

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in...Agnes of God

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Over the past four years, I have had many fantastic opportunities to perform onstage here at Birmingham-Southern College. I would not trade a single role that I have explored here for the world. Yet one show stands out in my mind as the culmination of all I have learned as an actor during my college career. The show also happened to be my senior project, Agnes of God. My work as Mother Miriam Ruth seems to be the ultimate result of everything I have studied from freshman year until now. I do not believe that graduation is the end of the road for me as a performer, but now could be the last time that I can explore my work in a wholly academic setting. I know that as an actor I have improved during my time in college. Most people believe that acting improves with life experience. With that opinion alone I was sure to have advanced. However, my growth as an actor since I entered school all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed was more than just age. I did experience the sleepless nights spent writing papers and other “life experiences” befitting a college student, but I also learned how to design a set, study and critique the classic playwrights, and musically direct a show, among other skills. I never could have developed these skills on my own. Yet my primary focus during my college career has been performance. Of all the wonderful instructions I have received, I have discovered that in order to do my best work, three things are extremely important to my process as an actor. Over the course of my four years at Birmingham-Southern, and particularly through my work on Agnes of God, I have learned that the three most important criteria for creating honest work and true communion are eye contact, truthful listening and reacting, and boldly pursuing the character’s goals.

I remember the very first day of Beginning Acting with Alan Litsey, in which we were introduced to the term “goal” as it applied to acting. Before that moment I had typically associated the noun with sports, like soccer or football. Little did I know that from that day forth, “goal” would become the four-letter word I most frequently uttered. According to Robert Cohen,

whose Acting One text has seen me through many a role, “goal” is defined as “the character’s quest at any given moment; what the character wants to achieve” (Cohen 254). I was a bit taken aback at first. Acting was one thing for me, but goals? Needs? Desires? In the beginning, I failed to fully grasp how acting and goals connected. Now I can hardly see them as separate entities. Acting is striving toward your goal at whatever cost, or at least it has become so for me. But it was not always this way in my mind. Acting was passive, presentational, disconnected, and emotion-based when I entered Birmingham-Southern College as a first-year student.

When I began working on my role as Ramona in Marian Faustus, PhD., I was determined to get this acting thing right. My main goals were not only to impress my director with my abilities, but also to be funny and perform outstandingly in my role. Before I learned about goals, things were not going very well in rehearsals. I was obviously not the most experienced actor of the bunch, which was intimidating to say the least. Not only that, but as a Beginning Acting student, I was still not completely familiar with either the terminology or its importance. I was baffled by questions then that seem so ordinary now. Alan would ask me, “How does Ramona feel about such-and-such?” and the only way I could respond was, “I don’t know. I never thought about that.” It was frustrating for me, since I always want to do well in everything. I made sure to pay special attention in acting class, hoping a real epiphany would occur, and all of my magical questions about theatre would be answered. It didn’t happen. I played my role to the best of my ability at the time, and hoped I would understand more in the future.

One of the concepts that I missed during the first part of my freshman year was that “life is action; that is why our lively art, which stems from life, is preponderantly active” (Stanislavsky 48). And now we are back to the question of goals. Our day to day life is filled with goals. I want to fix my computer, I want to graduate, and I want to write this paper. Those

are just a few of many goals that I experience in minutes. Any character I portray should be no different, for each character experiences a multitude of goals just as I do. According to the great acting theorist Constantin Stanislavsky, who redefined the process or method of acting and creating a character, each character in any show has one superobjective, a goal that trumps and encompasses all other goals. The superobjective, or ultimate goal, “contains the meaning, the inner sense, of all the subordinate objectives of the play.” In pursuing this superobjective, I am doing something; I am acting on something. I am living, and so is the character. For instance, in Agnes of God, Mother Miriam Ruth’s superobjective is to protect Agnes from danger at any cost. As straightforward as goals may seem, their implications can be very difficult to comprehend at first. I mentioned one of many struggles from my freshman year. I have had countless struggles following that, but the process has gotten easier. Over the course of my semester in Intermediate Acting, the importance of goals hit home. By the time the semester was over I wrote in my journal, “I remember how difficult it was at the beginning of the semester to identify goals and tactics. I really didn’t realize then just how important those things are to a scene and to the development of a character.” Since I felt I had begun to understand the definition of goals, my next step was to pursue those goals boldly.

