

PERFORMING THE ROLE OF
ISABELLA
IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

By
JAZMINE DINKINS

A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
2013

Acknowledgments

Special thanks goes to Dr. Ralf Remshardt for believing in my ability to “captivate an audience” and to Tim Altmeyer for helping me continue to develop an ability to “take up space” as an actress. To my acting mentor, Jade Lambert-Smith, I am grateful for all that you do. I thank God for His love and for my beautiful family and friends for their support. It took the entire village to raise this child! This is for Benjamin, my Claudio and my best friend.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	1
INTRODUCTION	2
PLOT SUMMARY	3
ISABELLA, PLEASE?.....	6
LITERARY CRITICISM	8
CHARACTER RESEARCH	11
WORDS, WORDS, WORDS.....	12
REHEARSAL PROCESS: THE BEAUTY OF ISABELLA.....	17
HISTORICIZING SHAKESPEARE: AMERICA IN THE 1960S.....	20
SHOW TIME: FLYING LIKE A BUTTERFLY AND STINGING LIKE A BEE.....	26
THE FINAL BOW.....	28
APPENDIX A—PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS	31
APPENDIX B—BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	38

Abstract of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to
the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

PERFORMING THE ROLE OF
ISABELLA
IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

By

Jazmine Dinkins

May 2013

Chair: Tim Altmeyer

Major: Theatre

This paper is a documentation of my creative process in portraying the role of Isabella in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, directed by Ralf Remshardt at the University of Florida, which ran September 14-23, 2012. The first part is a discussion of events leading up to my casting as Isabella. The next part of the document discusses my research about the play and my pre-rehearsal preparation, with a focus on text work. The third part discusses my discoveries during the rehearsal process that contributed to the development of my portrayal. In the final part of the paper, I reflect on my work in performance and I offer an evaluation of both my process and performance.

INTRODUCTION

As a Master of Fine Arts candidate at the University of Florida, I was required to complete a “project in lieu of thesis.” This project involved the portrayal of a “thesis” role during my final year of training. When the UF School of Theatre and Dance 2012-2013 season of plays was announced, my classmates and I began to petition for the roles we preferred. Among the choices that included a musical and four plays, there was no question that *Measure for Measure* would be my preference.

The summer before my second year in the Master of Fine Arts program at UF, I traveled to Oxford, England to take part in the *Mid-summer in Oxford* program at British American Drama Academy (BADA). It was an intensive exploration of Shakespeare’s plays and how to perform them effectively. While there, I took a series of daily classes with instructors from Yale and UCLA, as well as theatre companies from both Great Britain and the United States. I also took master classes with classical theatre “royalty”: John Barton, Jane Lapotaire, Julian Glover, Fiona Shaw, Mark Wing-Davey, and Henry Goodman. To top it all off, I was able to witness a performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST), one of the world’s premiere theatre companies, located in Stratford-Upon-Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare. This opportunity shaped my appreciation and desire to pursue classical theatre; I was blown away. The RSC used dancing, singing, and acting to bring *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to life. In that moment, I realized that in order to do justice to Shakespeare’s texts, actors must embody them. Furthermore, because the actors in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were also singers and dancers, I thought to myself, “I

can do that!” Before studying acting, I trained as a dancer for 18 years. I realized that my dance training might give me a “leg up” in my pursuit of a career in classical theatre.

In the wake of my experiences at BADA and the RST, I finally fell in love with Shakespeare, after years of believing his heightened language was both confusing and irrelevant. I discovered that I could connect with his texts because each of his plays is generous to the actor, providing everything necessary for one to understand the world of a character and his/her place in it. Shakespeare’s plays have stood the test of time because of his brilliant ability to capture the essence of humanity.

Once I arrived back in the U.S., I realized that my “Aha!” moment (as Oprah Winfrey calls it) was not just a brief flash of inspiration. Prior to my time at BADA, I was intimidated by Shakespeare and did not believe I fit in the world of classical theatre. However after, my confidence and focus grew, and I knew that my entire career would be affected by the discoveries I made in England. To exercise the skills that I acquired there in a production of one of Shakespeare’s plays became my goal. So, seeing *Measure for Measure* in the 2012-13 UF School of Theatre and Dance season was, from my point of view, a gift from God; it was a perfect opportunity for me to utilize the training I received at BADA and UF, and explore my strength as an actress to endure in the face of challenge and succeed. I made the decision to “grab this bull by its horns” and realize my goal. I put in my request for a role in *Measure for Measure* and awaited my destiny.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Measure for Measure*, Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, takes a leave of absence and trusts Angelo, his next in command, with the preservation of the city and its citizens. The Duke denies an offer to be accompanied during his expedition because he does not want anyone to know of

his whereabouts during his leave. With his new power, Angelo makes his first sign of rule by closing the brothels in Vienna. Mistress Overdone, who runs the brothel, is told by her “servant” Pompey that her business is to be closed down. Lord Angelo also decides to make an example of Claudio for his act of fornication with his yet-to-be wife, Juliette, by sentencing him to death.

Isabella, a nun and sister to Claudio, is in the convent when she is approached by Lucio, and made aware of her brother’s death sentence. Claudio has informed Lucio that his sister is gifted in the art of persuasion and his only hope of redemption from the “manacles” of the law. Lucio proceeds to convince Isabella that “all hope is gone” unless she can use her “power” to reason with Angelo for Claudio’s pardon (*MND* 1.4.68). After a brief hesitation and out of a sense of responsibility, Isabella decides to leave the convent since she is “yet unsworn” and sets out to seek pardon for her brother from Lord Angelo (1.4.10). All the while, the Duke, who said he was leaving Vienna, takes on the disguise of a friar in order to observe Angelo’s handling of affairs and observe his subjects.

