

Compassionate Acting: Healthy Artists Make Better Art

by

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Confidently Moving Beyond Here

As I was reflecting on my theater education thus far, I was reminded of a few things. The first was my experience of being able to be in the premiere of *26 Pebbles*, a docu-theatre piece that was written based on interviews of people who lived through the Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Being in that production was one of those experiences where I realized that my job as an actor was to honor the stories of my characters, it just so happened that the characters I performed were real people. It made me realize that no matter the simplicity of characters, they were telling someone's story and that person may even be in the audience. Having the ability to honor that identification with another human being by being an actor is such a blessing. I loved the challenge of docu-theatre, it led me to read scripts by Anna Deavere Smith. Smith is the mother of docu-theatre. Although her scripts and performances had never hit me as hard as others, she as a person and her drive to honor words was what inspired me. Smith's ability to take real life conversations and make them usable, moldable, and powerful was, in my view, nothing short of genius. What is so exciting about docu-theatre is that some of the most profound and honest words can come directly from the mouths of real people who have gone through tragedy and survived. I realized that what draws me to theatre is the fact that when I sit in the audience or am acting on stage, I can exist in that moment and feel seen. My humanity, my mistakes, my triumphs, and my struggles can all be seen and validated through the simple process of being shown. This project is spurred by the desire to show someone what is or could be their story and validate it. Simply put, Hannah Gadsby said in her Netflix Special *Nanette*, "what I would have given to hear my story" (Nanette.)

While my need to put *Vessel* on the stage is very much driven by this quote. I have so many other goals for myself as an actor and a writer. The first is to create a routine to keep

myself grounded and safe during rehearsals and performances. I am very easily pulled into roles to which I relate, and it becomes a dangerous undertaking because I consistently find myself battling between the impulse to go too deeply into character and being too guarded from my characters. This makes for an uneven performance and an unsettled state of mind. I have experimented with several things through my acting career, but with the knowledge that I have now from my movement class with Ronnie Stewart and through more research about acting methods in my research paper, I would like to create something that is more solidified and specific to me. I want to find out what really works for me as an actor so I can share my experience with other actors who face similar issues to mine. It will be a lifelong process figuring out what works for me, but I'm hoping to find something that may help future actors who suffer from empathy overload with their characters.

My love of acting stems from my curiosity. I have always been curious about the actor's process. I am greatly inspired by Anna Deavere Smith, who is a master at coming in and out of different characters quickly and gracefully. I want to create these characters from a historical context so that I can understand their world and bring it to life here and now. I plan to use archetypal and typological research to craft these characters so that they are different from each other, even though they are being portrayed by one person. How to move from one character into another is what really interests me. This may include rituals for each character, changing of voice, changing of physical movement, changing costumes, meditation, even drawing on theories from energetic psychology and chakra healing. I plan to use the theories of Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, and Meyerhold by combining them with very little Stanislavski method to create two contrasted characters.

The challenge that arises from playing more than one character in the same play is quite real. I have faced this challenge before, and it was no easy feat. What makes this particularly difficult is separating these women from their characters. While one of the goals for this piece is to give space to tell the stories of these women, they also must continue to be characters. I want to make sure I give space between the women that I know to be real and the characters on stage. This is where I differ from Smith. I am combining docu-theatre with scripted scenes that I have written from my own experience. Combining these two has the potential to create an interesting blur between history and the now.

As a writer, one of my major goals is to create a script and a research paper that I can be proud of. This seems obvious, but when it comes to writing I am a perfectionist to the point of burning out before completing my project. I am challenging myself to turn in less than perfect work so that I can enjoy the process of writing rather than trying to get it right every single time.

Something that is the cherry on top of theater for me is the community develops among the cast. This sometimes involves the director and stage manager but rarely involves stage crew and other elements of the production team. Because this is a one-person show, I will be missing the element of working with other members of a cast. Therefore, I want to make sure that that the community element can still exist between me and the other members of the production team. The collaborative spirit of theater is vital to the process of creating a production. Finding ways to do that without other actors by my side will be a challenge. It is going to be vital for me, because, like many actors, I am incredibly egotistical. If I don't keep myself grounded and surrounded by people whom I know are smarter than I in their field of expertise, the show will be nothing but a shrine to myself and no one, including myself, wants to see that.

Another goal I have for myself and my production team is to create a performance that can be picked up and performed in other places. I would like to take *Vessel* to regional theatres, cafes, festivals, and other opportunities so that I can show these stories to as many people as possible. I would ultimately like to expand *Vessel* into a sixty to ninety-minute production and take it off-Broadway.

Expectation is a Fool's Game

The technical execution of my senior project was very successful despite the fact that it was cancelled because of a global Covid-19 pandemic. Even though this was heartbreaking, I was able to reach goals that I had set for myself in my artistic aims about community building, character building, producing, creating emotional distance from my characters, as well as creating a warm-up and pre-show ritual.

Working with my stage manager and director was a true gift of collaboration. I was able to tight create a community within my small production team and myself. Working with Samm Lynch, production stage manager, and Alexis Kilburn, director, became essential to my process. While the script and the stories were something, I was responsible for, I needed and wanted their input on everything I produced on the page and on the stage.