I still struggle with going for my goals in a daring and dangerous way. Even in my senior project I floundered quite a bit during the rehearsal process. One would think that after three and a half years of goal definition and pursuit that I would have the hang of things. It is quite the contrary, actually. Now I can define them, but how willing am I to risk everything for those goals? That is where the rehearsal process comes in for me. Janet Suzman claims that “rehearsals are not to get it right straightaway, they’re to do it wrong and then find another way of doing it” (Cohen 83). I wholeheartedly agree, for that is what I have done. During Agnes of God the

rehearsal period was where I began to become bolder in pursuing my goals. For instance, in Act 2 Scene 2 Mother has just witnessed a horrific hypnotism of Agnes. Since her superobjective is to protect Agnes at any cost, she will not have Agnes hypnotized again. She attempts to convert the Doctor to her way of thinking, to dazzle her with knowledge. If the Doctor believes that Mother's way makes more sense, Mother wins and Agnes is left alone. Once I defined my goals, I felt freer to approach my target from many angles, using various tactics in order to win. I wrote very few notes in my script in this scene, and I think it is because I began experimenting early on with how strongly Mother strived toward her goal. I began reaching toward my goal impulsively and strongly, and I cannot even begin to describe how wonderful it felt. All of my personal inhibitions fell to the wayside, and I reached a commitment to a character like I have never experienced before. She was so desperate that it energized every action she took. That desperation soon took hold throughout the show, and I felt like I had finally reached a high point in my acting. I found success in boldly pursuing my goal.

I cannot attribute all of my success, or rather my personal satisfaction, to goals alone. That would be too simple. Pursuing your goal is only one aspect of acting. Performing with another person onstage is quite a different matter. Every goal your character strives toward is affected in some way by the other character(s) in the play. Goals clash and conflict ensues between characters. Each is trying to change the other's way of thinking. An obstacle exists, one that must be surpassed. The beliefs of the Mother and the Doctor in Agnes of God are a prime example of obstacles. Doctor Livingstone believes in the mind as supreme, while Mother Miriam Ruth sees God as omnipotent. Each holds very strongly to her beliefs, and each attempts to convert the other. But in order to truly enliven the conflict, the actors must be in tune with each other. They have to honestly listen to what the other person is saying, and truthfully react to

those words or actions. This is another lesson with which I have grappled during my college career. Acting is a team event, since every action creates a reaction, which causes another reaction, and so on. I had to learn to be less self-absorbed when “acting” and more observant of my fellow actors.

Acting is about observing and reacting to the other characters in order to know when or if you need to change your tactic. In striving towards a superobjective, one approach is never enough. You have to absorb the information your scene partner gives you through glances, words, or actions in order to know where next to go. I have had problems in the past with merely pursuing my goals with no attention to my fellow actors. I would set things in my mind a certain way, and would expect the same reaction every rehearsal or performance. As I have gotten more experienced, I have found that focusing on the other person in the scene is much more effective than focusing on myself all the time. Yes, I am pursuing goals for selfish reasons as the character, but I cannot be completely selfish as an actor. Making the scene what I want it to be is very different from living in the moment, and only by connecting truthfully with another actor can I live in the moment. I found a quote in Robert Cohen’s *Acting One* book where Christine Lahti states “Put all your attention on the other person...if you can see the experience *they’re* having...that’s truly listening and responding. That’s the give and take, the aliveness” (Cohen 108). That is what I want to arise from my work: aliveness. I found it consistently in my senior project and in a few scattered instances earlier in my studies.

One such incident was in Advanced Acting, when Brie Quinn and I performed a scene from Top Girls. We portrayed sisters who were at odds due to custody disputes. During our final in-class performance, we were completely in tune with each other, and I felt a sense of elation when we were through. I had been totally intent upon listening and reacting to her, as a

component of pursuing my goals. When we finished the scene, I was shaking from exhilaration and exhaustion. I felt that had anything gone wrong during our performance we would have been able to overcome it because we were honestly reacting to one another. Such an instance occurred earlier in my college training when I was working on a scene from Spinning Into Butter with Chandler Krison in Intermediate Acting. Although I was new to the concept of listening and reacting, I was beginning to understand the effect that it could have on a scene. I wrote in my journal that “I finally began to feel comfortable enough with the character and the lines and her tactics to really start reacting like she would” (Holmes 15). I went on to speak of how effortless it felt. It was not effortless, but I had done all of my homework on the character’s goals. I was then able to let go of my preconceived notions as to what should happen and allow honesty to occur. The same thing took place on a larger scale during this past Interim.