Isabella soon finds that Angelo is not easily swayed. After his denial of a formal plea, Isabella decides to relent, but Lucio encourages her to make another attempt and she commences in a match of wit and reasoning to convince Angelo to show her brother grace and mercy. Angelo, in awe of her virtue and ability to persuade, agrees to reconsider, bidding her to return to him by noon the next day. Left alone, Angelo reveals that he is aroused by her chastity and beauty.

As instructed, Isabella returns to Angelo the next day, where she finds out that Angelo has decided to carry out the edict to execute her brother, unless she agrees to “yield” her virginity to him. Isabella hopes that he is joking, but Angelo assures her that he is serious. She threatens to “tell the world,” but he guarantees that no one would believe her because of his “unsoiled name”.

At a crossroads, she refuses, sure that her brother would never allow her to lay down her chastity for his life, and goes to see him in prison to ready him for his journey to the executioner's block.

Meanwhile, the Duke (dressed as a friar) goes to the prison in an attempt to comfort Claudio, when Isabella enters to tell her brother of her encounters with Angelo. Initially, Claudio agrees that she must not give herself to Angelo, but then reconsiders as he begins to foresee his approaching death. Isabella is disgusted with her brother's request and, enraged, begins to storm off. The Duke overhears this and bids her to stay. He explains to Isabella that he has a plan that will keep her chaste and save her brother's life. He proposes that Isabella allow Mariana, a woman contracted to marry Angelo, to take her place in Angelo's arms, disguised as Isabella. Isabella agrees because she has "spirit to do anything that appears not foul in the truth of her spirit" (3.1.197-198).

Isabella returns to the Duke (in the guise of a friar) with keys to Angelo's gardens, where she has agreed to "call upon him." The Duke and Isabella convince Mariana to take part in their plan. Mariana insists that if the "friar" advises it, she will help.

On the morning after, the Duke waits for Claudio's pardon, since Angelo believes he has "deflowered" Isabella and promised to commute the sentence if Isabella surrendered to him. However, the provost receives a personal message from Angelo to behead Claudio. Angelo also requests that the head of Claudio be brought to him so that he can make sure he is dead. The Duke is taken by surprise by this, but convinces the provost to spare Claudio's life, and to send another's head in Claudio's place to Angelo.

Isabella arrives at the prison to get confirmation of her brother's pardon, but the Duke (still as a friar) tells her that Claudio is dead. Isabella is outraged, but he assures her that the Duke will return and she will receive justice in due time.

When the Duke officially returns (no longer in disguise), Isabella publicly accuses Angelo of being an “adulterous thief, an hypocrite, [and] a virgin violator...” (5.1.42-44). In a clever ploy, the Duke, defending his right-hand man, dismisses her accusations and sends her to jail for them. He then leaves momentarily to return as the friar, only to then remove his disguise to reveal to all that he is indeed the Duke of Vienna. He pardons Mariana and Isabella, and demands Angelo to confess his crimes. Angelo states that he deserves the death sentence, but is told to wed Mariana immediately. The Duke then asks for Isabella’s forgiveness and tells her that she must forgive Angelo before he can have Angelo put to death. Both Mariana and Isabella plead for clemency, only to be interrupted by the return of Claudio, who, unbeknownst to Isabella, has not been executed. The Duke ultimately pardons Angelo, and then at play’s end, to everyone’s surprise, proposes to Isabella, announcing a celebration at his home, before the nun gives him her answer.

ISABELLA, PLEASE?

When I learned that the graduate advisor sent out the finalized thesis show assignments, I let out a shriek in excitement; I had been waiting to hear for months. I immediately stopped what I was doing, opened my computer, accessed my email, and screamed once again when I saw that my thesis role would be in *Measure for Measure*. I was ecstatic! I went home, grabbed my Shakespeare anthology, and began to read the play. However, halfway through the first page, I realized that I did not understand what I was reading. I tried repeatedly, but could not get through the text. It felt like an attempt to read a foreign language. That is when the panic began to creep in and I faced the reality of this challenge: this would be the largest and most complicated role I had ever undertaken. I undoubtedly loved Shakespeare, but realized right then

that if I was going to succeed, then I would have to “eat this elephant one bite at a time.” And that is exactly what I did.

First, I had to find an easier version of the play to read. I first looked to *No Fear Shakespeare*, which is a series of guides that translates the original classical texts of Shakespeare’s plays into contemporary language, but *No Fear Shakespeare: Measure for Measure* has not been published. I eventually found a translation that I could comprehend by Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, and used additional resources, like Cliffs Notes and commentary from several other translations of the play, to give me clarity. They became beneficial companions in my attempt to gain a thorough understanding of the play—without which I could not render a credible portrayal.

But just as I was finding my initial footing, my future as Isabella came into question. Since *Measure for Measure* was to provide me with my thesis role, I automatically assumed I would play the female lead, Isabella. The director of the production explained to me in passing earlier that he was considering a particular actor to play my brother. With that, I was all but certain that I would be playing Isabella. This assumption, however, was inaccurate. The actor whom the director wanted for Claudio was no longer available, and when I followed up with the director later to ask if my playing Isabella had been finalized, he replied, although trying to not let me down, that it had not. This was heartbreaking. I knew that there were other female roles in the play, but in my time in the MFA in Acting program at UF I had not been given the opportunity to play a lead role in a main stage production and this would be my last chance. When I thought about why the director changed his mind when a particular actor was no longer available, it hit me: the other actor and I are both black actors in a predominantly white program. Without him, the director’s reluctance to use me implied that he believed a black actress playing

Isabella must have a black brother. I immediately became furious. This was not the first time my race was an issue in casting. If I was incapable of tackling Isabella because of lack of skill, I could comprehend being overlooked. But this seemed to be about something else. Why couldn't a black Isabella have a white brother or at least a half-white brother? I calmed myself down, trusting I could change the director's mind by proving myself in the audition and win the role that I wanted so badly.