Going into a solo performance for my project, I had a preconceived notion that thankfully turned out not to be true. I thought doing a solo performance was going to be an ego trip, especially with the stories that I was telling. However, my experience was quite the opposite. This project was one of the most humbling processes I have ever undertaken. I was reminded daily that I could not do this alone. It served me well to have a goal of creating a community within my production team that focused on collaboration. I knew that being the only cast member would be a different experience, and perhaps a lonely one, but I didn't know that there were ways that I could create a tight community with my stage manager, director, and other designers on the project that could equal the community I had experienced as a member of a cast. The most surprising outcome was that I thought I would have to be the one to bring that sense of community to fruition; that I would be the linchpin pushing it forward. Instead, it turned into a

swarm of collaboration that happened around me. I chose incomparable artists to work with who took what I had and made it better. I would not have been able to do it without them.

Something that I appreciated about my collaboration with Alexis was the ability to play. When I was out of my own head and in my body, I was able to see more possibilities. Alexis was the one who encouraged me to do this. The original idea of the set design was for piles of clothes everywhere, almost as if in a cavernous closet. When Alexis first brought up this idea, I was excited because it gave the piece of platform upon which to be built. However, once in rehearsal, Alexis put limitations on me. She had me do the first monologue by following my instincts. I decided to write on the floor as if I were a little girl outside at recess. After running through the monologue that way once, Alexis was very eager to scrap the set idea and switch to a simple idea of drawing out the set. I was hesitant, but it ended up being my favorite part of the performance. It was simple and different and symbolic; and fit the piece perfectly.

My goal to learn how to produce a show was only somewhat fulfilled. Unfortunately, my schedule didn't allow me to join production meetings, but I learned valuable skills for crowdfunding and collaboration. I remain determined to submit this project to festivals. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down live theatre productions across the country, I was unable to make true progress with it at this moment. However, the lull in production gives me time to research and discover different festivals to submit to in the future.

Creating emotional distance from my characters was an interesting and very difficult hurdle. It was only with big changes in the script that I was able to start exploring the characters without it being a troublesome experience. I couldn't write about myself without it becoming a conflict of interest, and a confusing web that left me exhausted and doubting myself. While I was

tired after every single run of the show, I knew how to really move my energy out of myself and into the characters. My body became a “vessel” for them, and they came and left without a trace.

My pre-show warm up became indispensable. I hate warming up, but using biomechanics and yoga, I was able to prepare my body. Once my body was prepared, the mind-body connection became stronger and stronger. The importance of the mind-body connection is one of the most important lessons I learned from this process. When I was physically warm and ready, my mind was able to flow; there was a place for the energy to express itself. When I wasn't warmed up, my artistic flow was stagnant, and I didn't form healthy connections with my characters.

Overall, even though my project was victim to an unprecedented pandemic that forced students to move off campus before I had the chance to perform it for the Purchase College community, I'm proud of the work that I did. I was even able to perform the piece secretly for my dad and a few close friends before my team lost access to the theatre when the campus was closed.

VESSEL

BY MAYA DOUGHERTY-HARRIS

CHARACTERS (All played by the same person)

The Vessel

Sandra

Millie

CURTAIN OPENS

(The stage is set with a chalkboard. The Vessel walks on stage: she's anxious, scared.)

THE VESSEL: Here's the thing. I have this theory. My spirit, living in this bag of blood and bones, she didn't decide where or when or how. I think she just spun around in a circle, pointed toward this flaming rock and said "them." No research, no questions just "I want to come from that group of alien human monkey things." I think that's how we all decide, it's a weird game of Russian Roulette.

Because here's the thing, who I come from, it doesn't make sense.

Let me lay it out for you.

Here are my parents. **(Writes Mom and Papa in two bubbles)**

They were both born from their parents. **(Draws four bubbles corresponding to Mom and Papa)** Andy and Millie on my mom's side, and Sandra and Ed on my dad's side. My dad had two siblings, an older sister and a younger brother. My mom was the oldest of five, four brothers and then the youngest was her sister. **(She writes the bubbles and names for the grandparents, but just lines for the siblings.)**

Of course my grandparents have parents who have siblings who have children and my parents siblings have children and some of their children have children **(Drawing lines haphazardly from bubbles and lines.)**

Then, there's me and my brother. **(draws bubbles and lines)**

Oh yeah, and then there's this one. **(draws a bubble and line from herself representing her child.)**

(She stands back and surveys her writing.)

See, all of this, it's intellectual, it's DNA strands, it...doesn't really mean anything.

The thing is, I've always been a lonely person. Don't get me wrong, I have people in my life who cherish me and care for me and are there for me. But they never *got* me, ya know? I always felt like we were in our different worlds. I didn't want a child for that reason, I didn't want to end up living like this, pregnant. But here I am.

Growing up in my immediate family, I never really fit in either. Again, I was loved, cared for. But I was different. The only Winter born in a family of Summers. My mother's idea of bliss is backpacking across the Canadian Bush. My brother literally built his house in the bed of his truck and is travelling across the desert, and my papa, well, he really just kind of nodded and smiled and told me I was an expensive date.

The thing is, I was an *extravagant* little girl. I was dramatic, and egotistical and confused why no one understood that I was the most important person in the room.

It finally kind of started to make sense with my dad's sister, she would take me shopping. One time we had picked several outfits, I looked up at her and said "And now for the shoes!" This other time she took me to the Disney store and bought me a Cinderella ball gown. I mean, a BALL GOWN, with elbow length silver sparkling gloves. I still have it, just in case I shrink back to a size medium in Girls. We were so similar, and not just in shopping habits. She was a little cuckoo, ya know? Kind of wild but served with a side of meditation mashed potatoes. She was someone I could look at and think maybe I wasn't so...different. I was more like her than I realized.

