

PERFORMING THE ROLE OF VERONICA IN THE PLAY
MISS WITHERSPOON BY CHRISTOPHER DURANG

By

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Hyper-vigilant - I have a tendency to worry about things, and think ahead obsessively.

- Christopher Durang

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead

If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.

- Lao Tzu

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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By

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Co chair: Tim Altmeyer
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I created the role of Veronica in the play *Miss Witherspoon* written by Christopher Durang as my project in lieu of thesis, thereby fulfilling this requirement for my MFA in Acting. *Miss Witherspoon*, directed by Kevin Marshall, opened on September 20, 2013.

Miss Witherspoon is an exploration of Veronica's journey from a self-protective wounded woman to one willing to engage in the world and try to make it a better place. My challenge in this thesis role was to embody Veronica's negativity, depression, and abrasive defense mechanisms in an honest way that would not alienate the audience, who must identify with Veronica and her struggle or else the play does not work. This paper will document my research and explorations of character in and out of rehearsals and will include observations of my performance and process from the first day I was cast through the final performance.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I read *Miss Witherspoon*, I was confused and slightly bemused by what I had read. Veronica as a character was certainly a tour de force for an actor, but I was terrified at the thought of playing her; I could not instinctively see who she was, feel her rhythms, or hear her voice. But acting is all about taking a step into the unknown and having the courage to risk failure. There was no better way I could bring together all of the training I had been given at UF than taking on a thesis role that challenged me as an actor and as a person. I lobbied for the role, and ultimately was cast as Veronica. I plunged in and never looked back.

I had several personal goals I wanted to reach through my work on this thesis production. I wanted to explore Veronica using the Lessac, Chekhov, and Laban techniques that I had not used previous to my training here at UF. I also wanted my performance to be real, grounded, and truly lived moment to moment. Finally, I wanted to use the Alexander Technique to allow my character to come through me without having to use my own tension and habits.

A few weeks before rehearsals began, I started to memorize Veronica's enormous amount of lines. I wanted to be free from the script so I could use the time in rehearsals to discover the similarities and differences of the four distinct lives Veronica lives as well as explore relationships with my fellow actors. By the time the production opened, I had created four physically and vocally distinct characters and felt very grounded in the reality of Veronica's situation. My connection and interplay with Amanda Schlachter who played Maryamma, my spiritual guide, was deep and nuanced, and all of the research and work over the previous three months culminated in a run of sold-out houses.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Playwright

Christopher Durang is a playwright who grounds his characters in emotional honesty and realism while setting them loose in a world of exaggeration, outrageous parody, and dramatic satire. One can see these traits evidenced in some of his better-known plays such as *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All* and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. He skewers religion and the myth of family with dry and erudite wit in the context of a world that vaguely resembles our own but is exaggerated to the point of the ridiculous. Durang's early work, written before his time as a student at Yale, was described as absurdist, and although his later work would become more anchored in realism, he never completely lost his absurdist roots. He has used methods of comic exaggeration to explore subjects that affected him in his own life – religion, family, sexuality, and psychology, to name a few.

Durang asks his audiences to laugh at moments that are serious and tragic. He writes about issues and events that everyone can recognize as a reflection of elements of their own lives, then exaggerates them and finds the humor within. As actress Kristine Nielsen described her experience working in many Durang's plays, she elaborated on their shared theory on why his plays not only make the audience laugh, but often make them cry as well. "[Comedy] is the most effective way I've found to truly affect people. To get them to listen, and get them to let you in" (qtd. in Apple 53).

Durang has always written from a personal place, using his own experiences as material for his plays. His spiritual journey began with a difficult home life as a child, a rejection of his Catholic upbringing, and his struggle during college with depression brought about by the

Vietnam War and the realization that he was gay. He hit rock bottom as he watched his mother's painful and slow death from cancer in 1979. For Durang, there was either no God, or, as he wrote for the character of Matt in *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, a God who ". . . punishes in general for no good reason" (Carr). When Durang met his partner, John Augustine, John's sunny disposition attracted him and "opened up positive feelings, possibilities, intuitions." Durang began to suspect that, contrary to his earlier experience of the divine, "there may be a force in the universe that offers guidance." (Carr).

While exploring this new spiritual possibility, Durang was asked to submit a short piece for an evening of theater in New York marking the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Still traumatized by the tragedy, Durang found he could not write about the event directly, so he created a character to discuss it, along with her discomfort with life itself, from the safety of the afterlife. In 2004, the McCarter Theater offered him a commission to write a new play, and this monologue (now Scene 2) became the core idea that gestated into *Miss Witherspoon*. Durang was interested in reincarnation at the time, but realized that he himself would not want to come back to earth because he felt the world was not a safe place. Therefore, he decided to take his female character from the 9/11 monologue and use her as a means to explore his own fears of living in the world, as well as a possible means of coming to terms with those fears.

The Play

The play opens with Veronica on the phone talking to a friend about her depression, when pieces of the disintegrating space station Skylab begin falling on the stage. The audience soon experiences the world as Veronica does, a dangerous place that will hurt you whenever it can. The lights change and Veronica reveals that she killed herself and is now in the "Bardo,"

the in-between place where souls wait to be reincarnated into their next lives. Veronica talks directly to the audience about her experiences and her reasons for not wanting to reincarnate. Maryamma, Veronica's spiritual guide in the Bardo, enters and works to convince Veronica that she must reincarnate to improve her soul and karma. However, Veronica will not budge in her belief that life is scary and painful, and she insists on staying in the Bardo.

The next few scenes occur on Earth after Veronica is forcibly reincarnated into two more lives. Both times, the horror of living again proves too much and she commits suicide via a dog attack and a drug overdose, respectively. She returns to the Bardo where she is reprimanded by Maryamma who points out all the repercussions that will occur from these deaths.

Veronica is very shaken by her experiences. Maryamma tries to show her the other choices she could have made, but Veronica can see only one way out of these earthly lives. She demands to see St. Peter, hoping he will allow her to stay in the Bardo. Maryamma leaves and Veronica speaks to the audience again. She desperately wants to be done with life and left alone, and expresses her frustration at the lessons that she is supposed to be learning.

Veronica is tired and worn out, and in this weakened state, she is reincarnated again; this time as a dog. This life is short, but Veronica returns from it more refreshed and positive, having experienced just simply living in the moment without all of the constant worry. She is then granted a reprieve to rest during which she dreams how her previous incarnations could have been more positive if she had made different choices. When Veronica awakens from her rest with her aura a little bit lighter, she is visited by Jesus in the shape of a black woman and the figure of Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* who exhort her to return to Earth and remind people to follow Jesus' teachings and to evolve faster. Veronica refuses yet again as the Bardo shakes with turbulence caused by nuclear attacks in India and Pakistan. Veronica, terrified about

being reincarnated into an even more hellish world, offers to go back in time to her first reincarnation and to engage in the world from there. The others agree and, at play's end, we find Veronica once again in a well-to-do Connecticut home. Scared but hopeful, she actively tries to make a difference for the first time in her many lives.

Miss Witherspoon has been performed many times since 2004 and, quite characteristically, many of the reviews I was able to find had the same criticism: the play starts off strongly and then meanders off-message. In my readings of the play, I had the same reaction. Once Jesus and Gandalf arrive to convince Veronica to engage in life and make an impact, the play loses focus and the ending feels a bit out of step with what came before. This apparent disjunction in plot and tone would be one of my challenges: I had to find a way to keep Veronica's stakes high and to keep actively pursuing my objective to keep the play knitted together as a whole. Much of my process would be centered around choosing objectives and actions that would allow me to keep the momentum and focus through the end, thereby not allowing a seemingly random rant on the crucifixion or the needlessly convoluted plot complications in the last third of the play to derail the story or my performance.