However, at the audition, I was nervous; "cold readings" (unrehearsed readings from the script with other random actors) of Shakespearean texts are notoriously difficult, and, despite my best intentions, I felt underprepared. I had a basic understanding of the script, but I did not know it "like the back of my hand." At the audition, I read some of the play's key scenes: when Isabella meets Angelo to save her brother's life, and when Isabella reveals to Claudio that she cannot save him. My audition was satisfactory, if not stellar. I was quickly released, making it was one of the shortest auditions I have ever had. However, since I did not read for any other part, I was confident in my chances. I had proven to the director both my rudimentary skills with heightened language as well as my fearless, persistent interest in the role. After a week of waiting, I learned that my dream was coming true—I was cast as Isabella.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Once I secured the role, I got to work by first examining critical response to the play, to see what scholars have said about *Measure for Measure* in hopes of finding insight that would guide my portrayal of Isabella.

William Shakespeare was a master with the quill and painted a lasting impression with his imagery by his inventive use of language. However, much to my surprise, many theatre scholars do not appreciate Shakespeare's attempts at comedy in *Measure for Measure*. It is not a

“traditional” comedy like the “light hearted” and fairly “well-made” *Twelfth Night*. *Measure for Measure* “does not easily conform to the familiar patterns of the Elizabethan comedic and tragic genres” (Kamps 1). More specifically, unlike *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare does not resolve all of the conflict in the fifth and final act of the play. In the case of *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare illustrates the “darker side” of humanity while still evoking laughter. The critics who do not appreciate Shakespeare’s “refusal [to] neatly and satisfactorily” conclude his tale of “rampant sexuality, deception, injustice, and death” have labeled it as one of his “unrefined” plays (Kamps 1). E.M.E. Tillyard dismisses the play as a problem; not merely one of Shakespeare’s “problem plays,” but a problem in and of itself. He wrote, “The negative judgments of...commentators have been predicted on an intense dissatisfaction with the play’s ending, which vexingly complicates the familiar resolution of a number of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies” (Kamps 2). Scholars contend that Shakespeare may have also believed that *Measure for Measure* was not “successful” because it was his last attempt at a “hybrid” work “before he turns exclusively to the composition of tragedies between 1604 and 1610” (Kamps 3). These criticisms motivated me to portray Isabella in such a way as to counter them; to prove scholars wrong about the play’s shortcomings. The mere fact that theatres continue to produce it 409 years after its conception proves its worth among the great plays of the Western World, and much of that is owing to the nun who is the play’s reluctant heroine.

Scholars differ in their opinions about Isabella. Ellis-Former states that it is “because of her inhumanity [that] she can watch unmoved while [Claudio] faces the awful realization of immediate death.” He goes on to say that she is sustained by “pitiless, unimaginative [and] self absorbed virtue” (Eccles 443). The harsh criticism of Isabella does not end there. According to Hazlitt, audiences are not “greatly enamored [with] Isabella’s chastity...[they] do not feel the

same confidence in the virtue that is ‘sublimely good’ at [Claudio’s] expense...” (Eccles 440).

Also, Coleridge admits that “Isabella, of all Shakespeare’s female characters, interests [him] the least” (Eccles 440).

Conversely, others speak of her depth and nobility. According to Murphy, “In Isabella’s character there is a fine variety of passions” (Eccles 439). *Measure for Measure* illustrates “a beautiful struggle between her virtue and her tender sentiments for her brother” (Eccles 439). Although she decides to let her brother die, she is respected, even by “the worldly Lucio” (Eccles 441). “Isabella’s saintliness is not of the passive, timorous, or merely meditative kind. It is an active pursuit of holiness through exercise and discipline... And as she has strength to accept pain and death for herself rather than dishonour, so she can resolutely accept pain and death for those who are dearest to her” (Eccles 442).

Despite the lack of consensus among scholars, I chose to find inspiration in the positive images of Isabella. If I was going to do her justice in my performance, it was important that I find virtue in and justification for her behavior.

When I read the play myself, I noticed that Isabella embodies many commendable Christ-like qualities such as compassion towards her brother as she pleads for his life, wisdom in persuading the Duke, and forgiveness of Angelo for all his ill deeds. I also saw that Isabella is a character full of moral strength and confidence. She is faced with the decision to give her body to a stranger or allow her brother to be executed. She, without question, decides that complying with Angelo’s lust is not an option. She states clearly in the text that she loves her brother, but testifies that she loves God and her righteousness more. Isabella says, “More than our brother is our chastity” (2.4.188). She even goes as far as to say that if she were in her brother’s place, she would wear “th’impression of keen whips... as rubies, and strip [herself] to death as to a bed that

longing had been sick for, ere [she'd] yield [her] body up to shame," suffering death before giving up her sanctity (2.4.101-104). This conviction is the core of Isabella's character and the foundation upon which I chose to build my portrayal. It is that conviction that led her to commit her life to Christ in the first place. If her religious beliefs and priorities as a nun seem to affect how she handles her affairs with other characters in *Measure for Measure*, then it seemed necessary for me to become acquainted with the mindset and lifestyle of nuns in order to portray one convincingly.

CHARACTER RESEARCH

In the television documentary, *Our America: The Brides of Christ*, Lisa Ling interviewed several women who served as nuns at some point in their lives. One young woman decided to become a nun right out of college because she knew that she was "called" to it. She was confident that God predestined her to enter solitude to grow closer to Christ and pray for the communities of the world. Her parents expressed their sorrow in losing their daughter to such a commitment, but were proud of her dedication to her faith and realized she was not going to back down from her decision to give up her comfortable life to live as a "bride of Christ." Like Isabella, she was young and devoted and protective of the idea of "finding" herself through Christ, unwilling to surrender that option. She became a strong image for me as I worked to embody that way of thinking.