I can truthfully say that I have never before experienced an entire show where all of the actors were so focused on pursuing their goals that observing and reacting became easier. I experienced that with my senior project. No scene was ever quite the same, nor did we want any of them to be identical. The three of us in the show listened and reacted genuinely each night to whatever happened, which meant we never stopped discovering aspects of our characters. Because we were so attentive to each other, our goals and battles became more dynamic. Stanislavsky wrote that each actor should “give an honest reply to the question of what physical action he would undertake, how he would act (not feel...) in the given circumstances” (Stanislavsky 201). I agree fully with the great acting expert, and I think we did just that in Agnes of God. I found that when I actively listen and react to my fellow actors, I can see whether or not my tactics are working, or my goals are being met.

This principle of acting definitely did not come as easily as it sounds. I remember several rehearsals where I was completely disconnected from Laura Oldham, who played the Doctor. I was so concerned with how my acting would come across to an audience that I forgot to react to what she was giving me. In Act 1 Scene 10, I was frequently carried away in berating her character, and as a result I unwittingly ignored the obstacles she was creating for me through her reactions. I had a certain image in my mind of how I wanted the final scene of the act to occur. I remember distinctly spending quite a bit of time in rehearsal on this scene, where Alan encouraged me to stop merely yelling at the Doctor. Yet this was how I had envisioned the scene in my mind. After several attempts at the scene, something finally made sense in my head. Alan told me to “live in the moment” and I realized that living in the moment means you have to let go of any preconceived notions you have of the scene. I had been trying to make the scene what I, as a selfish actor, wanted it to be, rather than paying attention to my scene partner and allowing my character’s tactics to change as a result. Once I started paying attention to Laura, our scenes improved dramatically. I realized that as an actor I cannot be selfish in order to work well with other actors. True listening and reacting makes any struggle more real, more human, and more interesting.

Another exciting event dealing with honest listening and reacting occurred during the third or fourth performance of Agnes of God. In the first scene between Doctor Livingstone and Mother Miriam Ruth, the doctor lights a cigarette against Mother Miriam’s wishes. For some reason, the matches we had as props did not want to light. As Laura struggled with the matches and threw them one by one to the floor out of frustration, I picked them up. Mother Miriam would do that. Also, Laura was very much in the moment and cursed the cigarettes, which Doctor Livingstone would do in a heartbeat. That prompted a natural reaction on my part as the

Mother Superior. If I had been unwilling to pay attention to Laura's behaviors, several entirely honest moments would have never happened. This type of listening and reacting occurred frequently in our show. I have also seen many similar circumstances as a teaching assistant in both Beginning Acting and Musical Theatre classes. Recently in Musical Theatre, Martin Landry and Meg Bailey worked on the song "In a Little While" from Once Upon a Mattress. The scene was cute but stagnant for the first two in-class rehearsals. I worked with them one night, and the scene was headed in the same direction as always. Their characters' tactics never changed because neither actor was truly listening or responding to the other. I watched the scene two or three times, asking various questions to try to help them make progress. I finally thought to ask them if their tactics ever changed in the scene according to what the other character was giving them. From that moment on, a change came over the scene. There was a sense of conflict, a push and pull rhythm to the scene that made perfect sense. Both actors were vigorously pursuing their goals, and allowing their tactics to change based solely on the actions and reactions of their scene partner. After seeing this in my work as well as the work of many others, I have realized that if actors honestly listen, react, and pursue goals, they take one step closer to real communion. Communion is a term that has not yet been mentioned in this paper, but it is the ultimate experience as an actor. All of my work, all of my studying, all of my rehearsals are in an effort to reach that state of being where every actor in a scene is completely focused and honest with the others.

Certainly listening and reacting play a role in achieving communion, as does reaching for goals. Yet eye contact is an additional and necessary element of communion and truth in acting. When I was younger I was painfully shy. I became involved in theatre because it gave me a chance to become someone other than myself. I had an opportunity to break out of my shell

beginning with my role as Sir Kay in The Knights of the Rad Table when I was in sixth grade.

