave in circumstances I will never inhabit in my own life. The following sections document certain theatrical experiences that have taught me new things about vulnerability.

Animals

A huge, first breakthrough for me first came in the classroom during my freshman year at Pace University. In our foundational acting class, we were often asked to put our intellect away and fully commit to outlandish exercises. This was helped by the warmup we would start every class with. Taking anywhere from ten to 45 minutes, the warmup began with an inward focus, finding a relaxed center while breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. I now realize that we were doing a mindfulness warmup. Then we ignited our Qi, an internal energy source, and began to energize our entire bodies, motivated by our breaths. This unifying warmup was a beautiful equalizer for class. We would all be at the same starting place for the work that was to come. One day we experimented with traits that characters can receive from animals. The exercise itself was quite simple. We would walk around the room and as our professor counted up to 100% we would become creatures. The process was slow, giving us time to fully investigate how a chicken or a giraffe might move in our bodies. The most memorable time we did this involved a lion's physicality. We started the process like we always did and then once we were fully lions, we went wild. We playfully swatted at each other, growling at some and purring towards others. One classmate hit my thigh, and that action started a frolicking game of chase. I'd never experienced such abandon before with no judgement from anyone else. Then we slowly reduced our percentages until we created characters influenced by what we'd discovered as lions. Watching everyone create a vastly different individual out of the same creature was a beautiful reminder that our experiences color everything we do and a lion can mean one thing to one person and the exact opposite to someone else and they are all authentic. I learned about the freedom that true vulnerability can have and how addicting that feeling is. It's why we become actors, to chase that feeling of truth, feeling alive. This remains one of my favorite memories from Pace, and it is a lesson I carried with me when I transferred to Penn State my sophomore year.

Titanic

The musical follows the infamous ship from its departure to tragic sinking, chronicling the final moments of the historical figures onboard. Since everyone knows the end of the play, the beginning must be so engrossing that they forget what is to come. Then, in the second act you must truly fight for your life, confronting your own mortality. My character, Frederick Barrett, is driven to return to his girlfriend back in England. When he realizes he won't make it off the ship and will never see Darlene again, he must find a way to accept his fate. I began to approach this morbid plot point by hunkering down and really working to act before I even got onstage. I ran on set and got in such a panic mode that I couldn't be receptive to anyone else. I was so focused on making sure I was feeling the right emotions that I didn't allow anyone else to affect me, which actually would have made my job easier. Luckily there were five adults in the cast and one of them was my acting teacher. In a discussion with him about the role, he reminded me to open myself, not gird myself to act. That was a far more frightening proposition for me because I had no guarantee that I would feel what I wanted to feel, but if I had done more work before the show, the emotions I wanted would have been more readily available. They wouldn't be dependent on the other actors, but informed and supported by them.

Additionally, we had cards that we gave out to each audience member with a name of someone who had been aboard the Titanic. Each night I grabbed a card and did the performance for that person. This helped remind me that these people had all been real, not just creations of ink from a writer's pen. Tying myself to these people gave me a sense of belonging. And reminding myself of their terror helped me release a little bit out of my controlling mentality. Looking around at my cast members, they truly appeared to me as the people they were pretending to be.

Hair

This production challenged my vulnerability and that of my cast members long before we ever reached the theatre. The 1968 hit show, revolves around a tribe of hippies in New York and was revolutionary because the final moments of act one are done naked. In addition, the show's bold handling of race, sex, and drug use forced the cast to confront our own opinions of and exposure to those subjects. Sheri Sanders, a rock audition coach, came in to rehearsal to facilitate workshops about how to best approach race-based conversations within our cast. The discussions we had produced the most beautiful growth and highest levels of discomfort I had felt in a long time. The entire cast was asked to be vulnerable on a scale I'd never seen and the conversations resulted in profound empathy and a connection that radically changed our tribe's dynamic. Then it came time to get naked. We approached this moment in the show with great care and respect for each individual and their attitudes towards nudity. My character, Claude, is the only character who cannot get naked in the show, but I wanted to try it during rehearsal to feel what it was like. There is a real sense of openness when you share that kind of intimacy with someone, especially a group of people. From that moment on, we couldn't hide behind who we dressed ourselves to be, we were exactly who we were with no pretense.

Playing Claude also helped me tap into vulnerability because he is such a youthful character. Our set was designed around the concept of an urban playground and I inhabited it like a child would. Claude sees the world through a lens that is innocent and full of hope and anyone who moves through the world in this way is more susceptible to all our daily traumas. The physicality and mannerisms I used during that show were all designed to be loose and free, untethered, yet receptive. Even in his moments between life and death, while he sees his friends protesting the very thing he died for, he is still enveloped in questions. He changed me and I changed him every night. I didn't change lines, or blocking, or notes, but my motivation depended on what I got from my fellow actors and the audience. While the deviations were only noticeable to me, they still unsettled me and taught me how to be affected by the wonderful humans I shared the stage with.

American Idiot

My most recent production showed me what it's like to not have any vulnerability. In *American Idiot*, my character Tunny, was a rage-filled young man, who leaves his hometown out of frustration and rage at everyone and everything surrounding him. My biggest challenge in callbacks and in preparing for the role was taking the charm out of Tunny. Erin, our director, made sure I tapped into the anger that made Tunny leave Jingletown as my primary emotion, which was really hard for me. I'm not someone who usually experiences anger and so all the outbursts that Tunny had felt very foreign and manufactured to me. I didn't know how to make them live in my body and make them look natural. Erin was very kind and assured me that what I did looked as though it belonged in the world of the show.

Tunny's character arc takes him to Iraq where he gets bombed and loses his leg. He spends the rest of the show in a hospital bed, wheelchair, or with a cane and usually dressed in a hospital gown. What surprised me was how quickly those props made my vulnerability skyrocket. The inability to move on my own made me so helpless. I'd have to be wheeled on and offstage and with that kind of inability there is no way to have anything but respect and love for those who help you. There is no way to hide when you are lying flat on a bed. I had to practice public solitude and truly imagine what I was seeing, keeping myself open to the audience this time, not turning me back, not closing my eyes. Putting Tunny in these positions gives him the potential for the most growth out of all the characters in the show. Since he can't find vulnerability emotionally, it is forced upon him physically. His nurse, the extraordinary girl, takes care of him and the most moving part of the show for me is when he finally lets her touch the stump where his leg used to be.

American Idiot was the perfect show to end my experiences here at Penn State. I learned so much about the need for empathy, compassion, and true human connection onstage. The storytelling allowed for no subtlety and everyone had to commit to the entire story with their whole being. You cannot be in the work judging it, and no one was. We all fully believed in the message we were delivering and the medium in which it was being conveyed.