Additional interviews revealed other nun stories: a woman who decided to leave her order after she became unhappy with her secluded life, and another who conducted ministry on the streets of Los Angeles. Despite the differences among them, all three stories gave proof of

how taking a vow to become a nun is gravely serious and intensely personal. Understanding this perspective is vital to understanding Isabella.

As a devoted servant of Christ, one might arguably assume that Isabella is well versed in the Bible. The Bible provides much justification for Isabella's actions throughout the play. Although her brother, Claudio, has violated the law of land (not to mention God's law), she operates with the compassion that all Christians are instructed to practice: "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (New King James Version Romans 12:15). Also, the Bible states "that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (New King James Version 1 Corinthians 12:25-26). It is Christian sentiments like these that surely lead Isabella to leave the cloister to help her brother.

The Bible's teachings also justify Isabella's willingness to allow her brother to perish, rather than give herself to Angelo in exchange for his life. Jesus says, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate (love less) his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple (New King James Version Luke 14:26-27). This suggests that for the things one gains in Christ, one must be willing to lose something. Isabella loves her brother, but she loves and trusts God more; for her, the choice is clear.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Once I understood the roots of Isabella's inner motivations, my next step in approaching the role of Isabella was to analyze the play's text with careful attention to the language and how

it was composed. Shakespeare was an actor who wrote his plays for the stage. Their true beauty and potency is revealed when spoken aloud with attention to their composition, like a musician must understand a piece of music before he plays it, and this skill comes from training.

As I have been instructed, I noticed first the vitality and specificity of Shakespeare's words. Unlike contemporary plays, which are more often "conversational" and/or "emotional" in content, leading an actor to manipulate the words for a personal interpretation of the role or scene, Shakespeare's plays demand that the actor allow the words to manipulate the actor. Every choice must be supported by the text. Shakespeare has provided everything in the play that an actor needs to create a character.

Much of Shakespeare's plays are written as metered verse (specifically iambic pentameter), which provide the text with a regular internal rhythm. Lines written in iambic pentameters have five "feet." Each "foot" includes two syllables, one stressed and the other unstressed (Tassel 23-25). Irregularities in rhythm inform the actor that the character is experiencing change: emotional, situational, and/or psychological. Scansion is an analysis method that helps determine the rhythm of each line, and reveal irregularities. I applied scansion to the text in order to discover acting clues for my portrayal. I noticed that in high stakes situations Isabella's rhythms are consistently even (regular), which told me much about her unwavering conviction. But occasionally there are irregularities, namely lines with an extra syllable (feminine ending), that seem to indicate a person bursting with intention; so much so, it can't be controlled and overflows the line. These instances reveal a woman who is working hard to "keep her cool," to regain a more even-tempered rhythm, or one who falls victim to emotion. In her monologue following Angelo's proposition, Isabella initially speaks in a consistent iambic pentameter, exhibiting calm and stoic resolve (2.4.172-178), until she begins to confront the love

she has for her brother and his love for her (2.4.179-180). The lines become irregular, revealing the cracks in Isabella's armor as she wrestles with her decision.

While the pulse of the language helps reveal a lot about a character's state in a given moment, an understanding of punctuation also informs the actor. For instance, a period demands a full stop in an actor's delivery, while a comma denotes a brief pause by the actor. Both are useful to an actor, allowing her time to breathe in sometimes dense, multi-line expressions of thought. But there is also potential emotional and psychological information to be found in them. Periods often indicate a completion of thought and a sense of a character's conviction. A series of commas may reflect the character's heightened circumstances, demanding that she take more time through these brief pauses to discover new thoughts in the moment, to experience the hesitation of uncertainty, or overcome the obstacles that these heightened circumstances produce. For instance, when she is given the ultimatum by Angelo, Isabella says, "So, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die" (2.4.185). Each comma constitutes a breath, indicating a methodical delivery of a possibly uneasy decision; the resulting breathing pattern may even resemble one who is in tears. Exclamation points indicate urgency and investment. For instance, Isabella replies to her brother's plea to give her body to Angelo, "O you beast! O faithless coward! O dishonest Wretch! Wilt thou be made a man out of my own vice?" (3.1.139-140). The punctuation reveals the magnitude of betrayal that Isabella experiences in her brother's request. In the final scene of the play, Isabella says, "O worthy prince, dishonor not your eye by throwing it on any other object till you have heard me in my true complaint and given me justice, justice, justice, justice!" (5.1.26). The exclamation point underlines how important it is to Isabella for the Duke to understand that she wants justice. Further more, the commas helped me find a rhythm in the line that ultimately allowed me to rally the crowd standing-by like a Civil Rights Movement protest

chant, a choice that was in accord with the director's production concept. (See HISTORICIZING SHAKESPEARE: AMERICA IN THE 1960S.)

Initially, as I worked to honor the specific rhythm and punctuation of each line, I sounded very mechanical, even robotic. There was no "life" in the words, even while paying attention to punctuation. To counteract that, I tried a method that had once been suggested to me to overcome monotone delivery: listening to Jazz music to find the musicality of language. I enjoy singing, and Jazz is one of my favorite musical genres, so singing and "scatting" my lines gave "color" (variety and life) to the words as I began to speak them. From this moment until our last performance, I thought about "playing" the musicality of the language and I found ease and melody in my dialogue.

I also discovered more vocal possibilities through Lessac's Tonal NRG Approach that my UF Voice/Speech instructor, Professor Yanci Bukovec, taught me. The Lessac method of voice training emphasizes the proper formation of words in the mouth and the energy (NRG) needed to create a "symphony of sound," as Lessac compares specific sounds to orchestral instruments; for example, the "NG" sound has the qualities of an oboe, while the "N" is reminiscent of a violin. This voice-music correlation meshed well with my vocal explorations with Jazz, allowing me to find greater variety and expression in my delivery.