The Bardo

A majority of *Miss Witherspoon* takes place in the Bardo. Described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, this way station between death and rebirth is an important element of Tibetan Buddhism where death is both a part of human life and its foe. This is where souls are tested to see if they are ready to attain a state beyond death. There are three stages to a soul's time in the Bardo. The first stage is a powerful welcoming light and an opportunity to become one with the absoluteness of the universe, but most souls' karmic burden will not allow them to join the light. In the second stage, the soul takes on an imagined body form mirroring the previous physical

body. Various Buddhas appear to greet the soul and if the soul connects with one of them, the soul can stay in the Bardo and stay on the path to enlightenment. Most souls will experience feelings of distance and shame as they become more aware of their own faults. These souls continue on to the third stage where their good and evil deeds are weighed. Here souls are visited by demons that attack them and eventually chase the soul to rebirth (Hallisey 19).

The Bardo that Durang has created in *Miss Witherspoon* is inclusive of many religions. He equates purgatory with rebirth and sets aside a "general anesthesia heaven" for those who do not believe in heaven or an afterlife, such as Jews and atheists (though these souls are eventually reborn as well). Given the division of the Bardo as described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, it seems that Veronica is most likely in the second or third stage, where she meets bodhisattvas in various forms (Maryamma, Gandalf, Woman in Hat/Jesus). This information gave me invaluable ideas of what Veronica might be experiencing each of her stays in the Bardo; facing her own shortcomings and the growing awareness of her faults raises the stakes for Veronica as she battles with all her might for what she most desires – to feel safe. The idea that she would be chased back into life makes reincarnation all the more terrifying to her.

Style, Themes, and Symbolism

Durang's plays target some common issues, such as the myth of family, social institutions (psychology, pop culture), religion, and sexuality. In most of his works, characters fight through these issues, while having an underlying fear of the world. This secondary theme is overtly explored in *Miss Witherspoon*. Unlike in some of his earlier work, there is no scathing indictment of religion, though there are several moments that challenge Catholic doctrine in Veronica's monologue where she speaks about her issues with the crucifixion and says, "But what about forgiveness *without* killing an animal? Or a person? Or your son?" (Durang 31).

The realities of the world as she perceives it are so terrible that Veronica would rather stay dead than have to live again. Kristine Nielsen, the originator of the role of Veronica, explained that Durang is asking, "How do I *stay in* the world?" (qtd. in Apple 52). Veronica's journey is to answer that question for herself.

While Durang's tone may have changed, his writing style in *Miss Witherspoon* exhibits a growth starting from absurdism and moving through darkly mocking satire, finally becoming to a cross between comic exaggeration (e.g., Skylab falling, Gandalf and Jesus chatting about the end of the world) and grounded realism (the struggle of a woman terrified of life). Through his surrealistic comedies, Durang continues to ask his audience to suspend their disbelief as he "exaggerate[s] awful things further, and then presents it in a way that is funny . . . It is how I ask people to laugh at things I know are serious and tragic" (Siegl).

Durang clearly uses the Bardo symbolically as well as literally, giving Veronica and the other characters a neutral place in which to reflect on what is happening to them on Earth. However, being there does not afford her the opportunity to truly live life and grow from the experience. The only place where such growth can happen is the dark and threatening world down below, and that is where Veronica eventually chooses to go at the end of the play.

Context

While Durang has only recently received his first Tony award, he has been writing for over three decades, and his heartrending comedies have cemented his place in the oeuvre of American playwriting. He has been called "a native American absurdist" (Lambert) and been compared with John Guare as one of "our two looniest geniuses" (Vinberg). Durang, like another iconic contemporary American writer, Edward Albee, uses the family unit as a mirror of not only society, but also his personal history. Robert Brustein, a senior research fellow at Yale,

noted that “the quintessential American drama is and has always been a family drama—a work in which the writer lays his ghosts to rest at last, making peace with his past by exorcising the dead” (qtd in Lambert). Others have compared Durang to Eugene O’Neill, another great playwright of the American family play, but unlike O’Neill, Durang puts his struggling families into the middle of surrealist comedies.

Durang wrote *Miss Witherspoon* with echoes of 9/11 in his head. The original idea was conceived for an evening of theater marking the first anniversary of the tragedy. He turned 56 as he worked on the play, the age of his mother when she died after a long lingering battle with cancer. Durang experienced a great deal of anxiety as he reflected on her death and the present state of the world with its global warming, warfare, ricin-laced envelopes, and mass shootings at schools. With all of these thoughts in his head and his neuroses in high gear, he sat down to write *Miss Witherspoon*. It is a tale for our times about a person trying to find some safety in a harsh and unpredictable world, and discovering in the end that it is up to her to participate in creating that safety. Her willingness to take that chance is one of many tiny ripples that could, in the end, save the world from itself.

THE PROCESS

Concept

In April, 2013, I sat down and spoke to the director, Kevin Marshall, about his thoughts on *Miss Witherspoon* and what he was envisioning for the production. Marshall was hesitant to discuss the concept or over-arching story with me at that time, but he did have some wonderful ideas about the visual aspect. Marshall shared with me his ideas of an all-white set with most of the scenery being provided by projections that would incorporate the entire theater, including the

audience at times. It sounded like a very exciting design and I was happy to have a picture of it in my head as I started to work on the script over the summer. I began to see in my mind's eye how our set might function as the Bardo and how I might live within it.

Continuing my work over the summer, I read and reread the script many times, each time taking notes of moments and ideas that struck me. I still did not understand the core of Veronica's identity, but I was beginning to see the story that *Miss Witherspoon* was telling: Veronica's journey from a self-protective wounded woman to a woman willing to engage with the world, to reach out through her own immense self-protective barriers and actually connect with other people to make a difference. My research into Durang and his prior work showed that this theme of fear of living in the world was a secondary theme in many of his other plays, but in *Miss Witherspoon*, it was front and center.

I asked to meet with Marshall before our rehearsals began in August, but after he read some of my work on the role I had sent him, he decided that I had a clear understanding of the script and the character, so unfortunately we did not get together to discuss the play or compare our conceptual approaches. I also had no opportunity to confirm what I thought was Veronica's *super objective*, defined by Stanislavsky as the main goal that must be accomplished as the overriding goal of the actors. My preparatory work, as I will describe later in this paper, all led me to believe Veronica's super objective is "to find a way to feel safe." This need is what ties the actions of the play together into a cohesive story. All action, all aspects of the performance have to be continuously oriented to accomplish this goal. (Stanislavsky 307), and I wanted to be sure that Marshall concurred with my analysis.

Characterization

I began my work over the summer with research into many productions of Durang's plays. My research suggested that his work seemed to function best when the actors let the exaggerated circumstances provide the humor and kept the characters as grounded in reality as possible. Of course, it was important to remember that *Miss Witherspoon* is a comedy and no matter how dark, it always requires specific timing, pacing, and a very mindful balancing of the dark and the light so that one element does not overpower the other. However, setting aside the style of a Durang comedy, I decided to focus on the grounded reality of Veronica and her psyche in my pre-rehearsal work, and I assumed we would work on the comedic style in rehearsals with our director. It was important that Veronica be a fully flushed out character with real need and emotional reactions and not just a stock comedic form. As discussed later in this paper, I used several techniques to help find the many layers of Veronica.

I continued my summer work with numerous readings of the script, always taking notes on moments and ideas that struck me. I marked all the elements of the play with which I was not solidly familiar and did some basic research. Having only a vague memory of the event, I looked up details about Skylab as well as specific definitions of "aura" and "karma", in addition to my aforementioned research on the Bardo. Since Veronica seems to be suffering from it, I also investigated the symptoms of depression in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*. While there were many symptoms, the few that struck me as very apropos to the script were constant sadness, irritability, and hopelessness (*Alerecares*). Anxiety and helplessness combine to create depression, and I ones this was a useful way to inform my depiction of Veronica's depression without falling into the acting trap of portraying depression with low, tired energy, and with a lack of interest in anything. This issue had concerned me as an actor because passive choices are not as strong as active choices, and can create a character

without a clear objective. In addition, comedy requires pacing and energy as well as timing, and these elements would be almost impossible to create without active choices and objectives to fight for.