Chapter 3

Mindfulness

Meditation and acting are not two words I ever expected to go hand-in-hand, yet mindfulness practice has become more popular as people seek a brief respite from the stress of our digital world. Apps like Headspace and Calm have made fortunes supplying this demand with tailored meditation packages ranging from emergency stress relief to a better night's sleep. In February 2016, our production of *Hair* inspired me to download Calm. Before every show I would spend twenty minutes meditating to prepare for the three hours to come. I needed the time to leave my world behind, it was a sort of airlock between my personal school day and the chaotic world of 1968. However, with this mindset it was inevitable that I would stop with the conclusion of our run. In the months after *Hair* I used the app rarely until my stress levels rose. In a fervent quest for self-improvement I threw myself into hobbies such as guitar, ukulele, writing with my left hand and a second date with meditation. This time, the discipline made my sessions chores rather than pleasurable. I became so obsessed with my breath, how I was breathing, how I was sitting, whether or not I was aligned, etc. that the entire exercise became a source of stress. I determined that I was too analytical for meditation and I took another break from the peaceful birds chirping and rhythmic pounding of the waves of Calm.

The following November I realized that my acting was the very reason I should have continued to meditate. In acting classes, we are taught to listen and respond authentically, reduce the time between action and reaction, and live truthfully in the moment. Those tenets are shared by mindfulness. Kristin Neff of the University of Texas at Austin runs the self-compassion Research Lab and defines mindfulness as such: "taking a balanced approach to negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed or exaggerated...Mindfulness requires that we not "over-identify" with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negativity" (Daring Greatly, 132). This definition resonates with me

because it forces you to confront the influence your thoughts have. My mind loves to wander down the rabbit holes of thought and practicing mindfulness lets me release my obligation to those thoughts. In your typical session the meditator is encouraged to sit still and exist in a state of non-reactivity. Your goal is to hold your awareness in balance and not get carried away by thoughts. If you find yourself distracted, you simply escort your thoughts away and return to your breath; streamlining the connection between your brain and respiratory system. Once I began to notice the parallels between these two practices I became much more interested in meditation as a way of honing my craft and to my surprise found out that vast numbers of celebrities and professional actors practice mindfulness as well.

Practice is one thing, but I've experienced these benefits in performance as well. The best example of this happened during *American Idiot*. The thin plot tenuously strings together twenty-two of Green Day's greatest hits and this lack of structure was immensely liberating, yet also deceptively challenging. By the time I'd leave the stage and enter one song later, months may have passed and the continuity of my character, Tunny's, story arc depended on what I brought back on stage with me. During one show I cracked in the third number and couldn't stop thinking about it, it totally took me out of the action. Try as I might, I couldn't shake this feeling. But then I remembered I didn't need an app to breathe and right before I walked onstage I turned my focus inward and inhaled. I followed my breath and reminded myself of what I was doing and what Tunny's circumstances were. With that simple reminder I was able to drop back into the show and finish it out stronger than I ever would have thought.

To a non-actor this may seem insubstantial, but mindfulness has been proven to transform education in children as well. A 2005 study conducted by Maria Napoli, an Associate Professor at the Arizona State University, found that significant differences were found between children who participated in her 24-week mindfulness training and those who did not. Napoli defines mindfulness as "an individual's conscious, purposeful choice and ability to be fully aware in the present moment" (Napoli, 2005). Her study emerged out of a concern based on growing rates of stress and anxiety related disorders among children. Schools that encourage mindfulness in the classroom tend to treat students and teachers

as partners in learning (Langer, Hatem, Joss, & Howell, 1989). In most common teaching scenarios teachers relay all the material through their own experiences and rarely have the novel excitement that a student does. Teachers forget that each student brings their own individual history to the classroom—similarly to how each audience member brings their perspective to a show (Adams, 2002). Mindfulness implores students and teachers alike to approach learning from different perspectives, and observe context. This is especially important for acting teachers because there is no one way to teach acting. There are many entry points for students that are nearly impossible to codify and as many things blocking our honesty.

One such issue involves critiquing a performance as it is being given. This is my personal kryptonite. My tendency towards hyper-analysis removes me from a piece because I am thinking about too many different things at the same time. I do this in meditation as well. During a performance of *Be More Chill*, there was a perfect example of this dual-thinking. The show follows a high-school boy, Jeremy, as he grapples with becoming cool—aided by the help of a supercomputer within a pill. I played the supercomputer in human form. Naturally, finding the physicality of this part proved to be challenging and I never felt settled in how I moved on stage. During one performance I jumped down from a block and as I was gesturing thought, “the way my wrists just moved felt very gay.” That sentence occurred as words were flowing out of my mouth and instantly I was gone from the moment, consumed by my worry. Had I known then what I do now about the powers of mindfulness I hopefully would have been able to let that thought gently slide from my attention while staying present in the scene. Meditation allows me to create a clearer channel between myself and the character I am portraying. Mindfulness lets me identify a thought that I am having as Aidan rather than a thought I am having as a character, a distinction that is very important to make. Honest acting is a balancing act, the actor can never ignore that they are in a theatre and yet we must react to our circumstances as if we are in reality. All we can hope for are honest reactions and to allow ourselves to be affected by the circumstances and fellow actors onstage. That creates good acting and is facilitated by opening yourself to vulnerability helped by meditation.

Chapter 4

Masculinity

“You’re handsome, you’re white, you’re talented, and you’re terrified.” Those words started my investigation of masculinity. Susan Russell had a point. I was all of those things, and she was able to clarify why I was terrified. I wasn’t allowed to make a mistake. I wasn’t allowed to show my weakness. I knew that was at the root of my acting troubles. I didn’t feel as though my problems were important because I had it so good. I wasn’t, and still am not, comfortable showing my problems. Hearing her name this issue gave me hope and I jumped into my research fervently, discovering the endless complications society places upon men. What I’ve also found is that key relationships are the most important way to dismantle how we perceive masculinity. Responsible, open adults, our mothers, fathers, teachers, and mentors all have a responsibility to guide young men towards empathy, respect, and love.

As a chubby, exuberant kid I desperately wanted approval from those who I thought ‘cooler’ than me and to this day I don’t know how to interact with them. I’ve always received attention from girls, but I was left constantly unsatisfied until I read this passage: “men subscribe to [their] ideals not because they want to impress women...They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men...Masculinity is...performed for, and judged by, other men” (Kimmel, 47). Reading Kimmel’s words made me rethink my involvement in my unsatisfying relationship with my peers. I wanted to explore this concept further, but I was at work so my only recourse was to scribble my thoughts on a napkin.

Do I want this male approval really? Or do I only want it because I haven’t gotten it? ...because it feels like some elite club I’d actually despise.

No, I don’t want it. And that feels good to write. Give me an intellectual man. Give me a kind man. Give me an outgoing man. Why would I want to be a part of a boys’ club like that? My favorite qualities are my empathy, emotion and compassion. Why would I want to be a part of a group with none of those qualities? I wouldn’t. I don’t.