Still, despite my analysis and discoveries, memorization of the lines became a frustrating challenge; so much so that I began to question my choice to be in *Measure for Measure* and think of a way to escape from it. One of my greatest fears as an actor is forgetting lines on stage. It happened to me before with disastrous results. With such an integral role in *Measure for Measure*, I knew that my cast mates' success depended heavily upon my preparation, which

included a solid ownership of the script. I believed that my failure to do so would hamper the process and keep both the cast and me from achieving our best work. Gripped by fear and tears, I decided to coach myself back to a place of calm. Using aspects of the Alexander Technique (AT), I “came home to myself.” AT is “a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support, flexibility, and coordination. It enhances performance and is therefore a valued tool for actors” (Connable 1). By “coming home to myself,” taking stock of my own body and sense of self, I am able to reevaluate challenging situations, to see them constructively as opportunities. I reminded myself that I will not grow as an actress if I am not challenged; an “easy” role would not give me an opportunity to grow. Also, my AT training reminded me to make a conscious decision to release the physical tension in my shoulders and back. I also gave special attention to my breathing, for the “sake” of my physical and mental health. Inhaling and exhaling intentionally helps relax the body and calm nerves. By employing elements of AT, I was no longer anxious, and recommitted myself to playing the most difficult role I had been given. My next move was to begin to research more effective methods to memorize Shakespeare. There had to be a way.

Using an Internet search, I found a company, “Memorize Shakespeare,” that sells recordings of plays to help actors memorize lines. Using that idea, I recorded Isabella’s lines and the cue lines (the lines that come directly before hers), just as the producers of “Memorize Shakespeare” suggest. Although tedious and time consuming, the recordings served as a balm for my fear. By listening to them repeatedly, I began to memorize my lines, while also discovering more meaning in them and a more “natural” delivery of stressed and unstressed rhythms. I believe that as my comfort with the language increased I became free and comfortable enough to discover life in the words. Shakespeare’s language was beginning to become my own.

I was working hard to prepare for the sake of my own performance, yes, but, more importantly, I was working hard for the sake of my cast mates. After a semester in acting class with Professor Tim Altmeyer, I thoroughly believe that the people with whom I am on stage are as important to my performance as my own work. As actors, we have to be open and vulnerable to the story and each other. Our performances are the result of how they affect us. We have to be willing to receive from as well as give to each other in our scene work. I knew that solid memorization would enable me to listen to my fellow actors (receive) to propel my responses (give.)

REHEARSAL PROCESS: THE BEAUTY OF ISABELLA

On the first day of rehearsal, the director asked the cast to complete a character analysis for their respective characters. A character analysis is a character biography and personality sketch, compiled from the details in the play. It is useful to an actor's process of discovery, allowing her to make character choices supported by a given text. To do this, I used the guide for formal character analysis for verse drama that was given to me by Dr. Mikell Pinkney, the first of my acting instructors to teach me how to approach performance in Shakespeare's works. He said that an important thing for an actor to remember is that each character is vital in the play, because the plot depends on every one of them. The characters do not exist for themselves, or some outlandish purpose, but to serve the story being told. A character analysis helps the actor organize the play for herself and helps her uncover details that will allow the actor to make discoveries and acting choices that will support the story. The analysis contains a Freytag. The Freytag is a graph that is used to map out the rising action, climax, falling action and conclusion of each plot. The Freytag helped me understand the play in a more detailed and organized

fashion. Each specific moment in the play was visually mapped out, which helped me determine the play's rising action (Isabella pleading for Claudio's justice), the climax (Angelo giving the ultimatum for Claudio's release), the falling action (the solicitation of Marianna for the Duke's plan), and the conclusion (the Friar is revealed to be the Duke and order is restored.) This map informed me about the play's momentum, what was required from me to tell the story and made me aware of the story's "big picture."

Next, I sought to identify Isabella's *super-objective* (what she wants to achieve in the course of the play), but I first needed to review the play in detail to identify her smaller objectives in each scene. In actor terminology, an *objective* is the reason a character is saying and doing what they do, usually phrased as an infinitive. In act 2 scene 2, Isabella travels to Angelo in order to plead for her brother. Her objective in this scene is to "get Angelo to pardon Claudio." In act 2 scene 4, Isabella discovers that Angelo will not pardon her brother without the giving of her virginity. At this point, she goes from wanting her brother to be pardoned to desiring that a higher justice be done, even if it means Claudio must die. Next, Isabella breaks the bad news to her brother. Her initial objective in this scene is to get Claudio to agree that she cannot give her virginity for his life. But when Claudio asks his sister to do it, Isabella is insulted and her purpose becomes to get Claudio to accept his death sentence. Later, her hope is renewed when the Duke, disguised as the Friar, tells her of his plan to deceive Angelo with Marianna to free her brother. Of course, Isabella's goal then is to get Marianna on her side so that she will take Isabella's place in Angelo's bed to save her brother. After the plan backfires, and the Duke tells her that her brother has been executed, Isabella wants revenge for Angelo's cruelty. She fights to get the Duke to punish Angelo for being the "adulterous thief, hypocrite [and] virgin violator" he is (5.1.43-44). I saw that all of these smaller objectives seemed to serve a larger,

over-arching sense of purpose for Isabella: to get the authority of Vienna (whether man or God) to give her justice. This *super-objective* guides her actions through each scene of the play; everything she does is in some way connected to that aim. Knowing this would be useful in keeping my performance focused and purposeful.