After many readings, it was time to leave the research behind and begin the creative process. This is always a challenging moment for me as an actor. The research, logistics, and technical aspects of creating a role have always been safe, solid territory for me. However, the actual creative process has always seemed dangerous to me, where my footing is less sure and beginning is always anxiety-provoking. It is where I must take a risk and begin to discover, make choices, and to penetrate the character to the core. This part of the process has always been where my self-doubt doubles in size, and it is often why I leave this step until later in the rehearsal process. I fear I will not be able to create a full, rich character that I can believe in. For *Miss Witherspoon*, I knew the timetable of the fall semester would make rehearsals tight, and I also knew that Marshall intended to use the Michael Chekhov Technique exclusively in rehearsals. This meant I had to complete any work with other techniques before the rehearsals began. There could be no procrastination this time. I took a deep breath and began.

I began my creative process of analyzing the script by using a technique laid out in the *Practical Handbook for the Actor*, a text I studied here at UF. It asks the actor to analyze each scene by asking three questions: “1. What is the character literally doing? 2. What is the essential action of the actor in this scene? 3. What is that action like to me? It's as if . . .” (Bruder 19). I took each scene in turn and first specifically analyzed what my character is literally doing. For example, in Scene three Veronica is napping, getting rid of Maryamma, finding someone with more authority, etc. I consolidated these smaller actions into one overall literal action, "Veronica struggles to protect herself." Next, I specified what the actual physical

action is of the character. For example, Scene three has Veronica battling with Maryamma over what happens to her next. The essential action would be "protecting myself from an annoying co-worker," since Veronica had a negative history with Maryamma who was (according to Veronica's point of view) not working to her benefit. The last step of this technique requires the actor to ask, "What does this action mean to me?" (Bruder 27). This personalization helps give a fuller understanding of the action which was chosen, as well as raising the stakes and giving the actor an emotional preparation for the beginning of the scene. My example for Scene three was, "It's as if I am fighting against being screwed out of my understudy performances by Rachel" (a fellow actor on the *Mamma Mia* tour). This personal "as if..." created an easy access to feelings of frustration and anger. These three steps of analysis helped me discover some of Veronica's deep seated fears and her choices for self preservation, helping me start to ground her in an honestly constructed reality.

After analyzing all of the scenes, I reviewed them and determined what the overall literal and essential actions were for the play as a whole, in order to identify Veronica's *through-action*, or super objective. This through-action helps the actor keep the entirety of her performance focused and on track. From this analysis, I discovered the through-action for Veronica is a desperate need to find a way to feel safe. I considered the difficulties of the script that I had discovered earlier in my research and decided that this overriding objective would indeed be strong enough to carry Veronica through the less-focused scenes of the play, and would provide my performance with enough energy and momentum to keep the story moving.

I continued my analysis of the play by applying another acting method. This time, I worked my way through the play scene by scene and *beat by beat* (anytime there is a change in action), identifying traditional character objectives as used by Stanislavsky. Objectives are the

goals that the character wants to achieve or the tasks the character wants to complete in the course of the play. This work has always been essential to my creative acting process as it clarifies where the character adjusts her objective or changes her *tactics* (which are the means whereby she tries to achieve her objective). I never hold myself to playing these exact objectives or tactics, but I find the information I discover invaluable in rehearsals when I am stuck in a rut, or unable to react to what I am given by the other actors in a way that moves the play forward. I wanted to flesh out these core ideas, and have them to refer to when I needed them in rehearsal.

In addition to the objective work, I also spent time analyzing possible tactics. I do not like to prescribe specific tactics to be used in specific moments until I have organically explored the options with my fellow cast members, but I decided to write down Veronica's tactics in groupings of scenes in the play. For example, in Scenes 1-6, Veronica uses tactics like defending, striking out, protecting, punishing, and pushing, whereas in Scenes 18 and 19, Veronica uses tactics like reaching, solving, grasping, and pulling. This analysis helped me explore possible tactics for Veronica while in a very concrete way allowing me to discover her growth and mine even further the depth of her reality. In addition, these tactics gave me an active way to experience and share her depression with the audience and begin to map out her journey through the play.

One of the challenges of this role is that textually, her journey is hard to track from the first scene of the play to the last scene. She continues to insist she does not want to return to Earth, so I had to dig deeper to discover where her growth occurs and how I could take that journey with her. By mapping out her tactics in the above manner, I began to see clearly the beginnings of her character arc and how and when these changes would begin occurring in her. I simplified the information I was creating with my analysis and discovered that Veronica spirals

from bad to worse in the first 10 scenes, bottoming out after returning from Ginny's original life. Only after her incarnation as a dog does she find some relief from the anxiety and stress of her lives on Earth. This breathing room begins to allow for a bit of change. Veronica experiences even more growth after her do-over of Ginny's life. The emotional space that is created by her positive life experiences allows her to take the plunge and offer to go back and help fix the world. This offer is, of course, only made under duress and the threat of living in a post-apocalyptic world, but it is still a very large step for Veronica to make.

Finally, as I analyzed the script, I realized I needed to discover to whom Veronica is speaking to in her monologues. Marshall had told me he wanted me to speak directly to the audience, so who could they be and what could I want from them? I played around with several ideas and, in the end, the concept that made the most sense to me was that they were other spirits in the Bardo waiting their turn to return to Earth. In the text, the stage directions only say, "She speaks to the audience" (Durang 9), but in the Author's Notes, Durang talks about Veronica feeling trapped in the Bardo (Durang 75). The choice I made supported Veronica's experience of feeling hemmed in and looking for an escape. Viewing the audience as fellow spirits in the Bardo made them my contemporaries and as such, perhaps people I could convince to support me in my quest *not* to return to Earth. This possibility gave my objective very high stakes anytime I directly addressed the audience.

Vocal Explorations

Up until this point, the preparation work I had been doing was all intellectual analysis. Now it was time to explore the text from a vocal standpoint. I began this investigation by taking apart the three longest monologues and analyzing them using the system described in Arthur Lessac's book, *The Use and Training of the Human Voice*. The markings that Lessac teaches

designate tonal, structural, and consonant NRGs. Lessac defines NRGs as “an acronym that stands for ‘energy’ and refers to pure, harmonic, intrinsic, vitalistic motion as opposed to movement” (Lessac 273). The markings show the possible NRGs that can be played within a sentence. There are many more opportunities than can truly be played at one time, but this technique allows the actor to investigate many possibilities that might never have been discovered otherwise and this, in turn, helps to keep the actor from falling into habitual vocal patterns. I analyzed the first two monologues in *Miss Witherspoon* as well as the "Christianity" monologue (see Appendix B) prior to my memorization work. The work proved invaluable when I began to memorize the play as it gave me a framework in which to explore these lengthy and meandering monologues. It allowed me to avoid falling into vocal patterns before rehearsals began.

I worked on the lines by first exploring the consonant NRGs, followed by the tonal and structural NRGs. As a singer, the tonal and structure NRGs come much more naturally to me, which is why I began my explorations with the consonant NRGs. Each time I would make my way through the monologue, I would focus on different possible playing opportunities. I also would combine body support physicalities such as radiancy, buoyancy, and potency (Lessac 204) with the various vocal NRGs to continue my explorations. Once in rehearsal, I had the freedom to allow my acting impulses to shape the vocal choices of my pre-memorized lines.

I was given a note by the director early on to use more of my lower range. This note had been a common theme in my time at UF and had caused me a great deal of frustration as I have a physical dysfunction in my right vocal cord that causes “vocal fry,” or a raspy, croaking sound in the lowest parts of my vocal range. After two years of not understanding how to use this note, I finally discovered this year what it really meant. The director’s notes were not actually

requesting lower pitches in my range, but were a response to hearing fewer overtones than was desired. The Y-buzz, as taught by Lessac, is a tool used to increase the bone conduction of tone. This bone-conducted tone creates more overtones, or resonant frequencies which in turn make the voice sound richer because of the additional resonance (Lessac 124). My attempts over the last two years to use the very bottom of my vocal pitch range were not in fact what was needed. I had added additional Y-buzz exercises over the summer and these combined with my previous warm ups and work over the last two years has finally led to more overtones in my voice. I feel that my voice is richer now and that I am no longer trapped in the few bottom notes of my range but free to use my entire range, which I did in my performance as Veronica.