I was proud that I had written those words. I wanted to appeal to those men and I always will, but that was the moment when I realized I didn't really want what they offered. They aren't bad people; these men simply suffer from the issues of thousands of years of conditioned masculine ideals.

Daily Issues

It all comes back to strength. Men respect, crave and value nothing more than what they perceive as strength. In Brown's preliminary research with me she "didn't hear about layered, conflicting and competing social-community expectations. The expectation, clear and simple: Do not let people see anything that can be perceived as weakness" (...*Just Me*, 280). Everything else we can be perceived as is alright, as long as we are always in control, always dominant in some way. This indoctrination begins when children hear men they respect say "be a man," "man up," and "don't be a sissy." These, and a myriad of other supposedly helpful phrases instruct male children to shut off their emotions. Our first line of defense against feelings of discomfort is our empathy. If we don't want to hurt, we don't associate with the pain of others. We shut off our emotional receptors and create alternate, acceptable conduits for rage, sadness, and joy. This is why sports and videogames are so popular; they are emotional outlets. Sports, specifically, are a way for men to show a vast range of emotions that are not only socially acceptable, but understood and encouraged. When a man cries due to a series of points scored by a group of men miles away from him, it's normal. When a man cries for any other reason, it's bizarre, feminine and must be hidden.

If we aren't covered by a calm exterior, then we get labeled. We risk being called fag, homo, pussy, bitch and other hurtful epithets by our peers. These phrases all boil down to the same intent, emasculation. And the two words to best shatter a boy's confidence are gay and fag. "Calling someone gay or a fag has...become synonymous with dumb, stupid, or 'wrong' ...because it isn't masculine enough. To the 'that's so gay' chorus, homosexuality is about gender nonconformity, not being a 'real

man” (Kimmel, 76). It is so pervasive that I used to say it myself. The cool guys said it and so I mimicked them, ignoring my burgeoning sexuality in hopes of being included. One day, my mom picked me up from school and within seconds I'd told her that my day was “so gay.” She told me the danger in that phrase and asked how my gay uncle would feel if he heard me say it. After that, I never said it again and it has since become my least favorite phrase in the English language. Once I came out I made sure to eliminate its use in my school, mainly by asking what made the subject homosexual. To which people would laugh and I'd remind them how much it hurt me. That's a disarming tactic because we aren't used to people expressing that. Guys are supposed to react to hurt with anger, that's how it works. In a TEDxUWLaCrosse talk in 2013, Ryan McKelley informs his audience of a pattern called the “Male Emotional Funnel System”. He shows an image of an hourglass, the top is filled with a wide range of emotions from humiliation to loneliness and the bottom contains only anger. The graphic illustrates how men are taught to deflect discomfort with rage. After years of this conditioning, men may not even know how to differentiate the two. This creates an inability to process traumatic events in a healthy and vulnerable way and a lack of emotional control that leads to fear, then rage.

This relationship is the reason that pornography use has grown over recent years. The convenience of online porn is preferable over the emotional and physical needs of a real person. “The world of escape offered by pornography is ‘easy.’ It makes few relationship demands; it asks little of men morally, intellectually, politically, and offers so much in return: the illusion of power and control” (Kimmel, 179). It is used as an outlet for frustration and is a direct response against the vulnerability that sex must have. Kimmel says that men use porn as a way of “getting back at a world that deprives them of power and control, getting even with those haughty women who...have all the power” (Kimmel, 188). Their stunted vulnerability leads to difficulties finding and sustaining healthy emotional relationships. After years of cultivating a defense against empathy, young men find themselves incapable of acknowledging or responding compassionately to the concerns of their female counterparts. They have spent so long disassociating that they don't treat women as their equals who they can learn from, but as

tokens and medals to parade around other men. Women become another status symbol in the endless search for validation and ascent into manhood.

The lessons taught to us as children come to a head in college. When young men arrive on campus for their first day of freshman year, it ushers in a new era of independence. In our vast expanse of possibility, we struggle to find who we are and who we connect with. Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett calls the college years “emerging adulthood,” a period of critical development. It is a time when students are told to decide what direction their lives will take during the next four years. There is no way to escape the constructs we fall into while trying to explore our new sense of self. We seek identity, justification, and status from our peers who are ill-equipped to give us the definitions we seek (Kimmel). Arnett states that this phase is a “time for serious self-reflection, for thinking about what kind of life you want to live and what your Plan should be for your life” (Kimmel, 39). But we cannot be expected to grow after a childhood that forbids weakness and vulnerability. Instead, men revel in the playful, Dionysian atmosphere that college often has. It becomes a time of freedom, an escape from responsibility.

Young men live within these social constraints for so long they become carbon copies of the very friends who enforce these rules. Their masculinity is constantly being policed by a jury of their highly biased peers and the best way to avoid ridicule is through conformity. They spend hours, months and years cultivating their shields, egos, and self-esteem that they lose their self-respect, which “is quite a different thing from self-esteem. Esteem requires only that you hold yourself in high regard, but it is unconnected to anything you have actually done. Self-respect is the fruit of action, of triumph over some hardship, of picking yourself up and getting back in the saddle” (Kimmel, 274). Self-respect is a necessary key to unlocking vulnerability and empathy because it allows us to feel secure enough to give up our power. That’s where all these issues stem from: a fear of losing power. This fear is a key contributor to the division within our nation. White, working-class American men, who comprise a large percentage of this country, feel threatened. They see their influence disappearing and their opportunities being given to women, minorities, and immigrants. Instead of men approaching this trend with respect

and openness, it is approaching them through fear; not an emotion that many like to face so it's covered up by anger. The tension means that change is occurring. We are undoing millennia of conditioning and strength, anger, and power will be the building blocks of masculinity for years to come, we must continue to seek out the cracks in the armor and widen them with kindness and the strength to be vulnerable.

Theatrical Issues

In middle school, I really didn't fit in with the other boys. I wanted to so badly and tried so hard, but it never worked. I was always on the outside. I didn't like sports, I wasn't excited by videogames, and I couldn't even love girls; we had nothing in common. We learn by failure and I failed tragically. So the lessons stayed. Coming to school for theatre with a host of hang-ups about wanting to appear tough is a recipe for disaster. I've struggled with this baggage for three years and have only been able to name it in the last few months. I can only imagine how long tackling this issue will take.

Musical theatre is a highly progressive art form. There have been strides made in this field that would not be possible in others due to Broadway's tourism industry. From the sexual liberation of *Hair*, to *Hamilton*'s racial diversity, artists on Broadway make headlines. But even while doing groundbreaking work, actors fall into traps. Audiences expect specific storylines and archetypal characters to appear onstage. These characters all descend from your classic leading man and ingénue. Only recently have more people been represented on Broadway. In high school I was cast as leading men and praised for being able to play straight. There are, of course, roles created for flamboyant, gay men, but most use homosexuality as a point of conflict in the plot. There are few roles where being a gay actor is beneficial because casting directors find it hard to imagine a gay man convincingly falling in love with women, even though straight actors play gay ones all the time. When I was in *Titanic: The Musical* two years ago, I was told that my movement was "too Hawaii." I needed some clarification on that note, and I was told that my stride wasn't heavy enough. I looked too young and light on my feet. I translated that to mean I

didn't look manly enough and changed my walk. Of course we are trained and encouraged to be honest, real, messy and truthful, but that's hard when you've grown up hiding all of those traits. Now, any feminine qualities I have are shut down in service of my physical type. I walk a tightrope between emotional availability and masculinity, trying to balance the authentic parts of myself against what I think a man should be.

