

Chapter 9. Acting the Author

Pamela Henney

KENT STATE

First-Year Composition (FYC) often begins with students and instructors alike maneuvering a field of expectations and fears. We hope students are well prepared but increasingly research is telling us something different. According to the National Public Policy and Higher Education, 60 percent of students entering four-year and two-year colleges or universities each year across the U.S. are unprepared or underprepared (*Beyond*). They are transitioning from a familiar world—where they are at once confident in their ability to learn, but unconfident with the many new expectations, and/or complacently satisfied their pre-college level writing abilities will suffice in this not-so-familiar world of varying discourses within the university. Although they bring a range of intellectual and emotional skills with them (see Fomalhaut), we easily recognize transitioning students as they attempt to write academically, only to misuse vocabulary, overuse punctuation, awkwardly phrase opinions, and illogically organize their presentations. In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae explains:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (605)

The students are taking on new roles, and studying under new directors, but misrepresenting the academic roles they are attempting to play. They cannot help it; they have been trained to write externally—or even resist joining in conversations. Bartholomae is correct: “[Students] must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is acquired” (Bartholomae *Inventing* 606). It is a remarkable performance, which writing requires, and *mimesis*, which literally denotes imitation, but which in the acting theory of Konstantin Stanislavsky equates to a greater depth. Where a representational theatrical performance can be flat and superficial, a *mimetic* performance is a holistic transformation or morphing of an actor who seems to disappear, leaving only the fully embodied character in performance (Stanislavsky 26-27). A presentation of the Self of a character functions within its reality—all naturalness implied. This reflects an Aristotelian paradigm that remains a standard (though a contested standard) throughout the centuries. Aristotle approaches *mimesis* differently:

Drama is usually conceived in Aristotelian terms, as a mimetic art distinguished by its manner of presentation (dramatic dialogue) and analyzable in terms of the object of its imitation (praxis action) and its constituent parts: mythos (plot), ethos (character), dianoia (thought), lexis (diction), melos (song), and opsis (spectacle). (Vince 41)

Aristotle's definition of *mimesis* is a synthesis of aspects of imitation. Similarly, Stanislavsky's Method Acting, in its organic definition, is a unique process which makes use of the influences and experiences we have in forming ourselves. The process parallels that which an actor goes through to create and present his character within the context of a play or film, and the process an expository writer (journalist to essayist) goes through to create and present himself as the author of his text (see also Fedukovich's "somatic composition").

We all mull things over and come to a discussion again and again with new insight, a new approach to the argument, or a new interpretation of earlier discussions (Fomalhaut). In this way, the writer creates and continually refines his character as he presents his case on paper. Ergo, the writer *rehearses*, according to Donald Murray in *Writing Before Writing*, writers experience as much pressure to *not* write as they *do* write. Writing, he argues, "is best described by the word 'rehearsal.' . . . writers are 'in a state of rehearsal all the time'" (376). Students, like actors, arrive at the university recognizing their new roles within new companies, bringing to those roles personal experiences, individual plans, and private dreams. Academia awkwardly supports that. We ask students to recreate themselves as academics—characters new and often unfamiliar. We require students to discuss their ideas on our terms, not theirs, using our language within our discourse. We expect assimilation as we evaluate their academic performance. Assimilation at times requires a façade—even if only temporary. FYC students believe themselves to be assimilated but their inexperience reveals the façade (Fomalhaut). Empowerment is the key to developing one's personal agency as the academic, Thomas Newkirk argues in *The Presentation of Self*. Further, students, like academics, also need to recognize the fact that the Self we are empowering has numerous constraints rather than autonomy (Newkirk 45). These constraints are played out daily before a variety of audiences. In the Erving Goffman sense, we are all always performing. But, as playwright Luigi Pirandello writes:

Do we really see ourselves in our true and genuine reality, as we are, or don't we rather see ourselves as we would wish to be? Through a spontaneous inner artifice, the fruit of secret tendencies or of unconscious imitation, do we not in good faith believe we are different from what we substantially are? And we think, work, and live according to this fictitious yet sincere interpretation of ourselves. (transl. in Casey 51)

Who we are at any given moment may not be who we truly are, but it may yet be an honest vision. We visualize our roles and actions as we embody those roles, in a way using them as rhetorical moves to accomplish or enhance a specific interactive mission (Fomalhaut). Using similar visualization and other acting techniques, FYC students could more readily envision themselves as academic writers.