To maintain and continue strengthening my voice for the vocal marathon presented by *Miss Witherspoon* rehearsals and performances, I gave myself a 25-minute vocal warm-up before each rehearsal and show. This warm-up started with the aforementioned Y-buzz to wake up the resonators. I continued using words and sounds to activate the tonal and structural NRGs and carried that work into some tongue twisters to warm up the facial muscles. I then ran one of Veronica's monologues at a fast tempo to continue working my facial muscles and getting my mouth around all of the words. At this point, I turned to my background as a singer, and I would sing a few warm-ups, including a song. The reason for including this element was that I was using all of my range for this role, and I found that singing was the best way to warm up the top end of my range while keeping it in a forward healthy placement. After singing, I would Y-buzz again for a few minutes, then move on to my physical warm-up. Taking the time to do this warm-up allowed me to be present and ready to go from the first moment of the play, and minimized any concern I had about my vocal use.

Physical Explorations

The physical demands of *Miss Witherspoon* were slow to reveal themselves to me so I began to research how some of Veronica's "lives" would move by watching videos of babies and dogs and taking note of various physicalities of which I could make use. I wanted to make the physicality of each life Veronica led as distinct as possible. Because both babies were visually created by my body hidden in a bassinet with my head sticking out, the characters were actualized entirely by my head movement and the puppet arms, which I experimented with in the rehearsal process. For Ginny at five years old, I observed my five-year-old nephew in his quieter moments. His hand and head movements were loose but could also be very careful, as if he was afraid he would do whatever it was he was doing wrong. He would be fascinated by the smallest things and lose himself in observing them. I used these elements to create the physical life of a child walking on eggshells in an unhappy home. Thirteen-year-old Ginny was a physical amalgam of middle school students I have worked with in the past. The physical slouch, the purposeful disengagement, the slumping sulking walk and sigh that every parent dreads were perfect to bring this Ginny to life. The Chekhov Technique offers a creative tool for physical transformation called the *Imaginary Body*, in which the actor locates the character's center or lead, i.e. the point from which the character initiates movement (Chekhov 100). As Ginny got older, her center moved steadily downward from her heart to her lower pelvis. This slowly sinking center added to the weight Ginny carried with her as she grew older, and this weight affected everything from making her walk heavy, slow, and sloppy to her hunched and self-protective posture.

Lonnie the dog was the most enjoyable character to research and explore. Lonnie is full of joy, and I wanted to represent that physically since as a dog I did not speak. The elements that I observed and played with were bounding body and leg movement, the head shake that dogs do when they are excited, and the contented stare. Lonnie was a joy to create because he was so full of life and happiness. My enjoyment of finding his physicality allowed me to feel something similar to what Veronica experienced when she was Lonnie – a freedom from stress, sadness, and worry.

Veronica's Bardo physicality was discovered during rehearsals. I did not come with a preconceived idea about how she should move or look, and during the second week of rehearsal I noticed myself slouching during scene work. I did not want Veronica to wear her depression on her sleeve, but the heft of it weighing her down seemed appropriate for the character, and I decided to keep it. As Veronica grows over the course of the play, I worked with letting her feel a little bit lighter and using a more open and accepting physicality, allowing her to hear what the other characters are saying without feeling as threatened. Veronica does not grow in significant ways in this play, but she does manage small steps, and I wanted her physicality to reflect her growth in the same way her choice of tactics did. She does not become a hero at the end of *Miss Witherspoon* – she is still a wounded woman. The difference is that she is finally willing to take a chance.

I continued to explore Veronica from a physical angle by using two different techniques. The first was developed by Rudolph Laban as a reaction to his observation of society's loss of expressive movement and subsequent loss of physical communication. The Laban method breaks down movement into categories of *Weight*, *Time*, *Flow*, and *Space* and then combines the categories into eight basic *Action Drives*, which are: *Float*, *Punch*, *Glide*, *Slash*, *Dab*, *Wring*,

Press, and *Flick*. For example, *Float* is a combination of light *Weight*, sustained *Time*, free *Flow*, and indirect *Space*, whereas *Punch* combines a strong *Weight*, sudden *Time*, bound *Flow* and direct movement in *Space* (Newlove 13, 68). I have found in my work that Laban is a tool that I use to inform the character's physicality and emotional state; for example, when Veronica is seeing the world after the nuclear holocaust in Scene 18, I would imagine a physical *Wring* in my body (in my stomach and heart), and I would allow that *wring* to create a contraction in my body, thereby physicalizing Veronica's overwhelming fear internally and externally. I took the Action Drives Laban described and used each of them, in turn, as I worked through my monologues and scenes. Like the tactic changes I described earlier, I was able to track Veronica's growth through her choices using the physical language of Laban's Action Drives. In the beginning of the play I discovered I could use *Wring*, *Slash*, and *Punch* as internal physical motivators for Veronica's lines and actions. Later, as Veronica is more open to change, I found myself continuing to use *Wring*, but was able to replace the more defensive and violent *Slash* and *Punch* with the lighter and more open *Flick* and *Float*. This physical language works very well with my creative process. I was a dancer many years ago, and my connection to my body is still very strong. In my work at UF, I have found that coming at a role using Laban encourages me to make stronger choices while at the same time keeping me more grounded.

Using what seems like a similar technique to Laban, I continued to explore the physical side of Veronica using Chekhov's Archetypal Gestures. The 10 Archetypal Gestures, used by Chekhov as part of his Psycho-physical acting exercises are: *Push*, *Pull*, *Smash*, *Lift*, *Gather*, *Throw*, *Tear*, *Drag*, *Penetrate*, and *Reach* (Chekhov xxxvi). These gestures are a physical way to explore the impetus behind the lines and actions of a character. In performance, these impulses would be subtle or internal most of the time. I knew that the director would be using

this technique exclusively in rehearsal, but I wanted to do my own exploration before rehearsals began. Using these gestures, I divided them again into three groupings, coinciding with Scenes 1-10, 11-17, and 18-19. I physically used each gesture in my scene work as well as the monologues, and discovered that Veronica would use *Push*, *Throw*, and *Tear*, which would transform into *Drag*, *Pull*, and *Reach* by the end of the play, allowing her to be more receptive and less closed off. I used these impulses vocally and physically to inform how Veronica interacted with the other characters. For example, Veronica would verbally push Maryamma at the beginning of Scene 3, but would reach out to her verbally in Scene 18. This technique, in combination with Laban, was able to help me enrich my character's interactions on stage by giving me a physical experience that would drive Veronica's own physicality in response to her situation.

Alexander Technique

My use of the Alexander Technique (AT) throughout this process was invaluable. One of the directions that the Alexander Technique teaches is: "Allow the neck to be free to let the head go forward and up so that the back may lengthen and widen" (Gelb 69). This is used to help reestablish a healthy *primary control* (the relationship of the head, neck and torso that initiates movement) and allow the actor to release habitual tension and open up the possibility of discovering character physicalities and quirks that are beyond the ones we conventionally use. I have a tendency to allow my character's tension to become my own, and vice versa. Veronica is under a great deal of stress in this play, and during our first stumble-through of the show, I began to feel massive amounts of tension in my neck. Concerned I was getting into a physical habit that could cause me difficulty, I decided to use the Alexander Technique consciously as described in *The Actor and the Alexander Technique*. I gave myself a physical warm-up before

rehearsals, which I continued throughout the run of the play, that included *constructive rest*, which is lying on your back in *active rest* – raising awareness of your body and releasing tension – and the pouring of the body from one position into another, such as letting your knees fall to one side and then the other while again releasing any excess tension. “[*Constructive rest*] releases tension and allows the skeleton and the organs to rest, supported by the ground” (Olsen 13). The conscious awareness of my body in addition to my use of the AT directions above brought me to a physically neutral space. I would then stand and walk about the room, continuing to give myself AT directions, as well as using other techniques such as “tailbone to the ground” and visualizing where my actual hip joints were to help release my hips and legs.