Moving Forward

Healthy relationships with adults are key to deconstructing the damaging effects of masculinity. We all need positive role models to show us that courage and vulnerability go hand in hand, that emotions are acceptable, and that there are many different ways to show strength. Our most important interactions begin with our mothers. Mothers, as the primary caregivers of most families, typically spend more time with their young sons than fathers. As boys grow, their mothers are seen as a feminizing threat. Her very presence encourages empathy, emotional availability, and compassion, which is why mothers must “remain present in the lives of their sons...By the time guys leave home, their mothers have often been...characterized as an obstacle, as the chief impediment to his manhood—holding him back, keeping him a ‘mama’s boy,’ feminizing him, undermining his need to separate” (Kimmel, 274).

During my childhood, my mom was the rock that I clung to at all times. I would sob whenever we had to part ways, whether it was for a day of school or a longer trip. In the sixth grade, when my parents told us that they would be separating, I assumed I'd live with mom and I wasn't sad even though I hardly saw my dad for three years. When my parents moved back in together, I started to notice a stronger connection with my dad taking shape. We have grown much closer over the years without having to distance myself from my mom. I learned about every trait from both of my parents in a neutral way. My dad taught me about the importance of affection and nurturing, and my mom taught me about discipline and resolve, among other things. My parents, for all their flaws, really nailed the non-gendered emotions

game. I wanted to know if my experience was unique, so I created an informal survey of actors covering a variety of questions and available to all genders, races, orientations, etc. Of the 32 men who took my survey, only four of them had negative things to say about their relationships with their mothers. The small sampling and vague nature of the question makes it hard to draw any concrete conclusions, but does indicate that a healthy relationship between son and mother allows for a greater emotional accessibility and an encouragement of the arts.

But our parents aren't the only adults who influence our lives. We interact with hundreds of adults over the course of our upbringing. Teachers, coaches, priests, and other mentors all shape who we become. "Far too often the burden for engaging with and guiding young men falls entirely on the parents...Yet cross-generational friendships...can be a crucial factor in helping guys envision possibilities for their own adult lives and should always be encouraged when appropriate" (Kimmel, 273). These relationships occur frequently in musical theatre. Since actors receive so much help during their training and careers, most yearn to repay that debt to those who come after them. I couldn't have made it where I am without so much help and I actively seek out ways to assist those who are coming next. This is one of the most beautiful things about the musical theatre community as a whole. I've have also noticed this in the close relationships that we form with our teachers. Penn State's Musical Theatre program has a very small faculty-to-student ratio. Every professor introduces themselves by their first name and each students has a close connection to at least one, if not many. This relationship of trust is vital when a professor asks students under their tutelage to bare uncomfortable emotions and trust that they will be guided to safety. They treat us as equals in the learning process and understand that our processes are all different. They are emotionally vulnerable and give us concrete examples of the type of men we can grow into. The communication between generations is the most effective tool for encouraging openness and must be utilized at every possible chance so we can move forward as a unified, respectful society.

Chapter 5

Judgement

If masculinity is the biggest inhibitor to vulnerability, judgement is a close second. Every day acting students are asked to bare their souls and expose their most vulnerable emotions, and we cannot do that if we are worried we're being judged. However, we often judge others in an attempt to seek validation in such a subjective, highly competitive art form. The survey I conducted found that 79.2% of those surveyed judge their peers moderately to almost constantly. Our contempt is a defense system forged from our own deepest insecurities. Brown illustrates the simple truth that "we are...hard on others because we're hard on ourselves...Finding someone to put down, judge, or criticize becomes a way to...call attention away from our box. If you're doing worse than I am at something, I think, my chances of surviving are better" (*Daring Greatly*, 98). There are few people who are more self-critical than actors. One of the first pieces of advice I received about theatre was "only if you'll die without it should you pursue it" and it's true. So much rejection goes into being an actor that only those who truly love the form stay with it. This leads to a workforce flooded with highly driven individuals. We spend hours each day standing in front of mirrors or our peers constantly trying to grow and improve. Unlike most other career paths, our growths, setbacks, and triumphs are on display for everyone to see.

A more conventional profession marks progress by figures and does so in private. If a student excels on tests, they progress. However, their peers are unaware of their progress. This is a very healthy way of learning; it encourages students to focus on their own personal journeys. This lesson is reinforced by harsh punishments of plagiarism. Schools treat stealing someone else's intellectual property as an offense much worse than underage drinking or even illegal drug use. These policies effectively protect student rights. Actors aren't as lucky. There is no way to plagiarize someone else's work and your growth

is constantly tracked by your peers as well as teachers. This learning environment is supportive during the best of times and intensely shaming at the worst. We look for ways to quantify and identify, so students automatically fall into categories such as: weak dancer, amazing soprano, not a great actor, needs some work on their voice, etc. While these phrases allow room for growth, but they often create labels that are nearly impossible to shrug off.

My hardest struggle with this has been in dance. My brother was always the dancer of the family and it wasn't until I started doing musicals that I became interested in dance as well. I didn't have much training and when I arrived at Pace in the fall of 2013 I was faced with an awkward scheduling dilemma. I had the option to take either Beginning Ballet and Beginning Music Theory or Advanced Ballet and Advanced Music Theory. I decided to go the advanced route. I was a ballet novice, standing at the barre with girls who had been dancing since three and boys who were on Broadway. Needless to say the label of 'bad dancer' arrived quickly. I wish I were called an 'untrained dancer,' which has room for growth built into it, but bad stuck and that's how I perceive myself. I spent hours in studios trying to improve my technique, but only succeeded at frustrating myself until I left dejected and hopeless.

In my despair, I found that I had to let go of jealousy quickly if I wanted to improve. Dance is the most objective part of musical theatre; either you can do a triple pirouette or you can't. Brown says that "we judge people in areas where we're vulnerable to shame, especially picking folks who are doing worse than we're doing" (*Daring Greatly*, 99). Since I was at the bottom of the heap, there was no one worse than me to judge. Since I was so insecure I became hyper-aware of irrelevant flaws in others. Those eventually became so distracting that I had to stop. I had to learn pretty quickly how to muster up the courage to make it across the floor even if I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I also had to remind myself that when I feel unsure, I assume everyone is as aware and critical as I am and they are not. I felt shame, but I felt it so often that it became a duller ache.