She killed herself when I was eleven and then I was alone.

I am alone.

That's okay. You get used to it. You start to realize that even without the tragedy, this is who you are. Alone. Even the ones that you think might be worth letting that wall down for, they really aren't worth it. It's just safer that way. I know that it can be sad to some people but I like it. I do. I'm fine. I'm good, even. Good.

Okay, I'm not a sociopath. It's not like I don't have feelings. I do, too many feelings in fact. My feelings are fucking huge. I'll show you.

(Vessel goes off stage and pulls out a large trunk, it's dusty and heavy. She's heaving. She pulls it on stage)

This is where I keep my "feelings." It's a little trick I picked up a while back. You just take the feeling or memory, whether it be gut wrenching or heart-breaking or simply uncomfortable and you pack it up. These are the feelings that are too big to fit inside of me so I put them in here, in the corner of the closet... in the basement...down the street. I know it sounds weird but it makes things SO MUCH EASIER. I'll show you.

(The Vessel opens her trunk and it bursts open, full of clothes and other accoutrements. She starts going through it, holding up pieces for each memory or feeling. When she holds the object, it gives her that feeling associated with it.)

This is the pen I used when I wrote my brother a letter when he was in rehab. My brother used to be the only person who could make me laugh, and he'd never made me cry as hard as I did on that day. **(She puts the pen by her brother's bubble on the map.)**

This is a little trinket my papa gave me. He was always around, except for when he wasn't. When I was a little girl I remember him reading me Harry Potter and taking me to school or going to get bagels. And then it stopped. I didn't know what I did wrong. **(She puts it by her dad's bubble.)**

This is from my mom. She is an achiever, pull yourself by your bootstraps kind of woman. She was always reaching for the good enough, but good enough kept moving. She kept chasing good enough, for her kids, but I just wanted her. **(she puts it by her mom's bubble)**

This is my grandmother's! She's a storyteller, a bad ass. My mom told me this story of when I was a new born Pookie, that's what I call her, was holding me to her chest and we both looked so peaceful, like we plugged in to each other. I spent my life chasing that, that connection. **(Vessel puts on the scarf.)** I don't know, I guess...**(Vessel looks at her hands, realizing something is changing, and then the transition begins. A gasp comes out of The Vessel cueing the...**

Transition: This should include a light and/or sound cue of a striking moment where The Vessel is taken over. The transition should be quick but not rushed.)

SANDRA

SANDRA:

The year was 1965 in Birmingham, Alabama and Ed, my husband, and I were known to be proponents of civil rights and integration, and that wasn't a very popular thing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1965. We were living in a time of incredible tension, there might've been two hundred, maybe two hundred and fifty other white people who shared our liberal views. One of them, funny enough, lived across and down the street a little bit from us, his name was Joe Wilson he was one of those Kentucky good ol' boys.

Now, one of the things that Ed and I did to promote our views was take part in The Council on Human Relations, they wanted to get black and white people together as social equals so that when the time came that integration happened, because it looked like that was the way it was going, there would be a network in place already.

The idea was that on Sunday afternoons host couples would have a couple of the opposite race come to their house. Ed and I signed up to be a host couple.

That Sunday we had arranged for our children Edith, Mark, and Phillip, to be with Ed's parents' house on the other side of town, mind you his parents did not know what was going on.

A young couple showed up. It was a little awkward at first because we didn't know each other but they had children so we began to find common ground that way.

They hadn't been there more than five minutes when the telephone rang. Ed left the room to go answer it and when he came back, he looked a little pale. It turned out a lawyer friend, a liberal lawyer friend of ours had called, and we don't know how he found all this at, but he called and asked "Ed, do you have black people in your house.?" And Ed of course answered yes. "Well, I'm just calling to give you a heads up that the police know about this.

Well we were astonished, that we just had people in our living room!

It was frightening for all of us, but only a few minutes later across the street there was a vacant lot with some shrubs around it. I looked out our front door and on the vacant lot, behind these shrubs there was a man with what seemed to be a camera. when Ed told the story, he tells how frightened he was, he wanted to just go hide somewhere but it made me furious. I ran into the front yard and was hollering at this man, I was shaking my fist and screaming. "What are you doing taking pictures of my house?!" I was livid. The man began retreating back onto the lot and at that point I realized I had gone over the edge and our new friends in the house probably thought that I had lost my mind so I went back in the house to repair whatever damage that I had done to them.

In the meantime, while I was going crazy on our lawn Ed had called Joe Wilson from across the street. Joe Wilson had grown up kind of rough and tumble, hardscrabble is what I call it, and was a fierce supporter of integration. He wasn't so convinced that this whole nonviolence thing was ever going to work and he got the call from Ed he grabbed his shotgun, and ended up helping this man get to his car.

Joe Wilson called and told us that the man had gone and so there was this moment of elation that we had driven this man away, but of course he wasn't alone.

After the couple had left, it had put a bit of a damper on our meeting, the telephone calls began.

Threatening telephone calls.

Naming our children, by name. Edith, Mark, Phillip.

It began to sink in, we couldn't put our children at risk.

We knew we had to make some kind of plan, we called my mother in Nashville, Tennessee and see if she would take care of the children for a few days. I had work the next day, I worked at the Birmingham Post Herald at the time, but Ed was going to take them up to her. She worked but she said she could after she got home from work so the very next morning, I loaded up the kids with Ed and a few of their belongings and he drove the two hundred miles north to Nashville. We didn't tell anyone we were doing that we hardly had time to communicate to our friends.