As I worked on the show in rehearsal and in performance, I would *check in* with myself (raise my awareness of my physical state to a conscious level) and release any tension I found. I discovered that during specific moments of the show, e.g., all of the scenes in which I played a baby, and Scene 18 with Gandalf, I would almost always experience more tension. I believe it was the physical position of my body as the baby and the emotional requirements of the scene with Gandalf that caused this habitual tension to interfere with my body. While some performances were less tension-filled than others, I have no doubt that my performances were better because of this application of the Alexander Technique and its effect on my physicality. I was able to bring a sense of ease to my performance that allowed more of the character to show through in the performance and less of the actor to get in the way. Not only did I need to release my own habitual tension, but I needed to find a way to inhabit the physicality of Veronica in all of her states without causing myself pain. As I played inside Veronica's slouched body, I would give myself direction to release within that physical shape, thereby giving myself ease within the

shape of Veronica and allowing me to play within her physicality comfortably for the entire run of the show.

PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE

After four weeks of rehearsal, we began our technical rehearsals. This show, while it can be done with nothing more than a chair and a table, was envisioned by the director and the designers as a much more beautiful and complex world. The use of projections, specialty lights, and scenery flying in and out from the catwalks made for a very complicated and difficult technical rehearsal. Our stage manager had a difficult time keeping the technical aspects moving in a timely manner. At no point during our technical or dress rehearsals were we able to get through the show without stopping. Incorrect cues were called, resulting in the actors speaking in the dark and having to hold through long pauses as furniture was brought out from backstage. Also difficult was the lack of support from the costume department. All of my costume changes were fast changes and half of them happened on stage, but even though I had requested repeatedly that we have a quick change rehearsal where these changes could all be set and choreographed, I was told it was not needed. Finally, during a particularly difficult technical run, I stopped and insisted we set how the changes would happen and where they would happen. My dressers were absolutely wonderful, and once we all knew what was happening, the costume changes went smoothly for the rest of the run. The run-up to opening night was a very frustrating experience for me. I wanted a chance to have at least one clean run to feel secure with juggling all of the technical aspects and staying grounded within the acting choices I had made. Alas, that is live theater, and opening day arrived without allowing me that chance.

Our opening night audience was boisterous and was filled with family and friends, and for the first time, I actually had an audience to talk to during all of those monologues. It certainly made a difference and I began to enjoy the fact that my performance of those monologues would be different each night, depending on the individuals to whom I spoke and the audience reaction. As the performances progressed, I was very pleased that I continued to make discoveries every night and that I was able to be more at ease physically with my acting partners on the stage. My connection to Amanda Schlachter, the actress who played Maryamma, continued to grow and ground itself in the bizarre reality of the Bardo, and every night was just a little bit different. As an actor I have always been able to go with the flow during a show, and that continued with this production as well. For instance, when the lights erroneously came up before I made it onto the stage at the top of the show, I answered a silent phone and made up lines to make it make sense. When the actress playing Mother 2 began playing the comedy a bit more strongly in our scenes, I joined her and reacted in kind. When I skipped a sentence or two or reversed words or just got tongue-tied, I let it go and simply kept on moving ahead while making sure that nothing important had been left out. I found I really enjoyed being in the moment as much as I could be, and seeing where Veronica would go next.

Miss Witherspoon is a dark comedy, and the old theatrical saying, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard" is still true today. The audience was part of our cast every night and their level of involvement influenced the show, especially during my monologues, as I was speaking directly to them. This has always been a complicated part of live theater. We must give each audience the show we rehearsed, but we must also be able to take what the audience gives us and play with it, ride the waves of laughter, or continue with the show we have created even if there is no laughter. My performance was directly influenced by the audience and I tried very hard to

be present with them, though unfortunately I know at times I forged ahead to keep the show moving instead of trying to connect with them.

I do not feel that we the actors ever really functioned as a cohesive cast in this production. There is a style to plays written by Durang, and as a cast we were never really acting in the same play or in the same style because this was never addressed in rehearsals. The actors I worked with were lovely, talented, giving, and supportive, and I would work with any of them again in the future, but we were not given the direction we needed to present the play as a cohesive whole, and I believe our performances and the show overall suffered from this absence.

CONCLUSION

I had several personal goals I wanted to reach with this thesis production. I wanted to explore Veronica from vocal and physical perspectives that I had not used previous to my time here at UF. I also wanted my performance to be real and grounded and truly living in the moment. Finally, I wanted to use what I had learned through the Alexander Technique to allow my character to come through me without having to use my own tension and habits. I did examine my character using vocal and physical techniques I have learned in my time here at UF during my pre-rehearsal prep time. I worked on the text from a Lessac perspective and I used Laban and Chekhov techniques to explore Veronica's physicality. I believe using these techniques helped me discover nuances and helped me create a layered and grounded character. I feel that I did create a believable and realistic character with honest emotions, reactions, and issues, as Durang would have wanted. However, I do not believe that I was able to truly live moment to moment in this play. There are a myriad of reasons for this failure, but finally, I was not able to connect consistently with my fellow actors and the audience to create that exciting

dynamic of intimacy and spontaneity. There were certainly moments that I was able to live moment to moment on stage, but on the whole, I believe I did not reach this goal. However, I was more successful with my use of the Alexander Technique to release my own tension and habits, and this allowed me freedom to create Veronica as a separate individual. All in all, I was very pleased with my growth as an actor and my incorporation of the tools I have been learning. I was able to synthesize many of the techniques I have learned at UF into creating a character as difficult and wild as Veronica. I am proud of the work I did and, while I would like to dig back in and work some of the outstanding issues, I believe I acquitted myself well and am pleased with the result.

APPENDIX A
PRODUCTION PROGRAM

school of theatre + dance
university of florida + college of fine arts

2013 / 2014 SEASON

*Shows and dates are subject to change.
For tickets, call (352) 392-1653 or visit www.ticketmaster.com*

<p>MISS WITHERSPOON A comedy by Christopher Durang Directed by Kevin Marshall Nadine McGuire Black Box Theatre Sept. 20 – Sept. 29</p>	<p>HOBSON'S CHOICE A comedy by Harold Brighouse Directed by Charlie Mitchell Constans Theatre Feb. 8 – Feb. 16</p>
<p>NEVER THE SINNER A drama by John Logan Directed by Ralf Remshardt Nadine McGuire Black Box Theatre Oct. 4 – Oct. 13</p>	<p>DANCE 2014 Repertory dance performance Directed by Tzveta Kassabova Nadine McGuire Black Box Theatre Feb. 20 – Feb. 28</p>
<p>GUYS AND DOLLS A musical comedy with lyrics and music by Frank Loesser, book by Jo Swerling & Abe Burrows Directed by Tony Mata Constans Theatre Oct. 18 – Oct. 27</p>	<p>TRIBES A new play by Nina Raine Directed by David Young Nadine McGuire Black Box Theatre March 14 – March 23</p>
<p>AGBEDIDI 19th Annual African Dance Showcase Directed by Mohamed DaCosta Constans Theatre Nov. 15 – Nov. 17</p>	<p>ANGELS IN AMERICA, PART TWO: PERESTROIKA A gay fantasia on national themes by Tony Kushner Directed by Tim Altmeyer Constans Theatre March 28 – April 6</p>

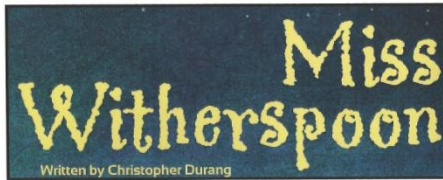
UF
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Miss Witherspoon
Written by Christopher Durang
Directed by Kevin Marshall

SEPTEMBER 20-29, 2013
Nadine McGuire Black Box Theatre

School of THEATRE + DANCE

CBS4 9th 9NEWS GTN THEATRE



Directed by
Kevin Marshall

Lighting & Projection Design
Dan Hopper

Costume Design
Janae Lafleur

Scenic, Properties & Projection Design
Jason Myron Wright

Sound Design
Ben Hawkins

Stage Manager
Colette Rackleff

The use of photography or video is strictly prohibited
Cell phones and text messaging are not permitted
This production is performed without an intermission
Strobe Lights are used during this production

Cast

Miss Witherspoon	Stephanie Lyng ^{^*}
Teacher/Woman in a Hat	Oluchi Nwokocha
Sleazy Man/Father 2/Dog Owner	Michael Pemberton
Maryamma	Amanda Schlachter
Woman in Chicken Suit/ Mother 2	Sunny Smith
Gandalf/Father 1	Thaddeus Walker
Mother 1	Marissa Williams ⁺

[^] Appears courtesy of Actors' Equity Association

^{*} Denotes Project in Lieu of Thesis

⁺ Denotes Senior Project

Time

Recent past, foreseeable future.
(1998, 2005 and beyond)

Place

Earth, and not earth.