I've been grappling with this label for four years and it has taken the joy out of an activity I truly love. The feeling of dancing is immensely liberating to me, but I was taught by my peers that I didn't look

good doing it, so I stopped dancing for fun. Once the label sticks, you start to believe it yourself. I've started to care less what people think about my dance skills and now practice things until they feel right in my own body. That way I can start to look up from the floor and actually take up the space that I have to with a 74-inch wingspan. And while I may not have advanced in dance as quickly as I would have liked, I have learned so much about confidence and discomfort.

I've also seen this labeling process destroy the confidence of my friends. If you compare singing and dancing you'll find that the skill levels are equally as varied, but harder to quantify. It is appropriate to say someone is a bad dancer, but not a bad singer. Voice lessons are conducted in private, which is the most beneficial method for most students. This privacy allows them to make mistakes while exploring areas of their voice that would make them cringe in front of their peers. Dance on the other hand is rarely taught to only one student. It is believed that less-trained students will accelerate faster by watching those of higher skill levels in the same class. However, I was fortunate enough to be offered a tap independent study with Michele Dunleavy in my junior year. It was one of my favorite classes I've had at Penn State, and it vastly increased my capacity for learning. I was no longer able to hide behind the sounds and shapes of my peers. I was the only one under scrutiny and while that was indeed terrifying, it made me grow at a much faster rate. Away from the groups and potential criticism of my peers, I was able to explore my full capabilities.

I'm more confident in my dance skills now, but it's a challenge to accept our own weaknesses when we can see everyone else's strengths. Our nervous systems are wired to grow from mistakes, yet learning is marked by what we get right. This educational shift needs to be addressed at the beginning of a college education in theatre. We should be told exactly how our mistakes help us. We should explore the positive effects that have occurred from failures we have had. I'm currently striving to re-label things in my own mind, such as untrained vs. bad, and to accept where I am. I think this would also even the playing field and allow everyone to be more receptive to the processes of others, reducing the need for judgement as a protective device.

Chapter 6

Other Obstacles to Vulnerability

While hegemonic masculinity is the strongest inhibitor of vulnerability and judgement certainly exists in all of our lives, there are many other ways in which we have learned to protect ourselves. Over the course of her research Brown has performed countless interviews and I can only imagine the vast range of protective tendencies we all have. In her books, Brown illustrates many different ways that we knowingly or unknowingly defend ourselves from vulnerability. She highlights eight, but the three that I find most pertinent to actors are: foreboding joy, perfectionism, and sympathy seeking. All three of these are of course applicable to people from all walks of life, but I find these three share symptoms that are exacerbated by the stresses of musical theatre. From the public nature of our classes to the untethered nature of waiting for jobs, we are forced to confront vulnerability in ways that few others do and therefore have different ways of coping with these stressors. In this section, I will deal with the nature and symptoms of these coping mechanisms. In order to fully understand their magnitude, we must unpack why they exist in society and what exacerbates them in musical theatre. In Chapter 7 I will explore ways to embrace these defenses and move towards an open-hearted lifestyle.

Foreboding Joy

Actors feel stronger emotions than most since we are constantly asked to push into the emotional territory that most people avoid. I would describe myself as a highly emotional person and my life philosophy is to “experience the high highs and the low lows, for who wants a life half lived”. I believe that we learn from our struggles and our moments of joy are what make all the other parts worth it. It

surprised me then when Brown explained that joy can be used to protect us from vulnerability. “When we lose the...willingness to be vulnerable, joy becomes something we approach with a deep foreboding...joy can feel like a setup” (*Daring Greatly*, 118). The more examples she provided, the more I started to see a trend, whether expecting to be disappointed during a class or audition to hearing my mom anticipate a tragedy, this technique is prevalent in all our lives.

Auditioning was the first example of this that comes to mind. Auditions all follow the same template. You select appropriate material, you dress accordingly, you rearrange your schedule to accommodate hours of waiting and once you get to the room you have less than a minute to present yourself. If you're lucky they will ask for more, if not, you leave the room and your audition is over. While you're in the room, you are expected to be kind, engaging and completely open. You must bare your soul for a room of strangers who hold your future in their hands. And then come callbacks, potentially many rounds of them and excruciating waiting. This grueling system creates a paradox, encouraging the foreboding of joy, yet also forcing vulnerability. Even if an audition does go well, there is no guarantee that you are what the casting director was looking for. We actors must numb ourselves to the joy of expectation because the chances of success are so slim. We are also asked to have the confidence to act as though we will get the job throughout the endless process. As emotionally engaged humans, we must keep our emotions subdued, but when we step into the room we must appear as if nothing is at stake.

Another method of foreboding joy comes from a term called 'marking'. Marking is most usually applied to singing and is a method used to protect the singer's voice. One can mark by switching octaves or going into falsetto; any way to continue the sound without the expending the same amount of energy. This practice is used in intense rehearsals or on occasions when a performer must sing something many times. It is a healthy, protective measure, but can also be used as an unhealthy, protective measure. There is no way to gauge this second form of marking and here I can only speak from my own experience, but I assume I am not alone. Marking can exist in any facet of the performing arts as a way of foreboding joy

and avoiding true vulnerability. I first discovered my own unhealthy form of marking in dance. I would learn a combination in a less-than-energized way that wouldn't allow me to fully inhabit the movement. This was a way of conserving the space that I was taking up and making myself a smaller subject. It wasn't until my junior year that I realized I was keeping my movements small because I was afraid of being judged on my true ability. In my mind it was much easier to do something at 70% than 100. If I was told that I was a bad dancer, I could subconsciously blame it on the fact that I wasn't truly giving my all. I would tell myself that I wasn't a bad dancer, I was holding back and when I really tried I'd be better, but I never did. I created a pattern for myself that stuck and is ridiculously difficult to get out of.

I also noticed it in my acting, though not as pronounced and harder to identify. The subjective nature of acting made it hard for me to name it as a key player in my educational development, but there it was. I was afraid of going all the way because of how I thought I would be received. I was constantly in my head and that made it very difficult to be in the moment with a scene partner. After some consideration I've realized how perfectly this fits into Brown's explanation of foreboding joy. Not allowing ourselves to be in the moment because of a fear of future adjudication has the same effect as rehearsing a tragedy. It simply doesn't allow us to be vulnerable. If we are performing, but worried about how others will view our execution, then our presentation will be less truthful, diluted. There will be a marked difference between public performance and rehearsing alone. I know that my dancing is different when I am alone because I am not afraid of people's responses. I move in ways that feel good and I have fun. I live in the joy of the moment. I've learned how to tap into that joy and am now processing how to keep the joy when surrounded by others. If we can start with the smallest bit of hope, it can grow into something miraculous and honest and noticing this fact is the first step towards embracing it.