I also identified Isabella's important moments in the story's action. They include Isabella deciding to leave the convent to plead for Claudio's life, her decision to allow her brother to die by refusing to give her virginity to Angelo, and her decision to forgive Angelo before discovering that Claudio was not killed. Acknowledgement of these key events helps the actor prepare the preceding scenes so that they support the key events. Being aware of the key events also helps the actor "drive" toward these moments, by taking advantage of the play's inherent momentum to aid the performance.

As instructed by Dr. Pinkney, I identified Isabella's key values, which are her willpower and determination to live a righteous life for Christ, as well as her personality traits, namely her ability to reason and speak eloquently. Isabella is a novice nun, but she is not a push over. She is well educated, but still has the "nerve" that comes with the ignorance of youth, like when she challenges Angelo's authority (2.2). These details helped me understand and relate to her. Adopting her perspective was vital in giving a three-dimensional performance. And by embracing her relative youth, I discovered playfulness in addition to her righteousness and intelligence. This helped me better relate to her, because I too am extremely playful while also considering myself mature and responsible.

HISTORICIZING SHAKESPEARE: AMERICA IN THE 1960S

Also, on the first day of rehearsal, the director revealed that this particular production of *Measure for Measure* would be set in 1960s America, during the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Originally, Shakespeare set the play (during no discernable time period) in Vienna, a place about which he probably knew little, but possibly chose deliberately to make his patrons feel removed from the issues he seems to be criticizing: religious and judicial hypocrisy, and corruption. Hundreds of years later, as the director pointed out, these same issues were reflected in the plight of African-Americans faced with dehumanizing Jim Crow laws. The director conceded that *Measure for Measure* is not a play about race, but can be laced with the issue, if certain aspects of the play are highlighted in production. To that end, he decided to borrow the design and social constructs of the television series, *Mad Men*, set in a 1960s New York advertising agency, depicting the shifting racial, gender, and corporate hierarchies of the era, and apply them to *Measure for Measure* with the Duke and Angelo as the establishment at the top of these hierarchies and many of the other characters in the rising sub-cultures of the age, including Isabella, a young independent black woman. Furthermore, the director, in an effort to honor the changing gender hierarchies of the modern setting, chose to make one of the Duke's men (Escalus) female (Escala), injecting sexual tension at the highest levels of authority in Shakespeare's Vienna. I was excited about the time period choice; I love 60s music and fashion. (See APPENDIX A) I was not certain how the choice would inform my portrayal, but I looked forward to seeing how the play and my performance would be transformed by this directorial update.

With our production set in a relatively modern world, I began the rehearsal process thinking that Isabella's physicality (how she walked and moved) would be no different from my

own, dictated only by the confinement and restrictions of the specific clothes she wears. She, like me, is a confident young woman who looks adversity in the face and fights for justice. Her ability to speak and reason eloquently and her critical thinking skills are proof of her education, something to which I can relate. I decided that my own personal eloquence and poise would be a logical fit for my portrayal of Isabella. This choice allowed me to be very free from the outset of rehearsals, comfortably and unquestionably in my own “skin” as Isabella.

As I mentioned before, my earliest preparations for the role involved intensive drilling of my lines out-loud until they became second nature to me. However, as we started to stage the play, the director noted that my deeply rooted speech regionalisms were getting in the way of my performance. He made it clear that he did not want me “to be like all other Shakespearean actors,” but he did want me to find a balance between my personal “flare” and the precision of high verse I was working to master. For example, according to the director, my enunciation of “tr” words was sloppy; I was saying “shtrange” and “shtraight.” To right this, I had to undo years of speech habits. I spent several nights going through my script and identifying the words that had become “hurdles” for me to conquer; words like “true,” “entreat,” “stretched,” “tread,” and “trade.” After identifying the words, I became more deliberate in my delivery to pronounce them correctly. But this made me very self-conscious as I performed, and less emotionally connected to Isabella’s struggles. I discovered that I am very emotionally connected to the way I habitually speak; it is linked to my family and the community from which I come and is intensely personal. So to be asked to speak otherwise seemed as if I were being asked to deny who I am, which made it more difficult for me to use myself in the role. Professor Tim Altmeyer suggested that I consider it less a speech choice, and more of a tactical choice for Isabella. Why might she *choose* to speak this way to achieve her objectives, among them being to get the respect of authority?

The answer seemed obvious. I employed Isabella's poise and precise enunciation, products of her education, to sway those around her, making what was once a frustrating exercise into another tool to get what she wants.

The director also noted my tendency to look down at the floor as I acted, closing my face off from the audience, and breaking a fundamental rule of acting. This had never been an issue for me before, but there was something about Isabella's situation (her sorrow and vulnerability) that triggered this impulse in me. I discussed this problem with my Alexander Technique professor, Ms. Kathy Sarra. We agreed that Isabella is connected with her God, open and willing to share her heart, and, as such, her portrayal should be appropriately "upright," standing "tall" and looking others in the eye. However, despite this concession, I still had difficulty making the logical kinesthetic shift away from casting my eyes downward. The missing puzzle piece finally came in a conversation I had with my acting mentor, Jade Lambert-Smith. She explained that Shakespeare conceived Isabella as a character who is vulnerable for the world to see, who wears her heart on her sleeve without shame. But, I, Jazmine Dinkins, am neither vulnerable nor comfortable wearing my heart on my sleeve. The misstep then became clear to me: because of our similarities, I failed to take note of the differences between Jazmine and Isabella. If I was to play Isabella, I had to accept her willingness to publicly admit her fears, and find a way to see that kind of openness, not as weakness, but as strength. Although I was initially uncomfortable, I fought the impulse to look down and broke this habit, and discovered a power in Isabella standing tall, despite her fears.