Cast Biographies

Stephanie Lyng^{^*} (Miss Witherspoon) is a 3rd-year MFA Acting Candidate performing in her Thesis role; Broadway: *Beauty and the Beast* (Sugarbowl, u/s Mrs. Potts and Wardrobe). National Tours: *Mamma Mia* (Ensemble, u/s Donna, Rosie), *She Loves Me* (Amalia). Off-Bway: *Three Penny Opera* (Polly.), *Das Barbecu* (West End Theater) Regional: *Showtune* (Pasadena Plyhs), *A Little Night Music* (Goodspeed), *Lend Me A Tenor* (Mountain Playhouse), *Tartuffe* (Barter), *Empire* (Hudson-LA). UF: *You Can't Take it With You* (Penelope Sycamore), *A Piece of My Heart* (Maryjo), *Ajax in Iraq* (Mangus). Directing: *Tick Tick Boom* (Constans), *Ancient History* (45th St. Theater). Love to D2 and my family and friends, old and new.

Oluchi Nwokocha (Teacher, Woman in a Hat) is a 2nd-year MFA Acting Candidate. Oluchi was previously seen in *Naomi* in the *Living Room*, *A Handful of Leaves*, and *Ajax in Iraq*. She would like to thank God and K-Marsh for this wonderful opportunity. She hopes she makes Jesus proud.

Michael Pemberton (Sleazy Man/Father 2/Dog Owner) is extremely excited to be a part of this production. He would like to thank his family and friends for all their support.

Amanda Schlachter (Maryamma) is a 2nd-year MFA Acting Candidate. Favorite roles include *Perdita* in *The Winter's Tale* and *Nepal* in the national tour of *The Day I Opened My Eyes*. UF credits include *Tecessa*/Gertrude Bell in *Ajax in Iraq*, *The Mother in Blood Wedding* and *Blanche*/Kate US in *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. www.amandaschlachter.com

Sunny Smith (Woman in Chicken Suit/Mother 2) is a 2nd-year MFA Acting Grad. UF: *Ajax in Iraq*, *Blood Wedding*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*; Regional: *Miss Electricity* (La Jolla Playhouse), *King O' the Moon*, *Wit*, *Dracula*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hansel & Gretel* (North Coast Rep), *Into the Woods*, *Heidi Chronicles* (New Village Arts), *Frozen* (on Theatre), *HMS Pinafore*, *Daughter of the Regiment* (SD Lyric Opera). Thanks, K-Marsh!

Thaddeus Walker (Gandalf/Father 1) is a senior BFA actor, previous credits include: *Hippodrome - King O' the Moon* (Rudy); UF-*Brighton Beach Memoirs* (Stanley), *A Servant to Two Masters* (Porter), *Ajax in Iraq* (Sergeant), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Nick u/s), *She Stoops to Conquer* (Thomas); Florida Players- *Othello* (Montano), *The Children's Hour* (Dr. Joe Cardin)

Marissa Williams⁺ (Mother 1) is thrilled to start off her senior year with *Miss Witherspoon*. She is a BFA Acting student with past roles as *Wendla* in *Spring Awakening*, *Waitress Valeria* in *A Servant to two Masters*, *Abrams* in *Ajax in Iraq* and a continuous member of the *Funny Woman Show*. She would like to thank her friends and family for their continuous love and support, Kevin for giving me such a great opportunity and to my awesome cast members who have inspired me throughout this production.

Production Team Biographies

Ben Hawkins (Sound Designer) is a Senior BFA in lighting design. He has enjoyed working on productions at UF including: *Ajax in Iraq*, and *Dance 2013* (Sound Design), *Chicago* (Assistant Lighting Designer). He also fulfills the role of technical supervisor at P.K. Yonge, supplying lighting and sound support for many productions.

Kristi Hess (Assistant Stage Manager) is a senior studying Event Management and Lighting Design. Her previous stage management credits include *TinyRhino* (NY), *Dance 2012* and *Blood Wedding* (UF). She would like to thank Colette for being a great stage manager and a steadfast friend. 1 Corinthians 10:31, and Go Gators!

Dan Hopper (Lighting/Projections Designer) is a 2nd-year MFA candidate in Lighting Design from central New Hampshire. His design credits include *Pippin*, *The Seagull*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *New England Tap Ensemble's Inspired*, and *Plymouth State University's Contemporary Dance Ensemble* (2010, 2011, 2012).

Janae Lafleur (Costume Designer) is a 2nd-year MFA candidate for Costume Design. She received her BFA in costuming from Jacksonville University in 2008. Recently she did the costume design for *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Blood Wedding* here at The University of Florida.

Kevin Marshall (Director) is a Professor and Director of the University of Florida's Center for Arts and Public Policy and has managed small theatre companies in the south and worked at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. For twelve years he was Director of UF's School of Theatre and Dance and produced Florida's First Coast Arts Festival in St. Augustine. Mr. Marshall taught for sixteen years at the University of Alabama where he developed the highly successful graduate program in Theatre Management/ Arts Administration in conjunction with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Mr. Marshall is the co-author of *Theatre Management: A Successful Guide to Producing Plays on Commercial and Non-Profit Stages*. Professor Marshall received an MFA in Directing from Ohio University and was on the staff of NYC's Manhattan Theatre Club. Recent UF Theatre productions directed by Kevin Marshall include: *A Handful of leaves: Immigrant Stories*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged*. Kevin teaches Acting for the stage and camera and Arts Administration and is a National Michael Chekhov Association certified teacher in the Chekhov Acting Technique. This December, Kevin will participate in the 21st Annual Chekhov Theatre Institute hosted by our School of Theatre and Dance and sponsored in part by the UF Office of Research.

Carly Peloquin (Assistant Scenic Designer/ Properties Master) is a 1st-year Scenic Design BFA. Previously, she has been Props Mistress for The Florida Players production of *The Altruists*. This is her first University of Florida production as Props Mistress. She would like to thank Jason Wright and the production design team for the wonderful experience!

Colette Rackleff (Stage Manager) is a 2nd-year (soon-to-be) BFA Costume Design major. Credits include *Blood Wedding* (ASM, UF), *Rooms: A Rock Romance* (lead understudy, Hippodrome), *Under the Balcony* (Juliet, MFA one-acts), and *Doctor Who* (Female lead, SwampCon). Infinite thanks to God, my fellow disciples, Kristi, Kevin, my family, and amazing cast. Break legs! Revelation 7:12

Zachary Titterington (Assistant Lighting Designer) is currently a Junior BFA student in Theatrical Lighting Design. He has designed for the UF production of *Blood Wedding* (Sound), the UF School of Music's *Dido & Aeneas/The Impresario* (lighting/projections). Over the summer he attended an internship with the Des Moines Metro Opera for their repertory season.

Jason Myron Wright (Scenery/Props/Projections Designer) Scenic Design MFA. UF designs include *A Servant To Two Masters* (2013) and *Hobson's Choice* (2014). He has worked with Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre, Utah Shakespeare Festival, The Hippodrome and Maine State Music Theatre as property apprentice for the East coast regional premier of *Mary Poppins*, *Les Miserables*, *Dreamgirls*, and *Gypsy*.