Perfectionism

This form of protection runs rampant throughout theatre programs and is the one that opened my eyes the most. When I read this section in *Daring Greatly* I was lying on the beach and sat up in shock. I have always lived my life as a proud perfectionist. I like my life to be organized and rational. I was raised by parents who had high standards and I excelled in most areas I participated in. I spent every semester on my school's Headmaster's List, I was always well-behaved, I hated breaking the rules to the point where I attended school sick and had perfect attendance throughout all three years of middle school. I liked making people happy and would go out of my way to do so, got praised for my looks and charm and helped break records for my school's paddling team. These were all traits that defined me. I wouldn't trade any of them for the world, but found I have remarkably thin skin because of them.

What I thought were my proudest accomplishments, Brown exposed as the foundation for my greatest insecurities. As a proud perfectionist, this quote shattered all my preconceived notions: "Perfectionism is not self-improvement Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: 'I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it.'" (*Daring Greatly*, 129). I'd received praise in every category she listed and more if you include theatre. In my astonishment I shared the news with my dad who dismissed the idea as silly. He responded with "What should we do? Not compliment you for anything then?" I didn't have an answer at the moment, but came to understand that now I crave positive praise because that's the scale by which I measure success. I was never taught to evaluate quality on my own terms. That shook me pretty hard. I am now faced with the challenge of really investigating what good means to me and how to distance the reactions of others from my own personal worth. Even this March morning, three hours before I wrote these words I had to remind myself that a performance I was giving was not for the reactions of the audience; it was for the truth of the character. But the reactions and lack thereof were still documented in the back of my mind.

As much as I focus on being authentic and messy, I fall into roles created in high school. In my class I'm always the one who people go to with questions, I take care of every technical issue, I always volunteer my things for class and part of me loves that. To hear "what would we do without Aidan?" makes me feel needed and worthy. People expect me to be strong and informed and that makes me hesitant to be vulnerable. Brown found a "painful pattern...[in her] research with men: We ask them to be vulnerable, we beg them to let us in, and we plead with them to tell us when they're afraid, but the truth is that most women can't stomach it... [a man she interviewed said] 'Men know what women really want. They want us to pretend to be vulnerable. We get really good at pretending'" (*Daring Greatly*, 95-96). I've found this to be true on multiple occasions. Most women find confidence the most attractive trait a man can have and yet they crave his openness. How can he do that without worrying that his appeal will then decrease? I know I get worried about that. I like to present myself as a nicely polished and self-supported person. I know those are some of the traits that people like about me and so that's how I present. I get positive reinforcement for that and then the feelings stick. Even in such accepting profession as theatre men and women are expected to fall into their respective roles on and off stage. I believe that this conditioning happens unknowingly and bringing it to the forefront of conversation is our first step in reversing its unintentional harm.

Sympathy Seeking

In the spring of 2016 I experimented with a no complaining challenge and became highly attuned to how often I hear complaining around me. It definitely affected my social interactions and I became so consumed by this issue that friends of mine would remind me that I was complaining in my search for answers. Finally, Brown named exactly what I'd observed in *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)*. She calls it Sympathy Seeking. "People seeking sympathy are not looking for empathy or evidence of shared experiences—they are searching for confirmation of their own uniqueness" (...*Just Me*, 51). This section

showed me that those who complain are actually seeking identity, which is immensely difficult to find in this competitive field.

In our program, you can find countless ways to group people together and just as many ways to prove their diversity. Therefore, it is hard to find benchmarks of progress. We are not only searching and exploring who we are as people, but also where our type and talent fit into the business. Our quest for self culminates in roles on a resume. The roles we play give us a concrete identity. Upon graduation strangers can look at our resumes and know who we are at a glance. When students get overlooked or graduate with fewer roles it leaves them with shaken confidence and an unstable opinion of how they fit in the outside world. There are many people in the program who could play the same roles and it is inevitable that some will feel marginalized. They may feel as though they are always overlooked in favor of their peers or that they are lumped into a label or group that they find unsatisfactory. This causes insecurity to grow at an alarming rate. When we are constantly told to find what makes us unique, but aren't given guidance to explore that, we try to find it in any way possible. So we turn to complaining in order to get attention. We declare that our lives are truly the worst ones because if that's true then we are unique. A few months of this is toxic, but when there's no reason to be lifted from this frame of mind, a few years is deadly.

This is more prevalent in girls because there are more women and more roles for men. It's unfair and I am highly aware of my natural born advantages. I know I have it easier than most, yet sometimes I can't contain my frustration. I try to point out small positives, but sometimes appear patronizing. But "it's not unusual to feel resentful or dismissive when someone requests our sympathy...On the one hand they are telling us that they have it worse than anyone...but on the other hand they are looking for our validation" (...*Just Me*, 52). How do we empathize with that? How do we acknowledge a system that is much more challenging for women to navigate and also try to illuminate the many gifts that we do have? I'm not sure that I will ever be able to answer that, but I do know that I will remind myself of this writing every day. I will be more respectful of the small challenges that may appear large and above all I will remain a positive energy by practicing patience and compassion on a daily basis.

Chapter 7

Training to be Vulnerable

This section has been the hardest to start since the constraints I've written about are so binding. Exploring masculinity has opened my eyes to a heartbreaking world of rules that most men aren't even aware they're in and if they are aware, that they can't talk about. Examining the internal aspects of the musical theatre department through my surveys has shown me the insecurities that plague everyone ranging from body image to simply being enough. Writing this thesis has only increased the questions I have and made me aware of the multitudes of paradoxes that exist within society today. I'm someone who tends to overthink and analyze constantly, which are not the best traits for an actor. These facts can send me into a nervous tailspin and I have definitely found myself lost in micro-anxieties. So how do I take what I've learned, examine the myriad of ways we protect ourselves and make that into a cohesive, executable plan of action? I can't, because finding and codifying a set of rules to live by wouldn't be mindful, which I think is the most important key for me and most actors. Learning how to hold everything, my thoughts, opinions, and fears in balance is a skill that I will never stop exploring and it will never stop challenging me. Nevertheless, the skills in the next two chapters will be my supports as I journey past Penn State.

Practicing Gratitude

I've been keeping a gratitude journal for almost a year and a half now and it's the most consistent routine I've ever had. I've filled one book with 365 lists of ten or more things I'm grateful for and have filled up almost a third of another. I started this by accident because I was given a journal as a gift for

Christmas and didn't know what to use it for. I hate rereading my own writing (so proofing this will be [and has been] fun) so I took out all the superfluous words and stripped it down to a simple list of things I'm grateful for every day. When I discovered that Brown names practicing gratitude as the number one way to combat foreboding joy, I was reassured. However, her method is more immediate than mine. She encourages her readers to name what they are grateful for when they feel the first twinges of vulnerability. So if I am enjoying some quality time with my friends and start to get vulnerable thinking about how I won't be here next year I'd say "I'm feeling vulnerable about next year and am so grateful for our friendship." This can be a hard thing to do, but it's better than the alternative of making a snide comment or retreating to my room or phone out of frustration.