Once Ed and the kids arrived, he let himself into the house because my mother was at work and within a few minutes the phone rang so he just answered it for my mother. The man on the other end said:

"You motherfucking, race traitor son of a bitch. You don't deserve to live."

Before that we had been skeptical of phones being tapped. We thought surely, they weren't tapping people's phones. After that there could be no doubt, not only were they tapping people's phones but they had figured out where my mother lived, and gotten her telephone number, and they knew when Ed was going to arrive at my mother's house.

That pretty much sealed the deal for us. We had no choice but to leave Birmingham. I had grown up there, so had Ed. And now we were getting run out of our home, away from our parents, away from our community. But we couldn't take it back, even if we wanted to it was too late. So, we left for Boston a week later and never looked back.

The thing is though, we had that privilege. We didn't *have* to look back, we could go somewhere where they *wouldn't* hurt our children. We could run away. Because I'm a white woman, married to a white man, with three white children. What about all the mamas who couldn't save theirs? What about them?

Transition: Gasp from The Vessel cues backwards version of previous transition. Vessel takes off the scarf and drops it where her grandmother's bubble is.

THE VESSEL: Holy. Shit. What the fuck.

(looking around at all the other objects she has taken out. Bewilderment, amazement, fear.)

Wow. She...I'm sorry...what?

I'm...no this must be the hormones ...yeah I'm just gonna put this stuff back.

(The Vessel packs up everything, the last item is from her mom and a ring drops out of it and clatters to the floor. She puts her mother's object back and picks up the ring, curious, looking at the inscription.)

1954 Class ring. This must be Millie's, my mom's mom. She died before I was born. I really never knew her at all.

(Vessel looks to Millie's bubble, looking sad at what could have been. She looks back at the ring, contemplating whether it might

work. She wants to know her grandmother, even though she still isn't convinced that it's important.)

Okay.

("Cradle Me" begins to play softly as she slowly puts the ring on...transition of her into Millie.)

MILLIE

(This section is meant to be recorded except for the lines in italics which should be spoken in real time. Movement piece during this monologue expressing what is not being said.)

Our Married Life

Decided to get out of the tavern business in April, 1955. Andy started work at Bay-Warner April 27, 1955 on second shift.

Left the tavern June 1st 1955, Moved into a four room apartment behind Kincaid depot the same day.

Ruthie and Tino got married June 18th 1955, at 9:00am St. Rilus at Kincaid Reception followed 2pm at Peabody Clubhouse

And I bought Earl Vaughn's house in the new addition at Kincaid July 1st 1955

Expect to move in around Aug. 1st.

Deborah Ann Dougherty born July 24, 1955 ten years to the day my brother Jim was killed. Moved into our house July 25, 1955.

Debbie weighted 6lbs, 15oz, was 18 ½ inches long; at 6:05am C.S.T. Doctor's name - L.C. Young.

Debbie christened August 27 1955

Ruth Bernardie - Godmother

Nick Fassere - Godfather

Debbie (unknown) hands at 3 ½ months rolled over at 4 months.

Andy laid off from Borg Warner May 25, 1956. Started at Franklin Life in Springfield July 2, 1956. Andy went to school in August 1956 for 6 weeks for Univac training in Chicago. I went to Chicago for two days when Andy finished training. Found out in

October we would have another baby in June. Was awfully sick at first but seemed to get over it at about 5 months.

Andy Started vacation (first of 2 weeks) May 11, 1957.
Andy got first role at Franklin Life in January \$25)

Bought bunk beds and new stroller etc when Andrew William was born. Arrived June 17, 1957 and Debbie slept in her new bed without falling out.

Grandma and Grandpa Dougherty started in grocery store in April 1957.

Five months after Andy was born I had miscarriage and was in hospital for 3 days. April 1958 preg. Again.

Will this never stop.

Got my mowing machine fried and how decided to get busy and get this house ??? up a little bit.

Oct. 14th 1958 Michael was born. Almost lost him due to cord around his neck was very lucky.
May 1, 1959 was in hospital 9 days with miscarriage, Back in hospital May 30, 1959 with infected cyst for 3 days. In hospital for removal of cyst July 7 1959. Stayed for 6 days. August 1959 discovered I'm pregnant again.

This has to be the last. I simply couldn't stand it any longer.

Charlie B - Holy Communion May 20, 1973. St. Mary's Church, Pawnee, Illinois.

Daniel B - Confirmation May 25 1973. St. Mary's Church, Pawnee, Illinois.

Amy Kathleen born 02/21/68

(Millie exits The Vessel. She takes off the ring. She's crying, in pain, clutching her baby.)

The Vessel: Why? Why? Why?

(Vessel gathers herself slowly and speaks to the trunk in front of her.)

What do you want from me? What are you trying to tell me?

I don't want this. I know it's wrong but I don't want this. These women, they were strong, but only to be beaten down. I don't want to be like them. I don't want a daughter, I don't want her to have to be like them. The sacrifice, the pain. I can't do it alone. I'm not strong enough.

These women, their children were weak spots in them. It couldn't have been worth it.

I come from women who suffered, women who were broken. No wonder I'm so fucked up, I have their broken blood in my veins.

(Cradle Me begins to play softly and a spot appears on her aunt's bubble.)

Eice(V.O.): I know that you don't always feel strong.

Vessel: What?

Eice (V.O.): My dear, I know you can often feel alone alone - and some of that is that existential aloneness - that "bigger than me" aloneness that we all have as being our own individual speck in this Universe. And - you have answered your own question.