Special Thanks

Kathy Sarra, Yanci Bukovec and Patricia Potter
with Pats Perfect Fit: Medical Supplies,
The Continuum, Oak Hammock, and Keith Watson Productions



Production Team

Assistant Scenic Designer/Properties
Assistant Stage Manager
Assistant Lighting Designer/Programmer
Master Electrician
Sound Operator
Assistant Sound
Light Operator
Projections
Deck Electrician
Run Crew

Technical Director
Master Carpenter
Scenic Studio Assistants

Costume Studio Manager
Costumer
Craftsperson
Costume Studio Assistants

Wardrobe Head
Dressers

Master Electrician
Light Shop Assistants

Director of Operations
Assistant Production Manager
Poster Designer
Photographers

Carly Peloquin
Kristi Hess
Zack Titterington
Mike O'Brien
Sam Baker
Scarlett Arencibia
Alexandria Portee'
Sharon Lo
Grace Moon
Anjonette Hall, AJ Johnson,
Ingunn Kristjansdottir,
Megan Smith, Carrie Bigley,
Sarrah Price
Zak Herring
Tony Berry
Nichole Bianco, Jaime Frank,
Jason Myron Wright
Kate Glennon
Michelle Benoit
Alyssa Couturier, Lisa Eash
Tracy Floyd, Janae Lafleur,
Kayla Lopez, Becki Stafford
Drew Bryan
Deborah Campbell,
Jesse Fryery,
Samantha Gresham,
Andrea Lopez-Terrasa,
Victoria Sexton,
December Slater
Todd Bedell
Patricia Coleman, Dan Hopper,
Julia Lavault,
Topher Stumreiter
Sarah White
Chris Kozak
Holly Franklin
Robin McCee, Shari Thompson

APPENDIX B LESSAC EXAMPLES

Opening Monologues for MISS WITHERSPOON -

LESSAC WORK

VERONICA: Well, that's just me. Kind of overwhelmed, kinda blue. That's how I am, I'm too old to change. Oh, just things. No, I don't see him anymore. That's long gone. I'm really done with him. I'm kind of done with everything, actually. Look to the future. Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were making a joke. Oh, you weren't. Look to the future. You mean, other men? Hope? I find it hard to get on the hope bandwagon, I always have. I've tried the antidepressants. They don't work. I'm antidepressant-resistant.

Well, no I haven't tried every single one. Listen dear, I know I called you, and you're a dear person, but I think I shouldn't have called. I think I'm not in the mood to talk. I just need to go to the grocery store or something. Don't be offended, alright?

Well, if you're going to be offended, then it just proves I can't get on with anybody, and that's kind of

dépressing tō mé. Pléase stōp tálking abóut Zóloft!
I've got tō hang up. Pléase just undérstand whô I am.
I can't change. I don't want tō change. Bye, déar,
tálk tō you..... sométimé.

Eggs, butter, chéese. Bread, mílk, frózen
vegetables. Peas, carrots, String beans.
AAAAGGGGGGHHH!

Páper tówels, tuna fish, máyonnaise. Aaaaaaa
goodness.

WOMAN: The sky is falling! The Sky is falling!

VERONICA: What?

WOMAN: The sky is falling! The Sky is falling!

VERONICA: What do you méan? AAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHH!
Stōp Fálling!! AAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHHHH!

Well, I'm dead. I committed suicide in the 1990s
because of Skylab. Well, not entirely, but it's as
sensible an explanation as anything.

Most of you don't remember what Skylab was... I seem to have had a disproportionate reaction to it, most people seemed to have sluffed it off.

Skylab was this American space station, it was thousands of tons of heavy metal, and it got put up into orbit over the earth sometime in the 70s.

Eventually the people onboard abandoned it, and it was just floating up there; and you'd think the people who put it up there would have had a plan for how to get it back to earth again, but they didn't. Or the plan failed, or something; and in 1979 they announced that Skylab would eventually be falling from the sky in a little bit - this massive thing the size of a city block might come crashing down on your head as you stood in line at Bloomingdale's or sat by your suburban pool, or as you were crossing the George Washington Bridge, etc etc.

Of course, STATISTICALLY the likelihood of Skylab hitting you on the head - or rather hitting a whole

bunch of you on the head - statistically the odds were small.

But I can't live my life by statistics.

And the experts didn't think it through, I guess. Sure, let's put massive tonnage up in the sky, I'm sure it won't fall down. Sure, let's build nuclear power plants, I'm sure we'll figure out what to do with radioactive waste eventually.

Well, you can start to see I have the kind of personality that might kill myself.

I mean, throw in unhappy relationships and a kind of dark, depressive tinge to my psychology, and something like Skylab just sends me over the edge.

"I CAN'T LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE THERE IS SKYLAB" - I sort of screamed this out in the airport as I was in some endless line waiting to go away to somewhere or other.

So I died sometime in the 90s. Obviously it was a delayed reaction to Skylab.

Só I killed myself. Anger turned inward, they say.
But at least I got to miss 9/11.

If I couldn't stand Skylab, I definitely couldn't
stand the sight of people jumping out of windows. And
then letters with anthrax postmarked from Trenton. And
in some quarters people danced in the streets in
celebration. "Oh, lots of people killed, yippée,
yippée, yippée." God, I hate human beings. I'm glad I
killed myself.

You know, in the afterlife I'm considered to have a
bad attitude.

And apparently I'm slated to be reincarnated and
come do this horrible thing again.

Why can't I just be left alone to fester and brood
in my bodiless spirit state? Who says spirits have to
be clear and light and happy? So what if my aura looks
like some murky brown tweed suit? So what? Leave me
alone, and I'll leave you alone.

Anyway, they tried to force me back onto earth in 2002 or so, and before I knew it my spirit was starting to reincarnate, but I put on some sort of spiritual otherworldly emergency brake system that I seem to have, and the whole process came to a grinding halt, and I simply REFUSED to reincarnate.

"What if I marry Rex Harrison again?" I said to them. Or maybe next time he'll be my mother and I'll get so frustrated that maybe I'll go off the deep end and commit matricide. Or then there will be more Skylabs. And of course terrorism and anthrax and smallpox and monkey pox and a pox on everybody's houses. So, no thank you.

Yes, I was married to Rex Harrison. He had several wives, so you'll have to do research to figure out which one I was.

I really don't want to come back. I just find too much of it all too upsetting.

Só I'm réfúsing tó reincarnate, at least as much as I can. I didn't like being alive, I don't trust it. Plus, you know, if I can keep thwarting these attempts tó reincarnate me, I'm not sure the earth is going tó still be there, só if I stall long enough, my going back may become a moot point. I'm sorry, am I depressing everyone? I'm depressing myself. Well, pay nó attention, I'm just a gloomy dead person, there's nó accounting for my moods. I guess I was bipolar in life, and I still am out here in the afterlife.

Is there anything positive tó leave you with? Well, good luck. I mean it sincerely. I guess life has always been scary - Hitler was scary, I was a child them; and we all expected tó die from Russia and America aiming missiles at one another, and that didn't happen. Só good luck - maybe it'll be all right. I hope it will. I just don't want tó come back, but if I hear it all has worked out a bit better than we expected, well, I'll be glad. Só long.

Christianity Monologue for MISS WITHERSPOON

- LESSAC WORK

VERONICA: Máy I see St. Péter please?

MARYAMMA: I'll see what I can do.

VERONICA: And I don't want him to look like any "modern interpretations" of him, for God's sake. Well, I think I made a point with her. All this repeating of life after life. Christianity taught me one life, one roll of the dice, and it's ^{1/2} heaven, ^{1/2} hell or purgatory, but it's clear and simple. And it's over.

So St. Péter can set this straight, I hope. Because for most of my lives I was a Christian, so I am expecting heaven or purgatory.

I don't want hell, of course, but after all I wasn't Hitler, I may have my quirks, but really purgatory should be the appropriate place for me, I believe. That's just that place where you can't see God for éons and éons 'cause you weren't perfect, and I

dón't know, it máy bé unpleasant, but I dón't think they torture you there or anything. Máybé you only eat bread or water. Máybé it's like prison. But not Spanish Inquisition prison - that would be more like hell - it's just "prison" prison.

Hére I am longing for purgatory. Strange, I actually thought the afterlife would be nothing... you know, like life is a television set with horrible things on it, but then you die and the television set is just unplugged. Nothing going in, nothing going out. I want to be unplugged!

I can't stand the idea that this just goes on forever. Or if not forever, until you learn one hundred and two fucking lessons. Who came up with that idea? The American Federation of Teachers? Oh my God, another life is starting. NO! I'm waiting to see St. Péter, I'm not available for another life right now. I'm on hold. I can't go, I won't go. Good. My force of will is working again. AAAAAAGggggggghhhh! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO! Thank God.