Coping with discomfort through technology is a rapidly increasing phenomenon. With the rapid increase of technology in our lives, I've become torn about the nature of human communication. I was raised that being on your phone while in the middle of a conversation with someone is impolite and that it is rude to have your phone at a table or during a family activity. It didn't help that I was in a long-distance relationship my last year of high-school so their reprimands were more frequent and more intense. This caused their teachings to take a firm hold in my subconscious and there they've stayed. Now I find it's hard for me to not get frustrated when my friends are on their phones even if we are just hanging out, doing nothing. I have to remind myself that that isn't how happiness works. Happiness does not only occur in exceptional occasions, it's found in the small, mundane moments that happen every day. Happiness is found when watching my roommate put on makeup or even sharing space with someone. Rather than making these experiences negative by blaming technology, I can open myself and say "I'm vulnerable and don't want to be replaced by a phone." That way I can truly be honest about my feelings in the moment, for "every time we allow ourselves to lean into joy and give in to those moments, we build resilience and we cultivate hope" (*Daring Greatly*, 126). Joy is what makes all the hardship of life worth it. We grow from all our negative experiences; we learn from the traumas in our lives. That is how we are biologically wired. Happiness lifts us from the mire of pain and gives us a reason to carry on. We find

ecstasy in the simple joys of standing and breathing, looking out over a calming view or doing something you love, reading or laughing or even writing this thesis. We run the risk of losing out on joy if we are always searching for it or planning its arrival in the future. Extraordinary experiences can be filled with joy, but our lives aren't always filled with extraordinary experiences and mindfulness lets us be present and observe these tiny moments for what they are, little miracles.

Letting go of Negative Labels

If we try to be aware of our small joys, then we must also stay vigilant about the power of tiny traumas. It is a badge of honor to be sleep-deprived in our society today. We put so much time and effort into what we do that if we can't show our exhaustion we aren't working hard enough. We are a diligent group of people in one of the most rigorous programs in the country and we should be tired, but we also should take care of ourselves. We are constantly told of the importance of health and sleep, but it seems, not given the actual time to put these words of wisdom into practice. There is not a day that goes by in this program where you we don't have to either dance, sing, or act. Usually we do all three in the same day and always two of the three. These classes rely on our bodies to be in peak performance condition; you can't do a handstand if your muscles are sore and you can't act a song well if your voice is tired, that's a fact. So how do we turn this trend around? It's connected to sympathy seeking.

As I've stated before, we are all looking for concrete ways to validate our progress throughout our four years here. Teachers rarely give us the solid answers we need, in fact my acting teacher freshman year would answer my questions with "Aidan, the answer isn't hydrogen." At first I didn't understand the nature of her response until I realized she was trying to get me to relieve myself of a black and white answer. There are no mathematical equations in singing and no Boolean logic in acting. It is all subjective. But classic school systems have created students who expect grades to inform us how we are doing. In high school we are taught by those teachers who only teach through their lens. The university

professors here understand that all learning is subjective and every student's approach is unique. We get grades here, just not until the end of the semester or maybe a midterm check-in. So we turn to each other to mark our progress; craving validation from people unqualified to give it to us and seeking it themselves. We are insecure about this, understandably and turn towards sympathy seeking and use exhaustion as a new status symbol.

But instead, we must strive to take care of ourselves as best we can. If we put a higher a value on staying healthy enough to fully inhabit our homework, classwork and production demands we can move away from this culture of exhaustion. If we are rested enough to be fully present in class our work will grow. If our work progresses, then we become more comfortable and confident in said work. The result of feeling secure in our art is less judgement and criticism of others. And if we feel sure of the amount of work we've done, then we won't feel as though we have to prove ourselves through the gauntlet of exhaustion. This trend would allow us to truly reach out to one another from a place of empathy and allow us to seek an equally empathetic response. Empathy is the great equalizer. It allows us to leave behind our need to prove ourselves and therefore allow us all to be much more vulnerable inside and outside of class.

Chapter 8

Loving Your Flaws

I'm not good at accepting my flaws. I'm not comfortable failing in front of myself or others. I get scared when I have to confront the parts of myself that I'm afraid of. I hate knowing how many issues there are in this thesis that I'll never fix. But those mistakes are okay. Those make this an authentic document. They make it a document that people can have opinions about. I could work and work on this until it is perfect, but no one would want to read it. It has just as many flaws as I do and there are just as many ways to love your flaws as there are flaws that we have. That makes me want to walk forward with my head held high and my heart vulnerable. It is hard to be accepting of these cracks in school since we are constantly learning how to repair some and open others. Our confidence must come from a place of worthiness. We must believe that we are enough and that enough is amazing. The small critiques we get in order to improve aren't comments on a flawed individual, but two circles of polish on an already gleaming diamond. And diamonds are full of texture, we can see their structure inside them, complex and breathtakingly beautiful.

We actors have a unique obligation, especially in such a tumultuous time when the truth is layered in fiction. It is our job to explore truth and illuminate it. We must confront audience expectations, share lessons with them and invite them to think with us, all under the guise of a fantastical story. Whether a show is about a hippie in New York or a scared man in Iraq or even a lion in a classroom, life-changing themes exist everywhere. A show about a perfect human would be pointless. There would be no growth and nothing to latch on to. Without imperfections the audience has no way in; no way to empathize. In *Hair*, Claude is that entry point. He exists in the show to invite your average theatregoer into this circus tribe of hippies. He shows the audience that they aren't so different from us. They may dress differently, do a lot of drugs, and think about sex differently, but all they want is love, connection

and happiness. Theatregoers might not pick up on the specifics of these messages, but they'll feel something even if we don't know it.

In the 2008 film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a scene follows a sequence of seemingly unrelated events that lead to a terrible, life-changing car accident. In Andy Weir's *The Martian*, there are entire chapters dedicated to the creation of a single piece of metal and the microscopic events that lead to its devastating malfunction. In my senior year of high school, my final AP Language assignment was a memoir. I crafted a choose-your-own-adventure story entitled *50 Shades of Gay* and throughout the 50 chapters I told 38 of what my life could have been and 12 of what my life had been. Each chapter ended with a choice; vast decisions such as my parents moving to California instead of Hawaii and tiny ones like choosing peppermint over chamomile tea. They all had a profound effect on what was to unfold. This idea of intertwining unknowns has always fascinated me. If I don't push my chair in after I'm done writing this, it could trip someone in five minutes and cause them to spill their coffee. If today is the day of a huge exam and they're already stressed, they could fail the exam because of me and I would never know. Conversely, someone could push in the chair after I'm gone and share a smile with the person across the table. They could strike up a conversation based around the inconsiderate nature of people and that conversation could lead to a date. If things went well, that date could lead to a happy relationship and who knows where from there. The event isn't important for me, but the ripples are endless.