Sir Kay was confident, arrogant, the complete antithesis of myself at the time. From that moment on I believed that theatre was completely presentational. I never worried about revealing too much of myself because I was supposed to pretend to be someone else. I did not learn that I was misinformed in that respect until I was older and more confident. Still, eye contact was always the one element I was most skittish about in a scene. I still am uncomfortable with the principle at times. As the years have passed, I have learned to be less presentational and more truthful, for that brings me closer to communion with other actors. Making eye contact is just another part of that truth and honesty. Looking back at my earliest Birmingham-Southern College Theatre experience, I realize that I was not at all willing to make eye contact with anyone. I was far too scared to connect with any of my fellow actors in Marian Faustus, PhD. I was intimidated and petrified of being less than acceptable. That attitude hurt me more than it helped, as I now know. In hesitating to reveal any part of my character's inner concerns, I closed myself off from what could have been an amazing experience. It was a fantastic affair for me at the time, but how different it would be if I had known then what I know now. That was my initial stepping stone into the world of eye contact. The more acting classes I took, the more willing I became to open up. I started making eye contact and things started getting better, I thought. Take Miss Prism from The Importance of Being Earnest, for instance. Had I never made eye contact with Alex Scokel, the actor who portrayed the Rev. Chasuble, our characters never would have been so deeply enamored of one another, and all the humor that arose from the situations would have been lost. My eye contact continued to improve over my time in college, as did my focus, which led me to this past Interim.

With such a small cast, and such a high volume of words to speak, I had to often remind myself during early stages of rehearsal to look at my onstage comrades. How intensely can you pursue a goal if you never look the person in the eye? How can you expect to gauge their reactions and responses if you never look at them? The principle finally began to make sense to me. I began to consciously will myself to look at my fellow actor Katie Barton when I was convincing Agnes to eat, or to make eye contact with the Doctor while arguing for faith over reason. I created a new habit for myself (no pun intended), which I hope to carry into my future work. Had I completely resisted making eye contact, I cannot imagine in what state the show would have been. After the run of the show, and subsequent to all of my work on eye contact, I found a passage in Creating a Role where Stanislavsky states that “it is with the help of the eyes, face, mimetics that a role most easily finds physical expression” (Stanislavsky 101). He goes on to speak of the speech of the eyes and how its subtleties are crucial to honesty in acting. Again I would agree with him.

I have found over time that the roles in which I take the most pride are those where I allowed my eyes to connect with those of my scene partners. One such example is my work as a Protean in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. My two fellow Proteans happened to be two of my best friends, and through our eye contact and trust in each other we were able to be free and creative with our characters. As a result, we became pirates, trembling servants, and vicious soldiers, among other things. We were adaptable to almost any situation, such as injury or forgotten props. The sense of trust that I eventually gained in my fellow actors through eye contact has made my work on several shows superior to those where I lacked eye contact and therefore lacked trust. The trust allowed my scene partner(s) and me the freedom to change tactics or take whatever steps necessary to achieve our goals. This in turn led to a sense

of communion between the actors. When I began to trust them, they in turn were allowed to trust me.

Over the years I have found that “the irresistibility, contagiousness, and power of direct communion by means of the human will and feelings are great” (Stanislavsky 106). I found this experience most in my work on Agnes of God. Most of my memories of the show have less to do with the rehearsal process and more to do with the amazing result we achieved. I could have created and worked in an environment like that for a long time. We never seemed to finish working on the show, which is a further testament to our commitment to it. We achieved communion with each other frequently, since we were focused and followed what I view as the three keys to honest acting. Over my four years here at Birmingham-Southern I have learned that even with all of the hours and time spent in acting classes, I have been able to reduce my process to three principles that are easy for me to understand. Not that this is all there is to acting or to my process by any means, but with these three concepts firmly in grasp I can do better work, and I can always improve. Making eye contact, honestly listening and reacting to the other actors and boldly pursuing goals combine to result in trust, freedom, and communion. These elements are incredibly basic, yet it is simple to allow other elements to interfere. I have found through this senior project, however, that if I keep my process simple and “don’t do dumb things,” as the saying goes, I will be able to create my best work. I find it amusing that if I were to teach these principles to a freshman version of myself, I would be in complete disbelief. I would wonder how activities that seem so simple are the key to everything for my personal process. And in truth, I still do, but I’m willing to trust what I have learned. My future after graduation might still be uncertain, but my success story with these basic tenets of acting is the opposite.

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