

The Write Way to Act

by

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## ABSTRACT

*The Write Way to Act* addresses the pedagogy of utilizing composition, sociolinguistics and second language acquisition in developing a character for the stage. The assertion is that aspects of the English discipline can be applied by the method actor through the composition of a Character's Diary, which takes into consideration important theories of sociolinguistics and second language acquisition, to develop a deeper and more meaningful connection to any character an actor may embody. Furthermore, this connection can be re-acquired almost immediately either before a performance or while onstage because the Character's Diary reveals memories of the character that the actor can relate to and draw upon for emotional recall. This thesis not only addresses the theoretical aspects of such pedagogy but also offers a blueprint of application through my own personal ethnographic study in which I successfully applied this theory to my own character when taking on the role of Mama in, *I Remember Mama*.

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## INTRODUCTION

I have never been satisfied that studying one discipline would give me absolutely everything I needed to know about that field in order to succeed. Even when I had my sights set on law enforcement I majored in theatre, because I thought the skill set of the theatre discipline would set me apart from other candidates who took the criminal justice route. I was right. Immediately upon graduation from the academy my skills in acting landed me an undercover job that propelled my career faster than if I had to work my way up from the bottom with the rest of the rookies. I moved quickly through the ranks, making Detective Sergeant quite early in my career. But such a meteoric rise led to high burn out faster than the average cop, and, with only fifteen years of service under my belt, I retired due to injuries received in the line of duty. I was given a full disability pension, but at the age of 35 I wanted, no needed, to redefine myself because a lifetime of ‘disability retirement’ was not something with which I identified.

I returned to theatre, which was my first love, and continued acting as well as teaching. Although I don’t aspire to be a world famous actor, I have a passion for theatre that extends beyond the brief moments I find myself on stage. I love exploring the discipline for absolutely as much as it can offer within the art form and then passing what I have learned on to students who share that same fire. I have acted in commercials, in more lead roles than I can count, and in a scene with Keene Holliday in the independent film *The Human War*. Nevertheless, I knew there was something more out there I could learn that would drive me deeper into character development. It wasn’t enough to represent the character onstage in a believable way; I wanted to *become* the character onstage. I wanted people who knew me to recognize nothing of me and see only my

character live, breathe, move and speak. I wanted more than a technically sound performance that hit all the right beats and made all the right choices; I wanted my character to be dimensional, layered, complicated and believable as they themselves lived, not as I the actor portrayed them; and I wanted to be able to tap into that believability on demand, in a moment, without having to set aside an hour ‘to get into character’. I began searching for something beyond the psychology of method acting that could connect me to a character almost effortlessly, within the short amount of time that is offered an actor in rehearsal. Method acting works, but unless you are afforded the luxury of taking weeks and months of “living the character in real life”, it’s hard to attain and maintain that connection when you are jumping from role to role every 8 – 10 weeks, or holding down a job and family as you struggle to break into the industry. I wanted to offer my students a deep connection to their characters that could be established in a short amount of time and be reconnected quickly, within the short moments between leaving real life and stepping onto the stage in rehearsal or performance. It was in one of these searching moments, when I remembered how I would take the time to write about my characters by exploring aspects of their lives that were not included in the script, that I realized I was attempting to make a tangible connection through composition. It was this realization that led me to pursue studies in English to see if I could deepen my understanding of the link between composition and character development. I was not disappointed. Donald Murray laid out the foundation of writing in a way I could directly relate to character development and the theories of sociolinguistics and second language acquisition added additional layers to be considered by the actor within the act of composition! I didn’t know it at the time but the idea of The Character’s Diary was

slowly coming together over the years of my English studies even though I didn't fully realize the concept until I put it into action.

For most people I would assume the leap from Theatre to English makes sense if you are coming at the process from the discipline of script writing or deconstruction. I use the word "deconstruction" to describe the process actors and directors use to break down a script into its smallest denominators. The play is already broken down into acts and scenes by the playwright, but in order to flush out subtext and the nuances of meaning during production, we will break the scenes into smaller scenes and those smaller scenes into sections of dialogue. We look at everything from the big picture all the way down to specific words, what we think the characters are trying to say, what they really feel, and how they would express it. This includes removing punctuation. Punctuation is in a script to make it easily read and understood; however, it is a stumbling block to the inexperienced actor who stops every sentence at every period and pauses at every comma. Punctuation needs to be removed so the actor is free to run sentences together, pause in the middle of a thought or interrupt themselves, which is what we naturally do as humans not following script or a line of text. This act of taking the steps to break the script into its smallest common denominator, taking care to reevaluate at every step, then removing punctuation is what I mean by "deconstruction".