Vessel: I don't get it, how is this happening. I don't have anything of yours.

Eice (V.O.): That speck is inextricably tied to everything else - sometimes through DNA, sometimes through stories, and sometimes through choice and/or sheer tenacity. In any case - that "speck" is absolutely crucial to everything it is tied to - everything it touches - everything it brushes up against, and to everything that brushes up against it. You don't need anything, our specks brushed up against you. And all of us brushed up against her.

Vessel: You all brushed up against her...oh.

(Begins to look through the trunk. She begins to hold up pieces as they come up. Holding them to her belly and/or heart and then telling their story.)

Look, look. This is my great-great grandmother's. She moved here when she was fourteen from Italy. She had her own illegal distillery in the 40's. This is great-grandma Jacob's, she lost her son Jimmy in World War II, his name is on the monument in Battery Park. And this is my mother's. In between putting her son

in rehab and her daughter into a psych ward she went back to school and then got cancer. And she never, ever stopped claiming that she was a Lucky Duck.

Okay...okay...I get it...I'm not alone. It's my turn.

(Cradle Me begins and she dumps out all of the objects, opens up the book her mom gave her and begins to write. The stage clears around her except for the trunk with one last thing inside of it. She continues to write and when she's done she begins to speak.)

The Vessel:

Dear Daughter,

More than anything I want you to know how important you are to this world. I want you to know that wherever your two feet are planted, they have a right to be there. And not in an egotistical way either, in a true way, in an earnest way, in a way you would never question.

I don't ever want you to stick your nose in the air like I do sometimes, but keep it level with the people you learn from, and the people you teach.

I pray that I let you know how much I love you. I pray that if the time ever comes that you need to tell me that you are not my daughter and that you are something else entirely, that the name I gifted you is not yours I pray that the courage lives in you like your heartbeat, and I pray that my acceptance of you is obnoxious.

I want you to know that the women behind you were strong, like think of how strong your mama is and multiply it by ten. The line you come from is bold, full of life, and never ever lacks love. The women you come from raised me, and they'll raise you too if you let them. They're never around when you want them to be but they will always be there when you need them to be there. They will hold you steady, and when they don't they will be the ground you fall on.

You will have those days, years even, where you think your mom and grandma are witches and this "you are never alone" bullshit is because your mom drank and smoked too much in college...you might be right about the drinking and smoking bit but I am positive that you are never alone. And you can take it from me,

the amount of times I've convinced myself that I was alone is depressing. Love without honesty is hypocrisy, and honesty without love is abuse, so you can take it to the bank that I will feed you with the bitterest of truths while wrapping you in a hold made of honey.

The only reason I was alive to have you is because of them. Yes, I did the the therapy and the crying, but only because they moved my feet to get me there.

The women we come from are so immensely powerful that I never had a choice to be a force to be reckoned with. I pray I raise you knowing that you have no choice either.

I pray that you never let boys or booze or what other people think of you keep you from feeling every bit of being human. I promise, I promise that it will hurt. And I promise that it is worth every ounce of pain. And I told you, I would never lie to you.

(Pulls the last thing out of her trunk, it's a Cinderella ball gown.)

I thought me carrying this around all these years was for me, but I think, really, I was saving it for you.

Love,
your mom

CURTAIN

NOTES

"Cradle Me" composed by Deborah Dougherty

Cradle Me, Cradle Me, Oh Dear Mother Cradle Me; Earth and Breath and Sky and Sea, All rise up and cradle me.

In the morning when I rise, wipe the night-time from my eyes;
Plant my feet down on the floor, move myself through daily
chores; Giving thanks while breaking bread, and for kind words

that are said; Spirit move me through my deeds, cradle-ing me with all my needs.

Cradle Me, Cradle Me, Oh Dear Mother Cradle Me; Earth and Breath and Sky and Sea, All rise up and cradle me.

When death knocks on my front door, taking a loved one to her shore; As I bend to Grief's old ways, I am cradled in my haze. And those tears are oft relieved by giving back what I've received; Stretching out with arms and heart, cradle-ing them that death did part.

Cradle Me, Cradle Me, Oh Dear Mother Cradle Me; Earth and Breath and Sky and Sea, All rise up and cradle me.

Circling through this walk on Earth, tears for death and tears for birth; Blessings quilted with the pain, All are woven through the grain. Plant my feet down on the floor, move myself through daily chores; Giving back what I've received, simple acts are sacred deeds.

Cradle Me, Cradle Me, Oh Dear Mother Cradle Me. Earth and Breath and Sky and Sea - All rise up and Cradle Me.

<https://youtu.be/-aw-DHyYdLk?t=24> - Link to original performance

Compassionate Acting

“Empathy is Tearing us Apart” screams a WIRED headline; “Empathy is Dead in American Politics” says New York Magazine; “Beware America’s Shocking Loss of Empathy” Psychology Today boasts. In the world we live in today, empathy is a hot topic. With political

revolutions rising and falling, the polarization of social issues, and artists pumping out more and more work that mirrors the world we live in, who wouldn't be talking about empathy. In the world of an actor, empathy is always a hot topic. Jessie Mueller, leading actor of several Broadway shows including *Waitress* and the recent revival of *Oklahoma!* once said when talking about theatre education "It literally helps you teach and train your brain and your heart to feel for others, to learn from others experiences and I think in our world today it couldn't be more important" ("Theater Life Lessons – Empathy"). Empathy is a strange concept. It is often used as a synonym for kindness or caring for something or someone, which is not accurate. Through exploring the true definition of empathy, studying different acting techniques and understanding techniques of how to prevent role/self-blurring, I will argue that empathy can be a dangerous goal for an actor; what an actor should safely be striving for is *compassion* for their character.