Creation of the author's character and audience are often discussed in relation to personal growth or to developing relationships, which can be a positive necessity and a cautionary lesson. In fact, "According to Quintilian (sic) the rhetorician must 'possess, *and be regarded as possessing*, genuine wisdom and excellence of character'" (qtd. in Newkirk 5). However, this relational development is rarely discussed as an essential piece of the academic writing process we encourage our students to utilize. The Method Acting process to holistically create and perform a believable character illuminates in some important ways the process a first-year college student, or even a high school student, goes through to develop a concept of himself as an author, as a writer, as well as a concept of himself in those roles relating to an audience (Fomalhaut). He outlines them in *An Actor's Work*, which is the diary of acting student Konstanin Nazvanov's two years of lessons under Arkady Tortsov. Both Nazvanov and Tortsov are alter egos of Stanislavsky reflecting his own actor training and teaching experience. The similarities between these developmental processes suggest the possibility of new pedagogical approaches to writing instruction which draw specifically from the teaching and practice of acting. Specifically, Stanislavsky's *Experiencing*, year one of training, provides those tools and specified practice for actors negotiating the aporia—space of doubt and simulated truth—between mimicry, or representation, and an authentic performance, or the embodiment of a character. Similarly, Stanislavsky's second year of study, titled *Empowerment*, offers exercises which can empower FYC students to negotiate with more confidence, inner strength, and more successfully critically construct their discursive identities.

Considering FYC writing as performance challenges the academy's boundaries (Fedukovich). Doing so highlights the intersections between various theories, bringing insight into issues of writing anxiety, concentration, motivation, etc. Knowledge of one's academic character may be created and disseminated off-stage while drawing from a menagerie of influences and experience. Finally, one embodies that specific academic character through a recursive rehearsal process. The relationship between the somatic and the semiotic—the material world and textual meaning—is key. Language does not merely describe; it is a means to action. "All language is performative," Reed Way Dasenbrock writes in "J.L. Austin and the Articulation of a New Rhetoric. "In making an utterance, one performs an act, or—as Austin went on to say—a number of different acts simultaneously" (295). The application of this theory directly to writing may be better explained through the work of master writer and performer Mark Twain. In *Acting Naturally*, Randall Knoper observes that Mark Twain once critiqued a written version

of the speeches of Robert Ingersoll, responding in a letter to the orator: "I wish I could hear you speak these splendid chapters before a great audience—to read them by myself and hear the boom of the applause only in the ear of my imagination leaves something wanting—and there is also a still greater lack, your manner, and voice, and presence" (116). Considering writing as a performance focuses the writer on the life of the words on the page. Performative theory offers the possibility for more and multiple analysis factors in studying the orientation and impact of textual discourse—written or oral—on an audience. Knoper's study extends Twain's position, arguing that the writing experience should be akin to a physical performance:

These examples must suffice for the moment to support my point—that for Twain there existed a gestural, bodily dimension to words, and that this dimension helped credit utterances with a degree of immediacy inasmuch as they were automatic and unconscious. In Mark Twain's thinking, especially of the 1880s and 1890s, the gaps of representation might be bridged by linking thought and word, emotion and language, through physical mediums; a problem of realism and reference had a possible solution in this more direct concrete connection. (117)

Knoper describes the physical or bodily connection to writing in Darwinian terms (see also Fomalhaut; Fedukovich). Basically, the human mind responds equally whether an emotion, for example, is elicited in an actual event or a simulated one (88). Dasenbrock explains Austin's view of discourse: "All discourse is multifunctional, oriented both towards its subject and its audience" (298). This depth of coherence between the Self and words on the page only reinforces the *stage fright* of many FYC students. Despite the social construction of the Self, expressing any aspect of that Self on paper requires a very intimate engagement with a subject and an audience, even in academic discourse. Consider how often those of us who have already successfully appropriated the discourse become defensive when our own writing is challenged. How many argument responses have we publicly voiced or read in the so-called composition theory wars? It would ease the tension of appropriating academic discourse if FYC students could envision themselves playing the role of the author or writer—and if we as academics could envision students' role playing as rehearsal for an eventual embodied performance within their academic writing. In "Fear, Teaching Composition, and Students' Discursive Choices," Sally Chandler reminds us: "While identity conflicts are highly personal and remain enmeshed in individual psychology and identity development, this uniqueness does not preclude the possibility that anxiety might influence students to express those conflicts in predictable ways" (60). Still, for some FYC students, writing anxiety is so great that they illogically ask for fewer writing assignments, even though they recognize the course is focused on writing.