I think I did stop it. Just like those other times. My little brake system. Stubbornness is a wonderful thing.

Now if only my brain will let up. I don't see why Jewish people and Jean Paul Sartre get to be in some general anesthesia state, and I get to remember things and fret and worry, and my brain goes on and on and I just don't like it. It's not fair. Albert Camus, Simone Signoret probably.

How am I to learn "lessons" anyway if they don't tell me what they are, and if I can't really remember the past lives when I'm down there. And what lessons am I supposed to learn? Maryamma! I'm still waiting for St. Peter. Are you bringing him? I really am a Christian. Tell him that!

Though that's not really true. I have a problem with the crucifixion. I didn't used to, I didn't used to think about it.... but the meaning of it has become "odd" to me. I mean, it starts with Adam and Eve,

éating the apple ... which is disobedient, and God goes ballistic - creates death and suffering, and punishes everybody by giving them original sin, which keeps them out of heaven forever.

But after a while God cools down a bit. And now He feels bad no one can get into heaven. So then he goes, "I know I know, I'll send down my only son to be tortured and die." And we are taught that somehow this sacrifice will expiate our sins, "Atonement for."

So when I was seven I believed that.

But when I was twenty-seven, I got to thinking about sacrifice, and how in the Old Testament God seems to require animal sacrifices... "Kill an animal for me, so I know you love me." Which seems a bit odd, why does he find it pleasing that we kill animals for him?

And then he almost moved up to human sacrifice when he told Abraham to kill his son Isaac... but then God relented and said, "No, no - you can just kill an animal for me, I was testing you."

But then later God himself does what he stopped Abraham from doing - he lets his only begotten son die so that our sins can be atoned for.

But what about forgiveness without killing an animal? Or a person? Or your son? I don't understand it, it doesn't make sense.

Imagine if your child did something really, really bad, and you said, "Okay I'm going to forgive you, but we're going to have to kill your sister first."

I mean, do you understand psychologically what my problem is with the crucifixion?

I bet this isn't a popular thought I'm expressing, but that's how it strikes me now. And why I can't really call myself a Christian. Oh, except I'm waiting for St. Peter. No, I do believe in the crucifixion. I believe it all! Maryamma! I'm still waiting for St. Peter! I'm a Christian!

Oh God, I bet St. Peter won't talk to me. I'm stuck in this netherworld with this lady in a sari. Who's Sari now? Pretty good joke, huh?

I'm feeling tired. I'm afraid they're gonna send me back, like some soldier sent back to the front over and over and over. Some of them kill themselves rather than stay there... that's what I did. But it doesn't stop it. Oh God, suicide isn't an out anymore, it's just a doorway to another awful life!

Oh, that last life. Poor little Ginny, there wasn't any hope for her. And even though she was fat, I could tell she was going to live till ninety or something, suffering through an endless succession of tedious days and tedious nights... that's a phrase from Uncle Vanya, or rather a translation of it, the real play's in Russian, I don't know the Russian, I saw Rex in Uncle Vanya, he was very good. Oh God, I'm getting sleepy ... my force of will is feeling weak... uh-oh... Maryamma! St. Peter!... Not now, I'm busy, come back later. Go Away. Maryamma! ... St. Peter!

APPENDIX C
PRODUCTION PHOTOS



Veronica in the Bardo. Scn 18



Veronica as Lonnie the dog . . . on Earth. Scn 11



Ginny buys drugs from the Sleazy Man . . . on Earth. Scn 9



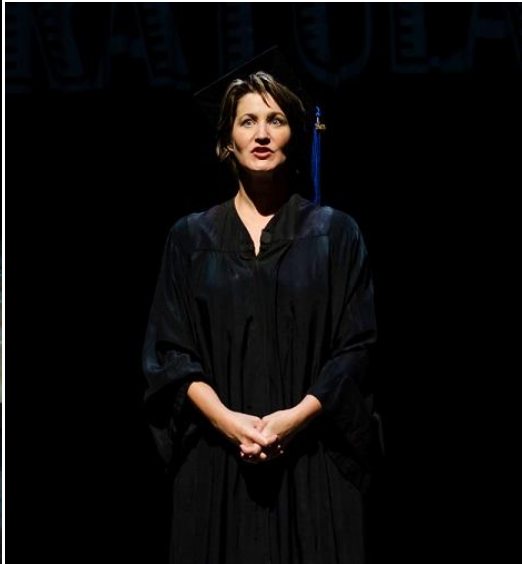
Veronica attempts to ignore Maryamma, again . . . in the Bardo. Scn 3



Veronica refuses to be reincarnated . . . in the Bardo. Scn 10



Mom 2 and Ginny in the principal's office . . . on Earth. Scn



Ginny at Graduation (on the second try) . . . on Earth? Scn 17



Veronica's first reincarnation as a baby with Mom 1 . . . on Earth.

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Biographical Sketch

Stephanie Lynge earned her BA in Musical Theater from Indiana University in 1992. After spending the next 2 years working in theaters in Tennessee, Virginia and Montana, as well as doing a performing stint on a cruise ship, Stephanie moved to New York City where she promptly fulfilled every actor cliché by working dead end day jobs and barely scraping enough money together to eat. Fortunately, this state of affairs did not last long, and she booked the lead role of Amalia on the National Tour of *She Loves Me*. Returning to NYC after the tour closed, Stephanie was quickly cast in *Most Happy Fella* at Rep Theater of St. Louis and became a proud member of Actors' Equity Association. Stephanie then spent the next 6 years working all over the country in many regional houses including Sacramento Music Circus (*Secret Garden*), Goodspeed Opera House (*Houdini*, *Little Night Music*), Mill Mountain Theater (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), Mountain Playhouse (*Lend Me a Tenor*), Barter Theater (*Tartuffe*), and Playmaker's Rep (*An O. Henry Christmas*). She performed locally in NYC in *BAM Salutes Sondheim* (BAM), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Theater 10-10), *Das Barbecu* (West Side Theater), and *Annie Get your Gun - The Concert* at Lincoln Center. After a brief stint in LA (*Empire* at Hudson Theater and *Showtune* at Pasadena Playhouse and on the original cast recording), Stephanie once again returned to NYC, where she was cast in *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway (Lunt-Fontanne Theatre) in the ensemble and understudying Mrs. Potts and the Wardrobe. She was thrilled to perform these roles for thousands of audience members over two years. After she left *Beauty* to originate the role of Susan in a new musical, *Snapshots* at Seaside Music Theater, Stephanie hit the road to tour again with the Broadway National Tour of *Mamma Mia*. As a member of the ensemble and with more than 50 performances of the roles of Donna

and Rosie under her belt, she waved a fond farewell to the touring life, and returned to her Alma Mater, Indiana University, as a visiting professor to teach in their Musical Theater program.

Returning once again to NYC, Stephanie found herself teaching at New Jersey City University in their Musical Theater Department and working behind the table as a casting director (Oceanside Summer Theater), producer (Goodfoot Productions), and director (*Bloodties* at NYMF and *Ancient History* at 45th St. Theater). Realizing that she found artistic fulfillment in more roles than just as an actor, she began her pursuit of an MFA to allow her to teach and direct as well as perform.

During her time here at UF, Stephanie has been thrilled to delve back into the techniques and methods of acting. Her roles at UF include Penny in *You Can't Take it With You* and Maryjo in *Piece of my Heart*, both directed by Charlie Mitchell; Connie Mangus in *Ajax in Iraq* directed by David Young; Mother-in Law in *Blood Wedding* directed by Russ Schultz; and Veronica in *Miss Witherspoon* directed by Kevin Marshall. She has been honored to teach many courses at UF including Oral Interpretation of Literature (ORI), Acting for Non-Majors, and Acting I. She has continued teaching voice lessons through her private studio, and was grateful for the opportunity to direct *Tick Tick Boom* on the Constans stage at UF as well as stage the chorus for the opera, *Dido*, and choreograph *Avenue Q* for the Hippodrome Theater.