The emotional toil Isabella experiences in *Measure for Measure* provided me with yet another challenge. When the Duke informs Isabella that her brother is dead, Isabella's reaction is visceral. She replies, "Nay, but it is not so." She threatens to "poke out" Angelo's eyes before

she laments, “Unhappy Claudio! Wretched Isabel! Injurious world! Most damned Angelo!” (4.3.108-109). Finding an emotional truth in this atypically aggressive moment was a difficult task. I did as I have been taught, and used the language (rhythm, tempo and punctuation) to lead me to emotion, but it was not happening fast enough for the director. I began to get frustrated, because the “formula” I had been given was not working for me. I was sure that I was doing something wrong. This proved to be a speed bump that threw my entire performance off course. Nevertheless, I was determined to persevere.

I sought help from an actress who inspires me, Viola Davis. I watched her in *The Help* (2011), portraying another woman who, despite her status, found the courage to fight against an unjust authority. I was struck by the truthful emotion in her acting and wanted to emulate it. I read and listened to interviews with her discussing her acting process, and in them, she repeatedly mentions the vitality of knowing what a character needs. In an interview with CUNY TV, Viola Davis states that she focused on “what the character needed most, what is it the character cannot live without” in order to successfully portray her Tony Award-winning role as Rose in August Wilson’s *Fences* on Broadway in 2010. So, I simply asked myself, “What is it that Isabella needs to live?” I concluded that she needs to please God by fighting for justice. She knows that God gave all of mankind grace and mercy, and that Angelo, as bearer of that gift, is obligated to bestow that same mercy on her brother. Her fight is righteous and godly and drives her forward, despite the obstacles and setbacks she encounters. This revelation helped me tremendously. As I paid closer attention to what was driving Isabella, I developed a better understanding of her thought process, of her logic and how one moment led to the next. This unified my scenes with a logical progression and a clear sense of purpose, which unleashed fuller emotional responses as I encountered resistance in my scenes.

I also realized that part of my frustration had arisen from my lack of a detailed rehearsal warm-up. A warm-up prepares an actor's body and voice for the demands of their role. Warming up helps an actor avoid injury and allows one to do their best work. I had my Lessac vocal warm-up exercises, but in order to fully engage the actor in me, I had to use the dancer in me—the physical part of me—to ready my body and mind for the rigors of playing such a demanding role as Isabella. So, I committed to a proper physical warm up before rehearsal. I did a basic ballet warm-up that consisted of *pliés*, *tendus*, *dégagés*, and lunges to loosen my muscles and “center” myself. As stated earlier, I discovered the value in “coming home to myself.” When I felt “at home” or comfortable in my body, I was able to focus more easily in my scene work. However, in doing this physical warm-up to help me better “step into Isabella”, I had to be careful that it did not allow me to “step out” of her. Isabella's journey in *Measure for Measure* is often a desperate one, of fighting against authority or herself. She is rarely at ease in the story. I had to be aware of the dangers of how a preparation that involved physical relaxation could hamper my ability to connect with the tension of Isabella's circumstances. At the same time, I was charged with discovering ease in this frustration. The tension that comes with this mindset had negative effects on my body and mind.

This concern led to another discovery. By striving to maintain my psychological connection with Isabella and her circumstances, I found that I was carrying her frustrations with me into my daily life. During the rehearsal process, in an effort to preserve my personal relationships, I had to make phone calls with my loved ones brief, since I was getting agitated in otherwise normal conversations. I was quick tempered and annoyed with almost everyone. I began “speaking my mind” without consideration of other people's feelings. My emotions were overwhelming and I did not understand how and why they came about. I realized that I had not

drawn a line between my personal life and my "life" as Isabella. To remedy this, I began to consciously "leave" Isabella in the rehearsal space and "come home to Jazmine." I chose to think about things that had nothing to do with the play like watching my favorite television show, *Friends*, in order to lift the weight of Isabella's conflict from my shoulders. This release allowed me to return to rehearsals, refreshed and excited about the work. As time went on, I began to "relax" into Isabella and trust the hard work I put into her creation. Confidence came by acknowledging that I understood the story, what Isabella says, and how to use Shakespeare's language to give Isabella the three-dimensionality I believe Shakespeare intended her to have. Furthermore, I had the trust of my director, who encouraged me to infuse the character with my own personal qualities to render an Isabella who was distinctly modern and American.

There were many hurdles to clear in this production, but one of the tallest was deciding how we would conclude the story. The end of the play presents a problem for the actor playing Isabella. Shakespeare does not reveal if Isabella agrees to marry the Duke after his proposal. In light of the government corruption and the Duke's own duplicity, an actor would have a hard time justifying putting trust in him, especially when Isabella has already devoted her life to the sisterhood. The director and I began to explore different options. I told him that I thought it would be interesting for Isabella to remove her veil (the head covering that nuns wear) at play's end. After riding this "emotional rollercoaster" where she has witnessed the worst in human nature, Isabella might justifiably stop to reevaluate her life. Removing the veil is not so much a denouncement of her faith, but an indication of her being at a crossroads. The director liked this idea and used it. As our production ended, he chose to have Isabella left alone on stage, uncertain and unveiled, approached by Pompey, who offers her a can of spray paint that he has used to protest against the corrupt authority of Vienna. As she deliberates her choices, Nina

Simone's "Feeling Good," in which she sings about a "new dawn" and a "new day," underscores the action, and the lights fade to black (See APPENDIX A). This resolution seemed appropriate and logical for a woman of color left disillusioned by sacred institutions (church and government) in an age of budding revolution. I understood her weary and restless point of view, and had no problem justifying these final moments as we conceived them.

SHOW TIME: FLYING LIKE A BUTTERFLY AND STINGING LIKE A BEE

After weeks of frustration, tears and personal breakthroughs, I was ready to share the culmination of my work with an audience. Getting in front of an audience was nerve wracking, but I knew what I needed to do to put myself at ease and deliver a strong performance. I have discovered that no matter how comfortable I am, overcoming nerves will always be a part of my performance process. Denzel Washington, among other notable actors, has said that he still has nerves while performing, even after "stardom." My nerves do not stem from being unprepared, but from fear of the unknown, of the potential for things to go wrong. I had to trust that the work I put into becoming secure with Isabella would help me navigate any "rough waters" I might encounter in front of an audience.