Empathy can be controversial. While empathy is generally considered a positive thing, it is by those who don't know the true definition. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the origin of the word empathy originated in the Greek words "em" meaning "in" and "pathos" which means "feeling." More traditionally it is defined as "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another." At face value one might argue that there is nothing wrong with empathy. However, Paul Bloom argues that there is a fine but important difference between empathy and compassion. He defines both as "Empathy: feeling what other people feel, which I argue is often very bad; and compassion, which is caring about people, and which is almost always good" (Bayley). Helen Reiss, a psychiatrist and researcher, who argues that we are in need of an empathy revolution, says "empathy involves an ability to perceive others' feelings (and to recognize our own emotions), to imagine why someone might be feeling a certain way, and to have concern for their welfare. Once empathy is activated, compassionate action is the most

logical response.” Reiss also argues that there are three components to empathy. The first is the emotional response. When we see another animal in pain, the same neural pathway that we have lights up in our brains, meaning that we literally have similar pathways firing as the person who is in pain. The second component is the cognitive component, which protects us from understanding that the person we are seeing in pain is not us, so that we can distinguish our feelings from theirs. Reiss says that the third component is concern, which is the motivation to take compassionate action. What is important to note is that the compassionate action that is taken is fiercely based on how similar we are to the person who is in pain. The strength of these three components is based on whether this person is the same gender, race, economic status, and so forth and our compassionate action is correlated to these factors (Reiss). We have Helen Reiss who asks for an “empathy revolution” and Bloom who argues for rational compassion. Both can be applied to acting techniques.

For actors, empathy is often praised. Leslie Odom Jr. said once “I majored in theatre... and I like to say really I majored in empathy” (“Theater Life Lessons – Empathy”). When seeing this praise, it is important to define what kind of empathy we are talking about. When it comes to acting, Reiss’ three components don’t hold up as well. The first component requires a stimulus that lights up our own neural pathways which is possible when actors are getting into character. When it comes to the second component, however-- the cognitive ability to process that the person in pain, in this case the character, and they themselves, the actor, are two different people is terribly difficult and downright confusing. When we hold Bloom’s point of view applied to acting it tends to be easier. Having compassion for your character, rather than “putting oneself in their shoes” is a safer choice for the actor. Bloom argues that the latter kind of empathy

(essentially, identification) “is biased; it's innumerate; it can be weaponized.” This weaponization can truly be used internally against oneself.

In acting methods that rely heavily on empathy, speaking specifically of those that were birthed out of Stanislavski such as Adler and Meisner, it is common for an actor to engage in a practice called sense memory. The basics of this technique is that an actor recalls a memory that is similar to or that evokes a similar emotion to that of their character. This can be a dangerous practice, especially when dealing with traumatizing experiences. While there is considerable evidence to suggest that discussing trauma is incredibly important for healing (Gillihan) it's important that you do it with someone who is trustworthy and do it in a way that is productive and not manipulative of the feelings. Needlessly discussing trauma in front of or with people who you do not know and do not trust can re-traumatize one easily. There is also evidence to suggest that discussing trauma over and over, even when it has been processed, can be re-traumatizing (Kampschaefer). Actors who have consistent runs every night or every other night could be re-traumatizing themselves every time they perform the character if they connect with the character with sense memory. If an actor is taught to have compassion for the character, there is a possibility for a safer connection with their character.

In an empirical study done by Dr. E.T. Hetzler which explored, among other things, whether an actor should “feel” emotions during a performance or “portray” emotions during a performance, Hetzler cited a short anecdote from the *Two Aspirins and a Comedy* by Metta Spencer:

A friend of mine, a woman psychiatrist, went to a play that her son had directed. One actress played all the roles – the child, her father (who molested her) and her mother. After it was over, there was a discussion with the audience, many of whom had also

experienced such abuse. The actress had no opportunity to get out of her roles before participating in the discussion. As a result, she had a psychiatric breakdown. My friend and her son stayed with her for two days because she was suicidal. She got into the roles and couldn't get out.

This is a perfect example of the danger of empathy-driven performances. The importance of providing space and time for actors to take care of themselves is important, but there is also the fact that the actor got so far into her roles that she couldn't have a conversation after the performance. Perhaps if she's had more time before the discussion it would have been better but who knows how long getting in and out of roles may take for her. This could mean that if an actor is doing eight shows per week, most of their time outside of doing those shows is requiring them to get in and out of characters. Time is necessary to do so regardless of acting techniques used, but it is necessary to not let the actor be carried away by their art because it can turn dangerous quickly. A popular example includes the late Heath Ledger who locked himself into a hotel room and slept only two hours per night to get into the headspace of the deranged character of The Joker from the acclaimed Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. Ledger wrote a diary during his time in the hotel room in character (New York Film Academy). Ledger died of an accidental drug overdose after he finished shooting *The Dark Knight*. Ledger had been prescribed sleeping pills during and after filming The Joker because he said "I couldn't stop thinking. My body was exhausted and my mind still going." His fatal decision to mix sleeping pills with illegal pain medication was not completely blamed on his method of studying The Joker but it is common thought that it wasn't innocent (Miller). In both theatre and film this technique of empathy and Method acting can be dangerous for actors and those around them.