Actors rarely get to know the effects their performances have had. They may look out into a sea of darkness and observe the first few rows, but even facial expressions can be misleading. There may be those who stand at the stage door, waiting with programs in hand to shower praise, but those are a small percentage. We'll never know the ones who walk to their car and realize for the first time that they've seen themselves onstage. We won't see the tears that come when they realize they aren't alone and that someone truly understands them. I've observed that moment once and I will never forget it. Allowing someone to see our imperfections may change their lives beyond our wildest conceptions. So we can't hold ourselves to the standards set by those we can't see. They may have the most complex thoughts, yet

a face of stone. They may be weeping, but unable to express why, prepared to shut down and forget after the curtain call. We will never know.

And that is enough. If one audience member has a new thought or strong emotion, then nothing else matters. Our responsibility as theatre-makers is to create connection and display imperfection. Art “most closely resembles what it is like to be human. To be alive. It is our nature to be imperfect. To have uncategorized feelings and emotions. To make or do things that don’t sometimes necessarily make sense” (Nicholas Wilton cited in *Daring Greatly*, 136). This is liberating. We can let go of the shackles of expectation and be fully present in the moment, living, breathing and responding to our fellow actors who are entrusting us with their vulnerability on the church that is a stage.

And if the stage is a church then mindfulness is our preacher, ushering us towards vulnerability. Allowing us to authentically respond in any direction our scene partners may take us. Mindfulness, lets us balance on the point where you can go backwards, forwards, down, up, to any emotion possible because you’re in the middle of everything. Making eye contact is an example of this, truly listening is an example of this, putting down your phone, telling someone you love them, holding someone and saying nothing, giving a stranger a compliment, telling someone you’re afraid, asking for help. The ways in are endless and all ask you to give a part of yourself to someone. Without that vulnerability there is no point to living because we thrive on connection. We thrive on love. We thrive knowing that we belong somewhere. We thrive by telling stories. “When we speak shame, we learn to speak our pain...we are wired for connection, and this makes us wired for story...storytelling is how we communicate who we are, how we feel, what’s important to us and what we need from others” (...*Just Me*, 156).

And with that quote, I’d like to end my thesis with a final story. I’m sitting in the HUB, amazed that I’m writing the last paragraph of this thesis I’ve been thinking about for more than a year now. It has changed from a one-man show, to a presentation, to a lecture, to this essay. My sister asked me what my favorite part of my life was recently and it’s been writing this. At first I was overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of the task, but it has taken on a life of its own and taken me along for a beautiful ride. I know

less now than I did when I started, but I'm okay standing in the middle of this unknown, feeling calm in the eye of a storm made of questions, investigations and possibility. I didn't know how to write a thesis and thought that my anecdotes weren't academic enough, but I realize I couldn't have written this without them. I am a storyteller and am surrounded by storytellers. Investigating the complexities of human behavior is my job and it will lead me around in circles, usually within my own mind and I wouldn't want it any other way. I'll cry, I'll laugh, I'll yell and I'll feel lonely, but I know I'll be fine because every emotion I have is a part of me, unapologetically me. I don't know what will come in two decades, two years or even two months, but I feel more prepared to walk forward into the unknown now, supported by my friends, family, teachers, inspirations, and most importantly myself. This thesis has shown me without a doubt that we are not alone. We are all looking for connection and it can come at any moment, from an unexpected hello, a shared laugh, or perhaps by leaving my chair pushed out.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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EDUCATION

- Pennsylvania State University** 2014-2017
Schreyer Honors College-BFA in Musical Theatre 2017
- Pace University** 2013-2014
Pforzheimer Honors College-BFA in Musical Theatre

HONORS & AWARDS

- Musical Theatre Endowment Scholarship (2014-2017)
- Hanson Scholarship-Musical Theatre (2015-2017)
- Dean's List from Fall 2014-Spring 2017
- 2016 Recipient of the Robert Reifsneider Award
- 2016 Recipient of the Sue Carson Award

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

- Doorman & Host, Local Whiskey**
State College, PA October 2016-Present
- Checked IDs and seated patrons.

- Counselor, S.T.A.T.E.**
State College, PA Summer 2016
- Was an overnight counselor for the inaugural session of this camp.
 - Took care of the needs of over thirty high school students.
 - Ensured student medicine was always with me and dispensed properly.

- Work Study Assistant, Penn State Residence Life**
State College, PA August 2014-Spring 2016
- Designed concepts, content, and art for co-curricular bulletin boards.
 - Managed office supplies and organized deliveries.

- Model, Abercrombie & Fitch**
New York, NY Spring 2014
- Organized floor displays and managed cleanliness of the store.
 - Was selected to present floor displays for CEO Mike Jeffries at the 5th Avenue Flagship Store.

- Camp Organizer, Keiki Performing Arts Workshop**
Waimea, HI Summer 2014
- Organized and taught a two week intensive children's' camp.

- Managed six employees, planned daily schedules, and organized legal release forms

Personal Landscaper

Waimea, HI

Lisa Chu-Thielbar - Anekona, HI	2011-Present
Robert & Ceri Whitfield - Kamuela, HI	2011-2014
Clark Realty, (Noekolo Estate) - Kamuela, HI	2010-2011
- Trimmed hedges, mowed lawns, created aesthetic patterns	
- Was given full control and multiple liberties on appearances	

MUSICAL THEATRE PROGRAM SERVICE

- Assisted at each on-campus audition for the Musical Theatre Program.
- Usually moderated the Parent Q & A
- Travelled to New York to assist with the Unified auditions in 2016
- Was invited to have breakfast with a prospective student by head of admissions Clark Brigger.
- Created a for-the-students-by-the-students handbook to help freshman Musical Theatre majors get acclimated to Penn State.

STATE COLLEGE PERFORMANCE HISTORY

American Idiot (Tunny)	Penn State Centre Stage-Spring 2017
Be More Chill (The Squip)	Penn State Centre Stage-Fall 2016
My Fair Lady (Freddy)	FUSE Productions-Summer 2016
Hair (Claude)	Penn State Centre Stage-Spring 2016
Titanic (Barrett)	Penn State Centre Stage-Fall 2015
Forever Plaid (Frankie)	FUSE Productions-Summer 2015
Parade (Frankie)	Nittany Theatre at the Barn-Summer 2015
Avenue Q (Nicky)	Penn State Centre Stage-Spring 2015
Marry Me A Little (Man #2)	Studio 119 Production-Fall 2014
Chasing Nicolette (Count Valence)	Penn State Studio Reading-Fall 2015
Alone in the U.S. (Robby Lefton)	Penn State Studio Reading-Fall 2015
Love & Other Fables (Philocalus)	Penn State Studio Reading-Summer 2016
NuMusicals	Downtown Theatre-Summer 2015
Radioactive (Pierre Curie)	Downtown Theatre-Summer 2015
Something Wicked This Way Comes (Mr. Cooger)	Downtown Theatre-Summer 2016
Deep Water Ballad (Ensemble)	