Towards that effort, I was sure to run my lines before each scene. In rehearsal, I discovered that to do my best work, I had to be engaged the entire time. Running my lines was a way to stay "in it" mentally and this became a ritual that helped me feel more secure while on stage. I did not want to be stifled by my fear of forgetting lines. The complexity and vitality of Isabella's journey in *Measure for Measure* made focus imperative.

I was carrying a lot of weight on my shoulders and always remembered how much my cast and the rest of the production team depended on my performance each evening. My focus had to be total. I deliberately got ample amounts of rest and avoided stressful situations. I was

careful not to spend too much time on my cellular phone or on social networking sites, because of the potential distractions. There were hectic days when I could not avoid the stress of family coming into town to see the production. These were the moments I was forced to “come home to myself.”

One evening in performance, I lost focus. I stumbled on a line and was not “in” the scenes “with” my scene partners. I gave myself two options. The first was to “end gain,” which in Alexander Technique terminology means that an actor focuses on an end result of the scene (i.e., anger or sorrow) at the expense of the “means-whereby” (the moment-to-moment playing with her scene partners by which the end result is achieved.) The second was to forgive myself for the poor work I had done in the prior scenes and recommit myself to my objectives and my attention to my fellow actors. I chose the latter, and regained my focus.

As the run continued, I received numerous compliments and some hints that people did not appreciate my work. I decided not to take these things personally, because they would hamper my work on stage. I did not want to admire or judge my performance as I gave it, and neglect the focus and attention to detail I worked hard to incubate. I decided to practice what I had “preached” to numerous people—to accept that not everyone was going to like my work—as hard as that was to do. I wanted so badly for people to love my work as much as I did. Once again, I had to “come home to myself,” and remind myself of my talent, my training and the hard work I put into my portrayal.

There were some things I wish I could have done better. My inability to access tears consistently was frustrating. In act 4, the Duke tells Isabella not to cry, insinuating that she has tears in her eyes. While I know that emotion can be expressed without tears, I felt obligated to have them. This pressure to perform impaired my focus. I also thought that my blocking

(staging) was not conducive to generating an organic emotional response. I was directed to run to escape from the Duke in this moment, when I wanted to stay where I was in order to take in the enormity of Claudio's death. Perhaps, in the future, I will be more selfish about what I need to do my job, including negotiating with the director about directorial choices that hamper my ability to deliver my best work.

THE FINAL BOW

The closing performance of *Measure for Measure* was bittersweet. I was excited to have more “free time” on my hands, but sad about concluding such a wonderful journey. I felt fulfilled by the experience, not because I received compliments for my work, but because I endured, surviving self-doubt and avoiding self-pity. Reflecting on my process reminded me of how much I have grown as an actress and how much I appreciated this role. It is not everyday that a young African-American woman is cast as the lead in a one of Shakespeare's plays. My success with this role speaks volumes about the ability of an actor of limited experience, no matter her race, to portray Shakespeare's genius on stage. Although I feared that my regionalisms and sass would inhibit me from playing Isabella, I now know that they enhanced my work, by making it both authentic and personal. I learned that “Jazmine” is “enough” to “claim” a stage, and bring 400 year-old words to new and still-relevant life. I was able to relate to Isabella on so many levels. I understood her love for family and her journey to fight for what she believes is right. Most importantly, I felt most connected to her awe and respect of God. And just as Isabella grows from an uncertain girl into a young confident woman, I too grew from a frightened actress into a confident one; both of us products of courage (and grace) under fire. This experience confirmed that I have all the tools I need to be classical actress, and left me feeling complete, grateful, a bit overwhelmed, but blissful. I will always carry a piece of Isabella, the gentle warrior, with me—

as I continue to grow as an artist, and tenaciously scale the mountain that is a professional acting career.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bible: New King James Version. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Eccles, Mark. *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare Measure for Measure*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1980. Print.

Interview. *Our America: Brides of Christ*. Oprah Winfrey Network. Lisa Ling, 19 June 2012. Television.

Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message-NKJV Parallel Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007. Print.

Shakespeare, William, Ivo Kamps, and Karen Raber. *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004. Print.

Van, Tassel Wesley. *Clues to Acting Shakespeare*. New York: Allworth, 2000. Print.

"Viola Davis, Stephen McKinley Henderson and Kenny Leon." Interview. *Theater Talk Productions and Cuny TV*. Cuny TV's Theatre Talk. N.d. Radio.

APPENDIX A—PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS



Act 1, Scene 4: Isabella in Convent



Act 2, Scene 2: Isabella and Lucio as Angelo looks on



Act 3, Scene 1: Isabella in Claudio's cell



Act 3, Scene 1: Isabella and the Duke (disguised as the Friar)



Act 4, Scene 1: The Duke, Isabella, and Marianna



Act 5, Scene 1: Isabella, Marianna, and the citizens of Vienna petitioning before the Duke



Act 5, Scene 1: Isabella and Pompey

APPENDIX B—BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jazmine Dinkins, affectionately known as Jazz, received her BA in Drama and Dance from Spelman College before pursuing her Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Florida. She was featured in UF productions of *Measure for Measure*, *Chicago* (in which she also served as dance captain); *Swamp Dance Fest*; *A Piece of My Heart*; *The Madwoman of Chaillot*; *Circle*, *Mirror*, *Transformation*; and *Agbedidi*. In February 2012, Jazz served as co-director, choreographer and writer of the *First Annual UF Black History Variety Show*. In the spring of 2013, Jazz will intern at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Johannesburg, South Africa, where she will teach acting and dance.