In strong opposition to empathy driven methods and performances is Bertolt Brecht. Brecht is best known for his theory of epic theater and the *verfremdungseffekt*, better known as the v-effect or the alienation effect. Brecht promoted theatre that made the audience think, but he avoided the audience becoming emotionally invested in the characters and storyline. Of course, he wanted them to be invested, but he wanted them to understand that what they were watching was a play, so that they would think about how it connected to the world that they were living in rather than the world that was onstage. Brecht was equally against the concept of the actor embodying or becoming their character; there was no point to it.

By not transforming the actor completely in the character we have in a sense taken a step backward. The ability to master this incomplete transformation measures the actor's talent. If he fails, everything fails. Children fail when they play at theatre, and novices fail. There is something false from the very start. The differences between theatre and reality become painfully apparent. The actor does not give himself entirely; he holds something in reserve the actor who intentionally does not complete the transformation makes one think he was not able to complete it. The spectator who "in real life" is at times forced to act a part recalls his unsuccessful attempt to play sympathy and anger without experiencing them (Brecht).

Brecht is an extreme example of a non-empathy driven point of view, and, for the most part theatre patrons usually expect an Aristotelian catharsis experience.

When it comes to a productive and artistic method that will not put the actor in danger, it depends on the actor them self, but also the teachings that the actor has been exposed to. One actor may be much better equipped to take part in empathy-driven methods because they have been given the tools and/or have the propensity for that particular method; other actors may need

to pull back to complete Brechtian style acting and slowly dip their fit into the empathy pool. It solely depends on the actor, and compassion tends to be where these two sides meet. The first skill that is important to recognize to find compassionate acting is healthy boundaries. In a study done by Suzanne Burgoyne that looked at emotional distress and boundary blurring for student actors, she specifically looked at actors who used outside-in approaches, a more physical version of non-empathy driven methods, and inside-out methods, generally creating the character inside and then expressing it outwards, closer to empathy-driven methods. The study did suggest that there could be a large impact on the actor and “the actor’s ability to control that blurring may influence whether an acting experience leads to growth or emotional distress.” The implications of this in theatre pedagogy is incredibly important because it leads to the question: can an actor learn to control that blurring? And if so, how does an actor build that skill? To the point of learning these healthy boundaries there are two important conditions to be aware of. “1) awareness that the life/theatre feedback loop may operate in acting experiences, and 2) development of strategies for boundary control that give the actor the ability to choose how and when to blur and reclarify boundaries.” Awareness is something that can be built from a young age, and hopefully won’t have to be retaught. The tools and strategies of an actor to set and reset those boundaries are what is most important in the artistic routine for an actor.

Several actors may not be familiar with the idea of an artistic routine or rituals, but it is one of the most important things that an actor can do for their emotional hygiene. What is important is to have a ritual or routine before not only every rehearsal and show, but also after every rehearsal and show (Taylor.) It is very common for actors to be taught that they need to prepare their bodies with warming up, but rarely is warming up the mind discussed. While the routines for before and after may differ, it’s important to keep the habits relatively the same with

every experience you have with that character so that your brain receives a signal of going into character and coming out of character, eventually when you begin your ritual the brain will become accustomed to what is going to happen next (“The Habits of Individuals”). There are five main components to an actor’s ritual, but as aforementioned the actor can take or leave whatever doesn’t seem to work for them. The first component is awareness, or mindfulness. Mindfulness has multiple benefits and has been recently delved into both psychologically and spiritually in several ways in recent years and was being studied long before. The main component of mindfulness is the idea of being in the moment. An actor commented that staying in the moment “helped him manage boundaries and improved his artistic work because, although his connection with the character was closer and his “emotional attachment to the scene was much stronger” onstage, when he left the stage, he “wasn’t holding onto that emotional attachment” (Burgoyne).

The second component to compassionate acting is physical exercise. While warming up the body is important, the mind-body connection is something that is rarely talked about when it comes to warming up. The science of what happens to your brain when moving your body is very complicated, but the brain begins to produce chemicals that bring the brain into an emotionally protected state, that feeling that nothing can get you down. A technique used to help with these chemicals is Biomechanics, developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold. At its inception it was used to compare the actor with the industrial revolution, claiming that if trained correctly an actor could continue for as long as they needed to without a long break. The key is to take small breaks in between very hard pushes of movement. Other methods of movement include the Grotowski Method as well as regular exercises like power yoga or running. It is important to get the heart rate up and not just stretch.

Another important tool to creating a boundary between the actor and the character is the way you talk about your character. When talking about a character it is important to talk about them in the third person. If an actor were to be playing Lady Macbeth instead of saying “I manipulated my husband into killing Duncan” the actor might say “She manipulated Macbeth into killing Duncan.” Another concept is to have conversations with your character, which may seem quite out of the box but may prove to be rather helpful when struggling with the character. Compassionate acting can be difficult when extending that compassion to ourselves but if the actor can talk about the character in the third person, it may be easier to extend that compassion to them. It may feel strange to personify someone that isn’t exactly real, but a technique that is commonly used is to take an object or the costume the actor wears as that character and refer to that piece by the character’s name, this way there is a cloaking mentality of having the character in hand, or cloaking yourself in the character. This may also help in the way of talking to the character and not feeling like the actor is talking to the air. The last component of compassionate acting is consistency. Being consistent with this practice puts it in the body so that it can be used every time the actor takes on the character. Just as it is important to rehearse the character it is important to rehearse getting in and out of character, this will continue to make it easier and soon be secondhand nature (Burgoyne).