Generally, students see no distinction between Author and Writer. To them, a Writer records, summarizes, notes, argues, or explains ideas on paper and an Author is a Writer who is published or who gets paid (Fomalhaut). In fact, Foucault makes a clear distinction between these personas. He argues that the Author is historically situated with the text and bears legal ownership of the work, while the Writer, however, “is born simultaneously with the text, [and] is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (Foucault *Barthes* 5). The Writer has no history or experience. The Writer is present only during the performance and is gone, while the Author remains and is responsible for the writing. In this frame, students would agree writers are scribes; authors create—and they are neither. Joy Ritchie, author of “Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity,” however, frames the writer this way:

When the writing class focuses on language as a productive, generative force for creating meaning and when it provides multiple audience responses to writing, it gives the beginning writer an opportunity to develop new ideas and new forms of writing, but it also allows her to try on new identities through the writing process. (Ritchie 155)

Likewise, Barbara Tomlison, author of “Characters as Coauthors,” does not distinguish between author and writer arguing “Such metaphorical stories are an important means by which people understand their composing experiences only partly monitored, partly remembered, partly reconstructed” (422). All writers use their own stories—fully or in part—fed by their own experiences or histories as a means of describing their own writing processes. It is often argued that fictional characters actually write themselves into a work, so why not expository writers? Why not FYC students? Writing oneself into a work—fiction or expository—is wholly an act of engagement.

Method Writing in the FYC classroom would focus on experiencing academia and the academic role before eventually embodying or appropriating that role. Both experience and embodiment require multiple forms of improvisation and rehearsal—physically, as well as dialogically, and dialectically (see Fedukovich). Murray actually ties improvisation and rehearsal directly to the writing process, calling procrastination in writing *rehearsal*. He writes, “Rehearsal usually begins with an unwritten dialogue within the writer’s mind . . . The writer thinks about characters or arguments, about plot or structure, about words and line” (376). This dialogue takes the forms of note-taking, journaling, outlining, discussions, research, and sketches. “In the final rehearsal,” Murray continues, “The writer produces test drafts, written or unwritten” (377). Stanislavsky’s alter ego Nazvanov began his acting courses by preparing dramatic scenes for performance with his assigned group, requiring discussions of scene options and casting their roles based on skill levels. Research was also required into not only the plays and roles, but also the acting notes and recalled performances of famous actors and acting

coaches. Nazvanov admits he stopped reading the script early on, convinced that he knew his assigned character, therefore slacking in preparation and rehearsal. On day three, he decides he's ready to rehearse before his classmates, who negatively critique his work. Nazvanov's experiences are similar to FYC students in their first few days of writing class in that they frequently fall back on what is familiar, writing as they have for previous, non-university courses. Nazvanov, however, has the benefit of Tortsov's lessons—or Stanislavsky's Method. In his introduction, Stanislavsky explains the Method is not only for use in acting. Acting is only the frame Stanislavsky uses in discussing creativity: "So actors and others working in the theatre should create *who* and *how* they please but on one essential condition: that their creative process should not run counter to nature and her laws" (xxviii). The nature of the character being embodied and performed is already known by all who have read the play and the author's other works. This utilization of both internal and external experiences and observations in the Method might become a tool for resolving the theoretical and pedagogical differences in understanding FYC students and their development in the academy through writing.

Acting requires believability within false circumstances. The actor cannot change that role or the familiarity of it; he must present it entirely as the author intended. The actor must adapt, making the audience and fellow characters on stage believe he is who the character says he is—despite the actor's possible real life lack of experience. Acting is not mere external representation of a stereotype. Stanislavsky explains through Tortsov:

Everything onstage must be convincing for the actor himself, for his fellow actors and for the audience. Everything should inspire belief in the possible existence in real life of feelings analogous to the actor's own. Every moment onstage must be endorsed by belief in the truth of the feelings being experienced and in the truth of the action taking place. (154)

Similarly, composition students are required to display this believability. If a student chooses to argue academically against civil disobedience, the reader expects the student to provide relevant illustrations of non-violent protests and provide research of negotiation techniques. This is what an academic does, and the reader must believe the student is an academic—despite the student's lack of experience as such. These are performances for the actor and the student—performances which require experiences they do not yet have or have not yet internalized. It is human nature to be comfortable with an external representation of an experience, but it takes practice to internalize an experience. The representational Stanislavsky's Method trains actors to move from external mimicking to internal experiencing to foster believable, spontaneous, inventive, honest, ergo credible characters in performance:

What does it mean to play 'credibly?' Nazvanov asked Tortsov,

his acting instructor. “That means thinking, wanting, striving, behaving truthfully, in logical sequence in a human way, within the character, and in complete parallel to it. As soon as the actor has done that, he will come close to the role and feel as one with it Our purpose is not to create ‘the life of the human spirit in a role,’ but also to communicate it outwardly in an artistic form. (Stanislavsky 19-20)

That happens, according to Stanislavsky, through a number of simultaneous activities which must be practiced *un*-simultaneously. In other words, to ensure a natural flow, one must make a series of actions appear to be unrehearsed by not practicing each move in order. Consider how one moves across the room. Onstage perhaps one is not meant to be noticed as he moves across the room, or perhaps he is meant to hold the focus of the audience, blinding them to what else may be happening on stage. Breaking up entire series of action into skills makes it appear to be like any familiar skill and drill approach, but it is not. This is rehearsal: the type of rehearsal that Murray noted is necessary. The exercises are preparation during rehearsal, but each exercise is evaluated individually and immediately—a self-evaluation, a peer evaluation, an instructor and/or a director evaluation. Note: No audience evaluation is yet considered. This is practice discovering and experiencing. Only later do those skills play a part in fostering the creation and embodiment of a character performance before an audience. As the character focuses on his task onstage, the audience follows that intense focus. The actor embodying the character refocuses the audience’s observation of the action. Embodying a character requires negotiation. Despite one’s doubts, one must negotiate the character’s construction in one’s own terms, before finally embodying or, to use Bartholomae’s terms, *appropriating*, the character. However, as noted earlier, one often gives in to the doubt, clinging to one successfully negotiated and powerful aspect of the character and ignoring all the others.

In Stanislavsky’s terms, such negotiation *is* embodiment: “You must absorb and filter any system through yourself, make it your own, retain its essentials and develop it in your own way” (Stanislavsky xxv). In *Embodiment*, Stanislavsky offers exercises targeting basic underlying or building block skills, similar to those offered in *Experiencing*. These are not meant to help the actor create the character, but to *refine* the character which is already created. This natural appearance is what Bartholomae is concerned about when he allows that students must “carry off the bluff” (605). Through Method acting’s character development techniques, FYC students should not only perform more authentically and naturally when acting the academic role and acting the author role, but they may also begin *embodying* their roles on stage—or on paper. In fact, the Self is informed as much by the character developed for performance, as the character is informed by the Self. The key is control—and polish, or *finish* as Stanislavsky calls it: “The more control and finish acting has, the calmer the actor is, the more clearly the shape and form

of the character comes across and the more it affects the audience and the greater success the actor has" (543). Likewise, the First-Year Composition student.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, edited by William Irwin. Greenwood Press, 2002, pp. 3-8.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *The Norton Book of Compositional Studies*, edited by Susan Miller. W.W. Norton & Co., 2009, pp. 605-630.
- . "Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins." *Writing on the Margins: Essays on Composition and Teaching*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, pp. 177-191.
- "Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy." The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010.
- Casey, Mary. "Building a Character: Pirandello and Stanislavsky." *Luigi Pirandello: The Theatre of Paradox*. Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, pp. 50-65.
- Chandler, Sally. "Fear, Teaching Composition, and Students' Discursive Choices: Re-Thinking Connections Between Emotions and College Student Writing." *Composition Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, Fall 2007. *Academic Search Complete*, pp. 53-70.
- Dasenbrock, Reed Way. "Truth and Methods." *College English*, vol. 57, no. 5, Sept. 1995, pp. 546-561.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *The Death and Resurrection of the Author*, edited by William Irwin. Greenwood Press, 2002, pp. 9-22.
- . "Writing the Self." *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, edited by Arnold Davidson. University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 234-247.
- Henney, Pamela. *Acting the Author/Writer: Using Acting Techniques in Teaching First Year Composition*. Master's thesis, University of Akron, 2012.
- Knoper, Randall. *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Murray, Donald. "Writing Before Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 29, no. 4, Dec. 1978, pp. 375-381.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Boyton/Cook, 1997.
- Ritchie, Joy. "Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 40, no. 2, 9May 1989, pp. 152-174.
- Stanislavsky, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, edited and translated by Jean Benedetti. Routledge, 2008.
- Tomlison, Barbara. "Characters are Coauthors: Segmenting the Self, Integrating the Composing Process." *Written Communication*, Oct. 1986, pp. 421-448.
- Vince, Ronald. "The Aristotelian Theatrical Paradigm as Cultural-Historical Construct." *Theatre Research International*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1997, pp. 38-47.