Just as important as it is to figure out what works for the specific actor, it is important to figure out what doesn’t work for the actor and it’s important to understand that it may be uncomfortable to set in this ritual before and after rehearsals and shows, especially when the actor is used to doing something else. “It has long been acknowledged that heading to the bar for a drink after a performance is the traditional way for actors to unwind after performances. The 2015 [Australian Actors’ Wellbeing] study found that, perhaps unsurprisingly in light of this

fact, actors' alcohol consumption was high" (Taylor). Alcohol is only one example of unhealthy ways to deal with winding down from a performance or rehearsal. There is nothing wrong with having a drink after a performance or rehearsal, but it requires introspection. The actor may ask themselves "How does this ritual make me feel? What does it give me? Am I indulging in this ritual too often? Do I feel that I need this ritual to get through the evening?" and so forth. While some actor's rituals may be going to the bar, another's may be binge eating, sex, drug use, and other harmful behaviors. To be very clear, harmful behaviors are only harmful if they are overused, too much of a good thing is a bad thing. One may find that a cup of coffee before a show is a great trigger for them that they are about to start a show, and it gives them exactly what they need to continue on with their other pre-show rituals, however ten cups of coffee before a show is never a good thing and will most likely lend itself to the actor becoming jittery, shaky, and unfocused.

While empathy is not a bad thing, in fact can lead to important social and political change, it is not always positive when acting. While this research does go from Stanislavski to Brecht, two ends of the spectrum of empathy, I hope that the idea of compassionate acting resonates with those actors who may be run down, tired, and feeling like they aren't able to do their job, or maybe are struggling to get through. By combining two intensely different schools of thought, indulgence in empathy and complete disregard for catharsis, one may find happy middle where making good art requires not only hard work but intense self-care.

Annotated Bibliography

Bayley, Bruno. "Why Empathy Is Dangerous." *Vice*, 7 Feb.

2017, <https://www.vice.com/sv/article/vvzyka/why-empathy-is-dangerous>.

This is an interview with Paul Bloom where he expands on his ideas in his book (cited below) and gives the definitions of empathy versus compassion, which is a large part of my research, pushing compassion rather than empathy.

Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: the Case for Rational Compassion*. Vintage, 2018.

This book is a more in-depth research about compassion versus empathy.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre; The Development of an Aesthetic. Translation and Notes by John Willett*. Methuen, 1965.

Brecht has stances on acting that support a protective distance between the actor and the character.

Burgoyne, Suzanne, et al. "The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress." *Theatre Topics*, vol. 9 no. 2, 1999, p. 157-179. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/tt.1999.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.1999.0011).

This study gave me so much rich, qualitative data that helped with creating a solution to the problem of empathy driven technique. It gave real life examples of what was important for actors to do to de-role.

Chang, Ashley. "Backstory: The Trouble with Empathy - Trailers More." *Playwrights Horizons*, 8 July 2019, <https://www.playwrightshorizons.org/shows/trailers/backstory-trouble->

[empathy/?](#)

[fbclid=IwAR1FEf7DHgi8WEW2Y26IVkF0575wQ3C4aTQnhq9LJAVMbdG6T9FqpfjC](#)

PVE.

This article inspired my thesis. While Chang wrote the article about a specific play, it put the context of empathy into today's standards and talks about how empathy can be abused.

Hetzler, E. T. "Actor Self vs. Character Self: An Empirical Exploration." *Journal for Artistic Research*, Journal for Artistic Research, 5 Nov. 2012, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/15971/16023>.

This article gives an outstanding look at who we are as actors and who we are as characters and what that separation looks like.

Lighthelm, Elizabeth. "Acting Training, Theory of Mind, and Empathy: Is There a Relationship?" *University of Cape Town*, pp. 1–27.

This study concludes that the more training an actor has doesn't mean that there is more empathy within the actor. This is important to note because some say that actors are as a whole more empathetic than others and that's why they act, when in fact, anyone can be empathetic it's a matter of how that empathy is used.

"Nanette." Performance by Hannah Gadsby, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, Netflix, 19 June 2018,

www.netflix.com/watch/80233611?

[trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C4714c52ec5106c6a81aa9e22cf27691900fe6eb3%3Acb88baf592dd63e6a384ddc5248fd66ef8a11147%2C%2C.](#)

Nanette became my engine throughout this process. When I doubted myself, I would come back to why I was doing this project. My reasoning largely came from her inspiring words.

Riess, Helen. *Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences*. Sounds True, Incorporated, 2018.

This book argues that we need an empathy revolution. Empathy is needed more in this world than ever and it gives me good points to backbone my arguments with so that I can understand what the cross argument would be for my thesis.

Taylor, Leith. “Out of Character: How Acting Puts a Mental Strain on Performers.” *The Conversation*, 3 June 2019, theconversation.com/out-of-character-how-acting-puts-a-mental-strain-on-performers-86212.

This article gave me basic techniques to use when it came to compassionate acting, as well as statistics about the health of actors.

“The Habits of Individuals.” *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, by Charles Duhigg, Anchor Canada, 2014, pp. 11–25.

This book is full of wonderful information about habit building and helped me understand the importance of making rituals consistent.

“Theater Life Lessons - Empathy.” Performance by Jessie Mueller, *Theater Life Lessons - Empathy*, YouTube, 10 June 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMAoBbc_q8M.

This video gave me primary information about what professional actors are thinking and talking about when it comes to empathy.