The literature aspect of English as far as period pieces and dialogue are concerned are all common connections one would make between the two disciplines also. But I was focusing my attack on character development specifically and the process the actor must undertake to embody that character in as complete a way as possible so that in production she presents a fully developed, human, relatable, interesting, dimensional and believable

character every single time she takes the stage. She *becomes* the character. Yes, yes, I hear you, that is what method acting is all about and I would agree with you. But it's not easy to just shed your everyday life and become someone else in a believable way unless you are connected to that character in some way. Yes, you can give a good, even great performance by relying on all the techniques and inserting the proper psychological motivations at the right times but the performance, although correct, lacks something. That human element, that spark, that energy, whatever you want to call it, that makes the audience sit up straighter in their seats and say to themselves, "My goodness, this person is *real*". I want that response and the only time one gets it, is when the two souls, that of the character and that of the performer, become one. It is a very difficult result to achieve because it places the performer in a very vulnerable position. Baring it all onstage, *one's* soul, whether the character is nice, mean, dark, dangerous, or a sociopath, would be what was exposed. Because at the heart of all of us is the capacity to be or act like anyone. *Anyone*. It's just a matter of tapping into what would take you there. That is an amazing chasm to cross in four to six weeks of rehearsal time, but I touched on a way there long ago, which I believe contributes to my success of not only being cast in lead roles, but asked and begged to take on lead roles by my peers in the community. As I alluded to earlier, I have always found and connected to my character through composition.

It was in the realization that writing had allowed me to grab a metaphorical Tarzan rope to swing across that chasm between me and my character that I decided I needed to pursue further studies within the English discipline. I wanted to experience everything English had to offer me in the way of character development beyond writing, and I wanted to do so in order to map out the process so that it could be offered to



aspiring actors. I wanted to give actors the ability to create their own shortcuts and Tarzan ropes between themselves and the characters they are playing. I wanted to present a process that combined certain aspects of English with method acting techniques so that actors had a tangible process they could undertake to *become* the character, to intertwine the actor's soul with the character's soul in such a way that the actor *can* actually *live* the character every moment they are on stage. Actors are asked to hurdle their personal psychological walls and overcome their personal vulnerabilities by stepping aside and offering their bodies to a character so the character may live, breathe, speak and act without interference of the actor. The actor is asked to bare their soul, to expose *everything* and it's not easy. As actors we know we need to make it to that point of vulnerability but we are not always sure how to get there, or even where to begin. I think that process begins with writing. My studies in the English discipline have solidified my theory that character development can be created through writing. I also found connections to character development in the study of sociolinguistics and second language acquisition. As I was formulating the actual process of *The Character's Diary* I was fortunate enough to have been cast – I didn't audition, the director begged me – in a demanding lead role at absolutely the worst time possible, just before the semester in which I was set to graduate with an unfinished Thesis looming before me; or perhaps it was the best time because I was forced to make these connections and hurdles with very little rehearsal time (four weeks to opening with only 18 days of scheduled rehearsal time in theater) and a very full schedule on top of that. This was the moment of truth. I agreed to play the part of Mama in *I Remember Mama*. A character who was not only a lead, but an immigrant from Norway who moved to San Francisco, who required an

accent based on her learning English from her family and children at the turn of the century in 1901. This thesis will document that journey, my journey, of how I used writing, sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition to hurdle the barriers of time and the psychological walls to not only develop the character of Mama as fully as possible, but to allow her to *live* completely onstage. In the process of recounting how I did this, I hope to exit on the other side with an acting pedagogy that can, at the very least, place yet another tool at the method actor's disposal in the process of character development. For the ease of the reader, I have separated each chapter into three subsections which include Process/Theory, the example of how I used that process in developing the character of Mama and Teaching Implications/Pedagogy.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CHARACTER'S DIARY *The Original Process*

Since this paper is more about what the English discipline offers the method actor, it is assumed that the actor reading this already has a solid understanding of and foundation in method acting. Konstantin Stanislavsky, the Russian Director responsible for discovering and developing the Method tells us, “you must live the character every moment you are playing it” (Strasberg, 1987). If you are an actor, or studying acting, you already know that moving from *playing* the character onstage to *living* the character is easier said than done. This writing technique of the Character’s Diary is something I started to do years ago when I was an acting student and continue to do because it helps me to psychologically tear down any walls that prevent me from *living* a character, particularly a character that I don’t personally identify with, or find it difficult to sympathize with or understand. It is especially hard if the character does or says things that go against my personal value system or moral compass, and this technique helps me to *get out of the way*, so to speak, and allow the character to live in exactly the way she was meant to, without my personal interference.

As actors preparing for a role, we understand the subtext is more important than the text. We are constantly considering a character’s back story: where the character came from prior to when the author introduces him/her to us in the script. We need to discover *the through line of a role*, what the character wants beyond, or in spite of, what the character is actually saying. As actors, we consider the “through line” and then utilize the information found in the “through line” during rehearsal to create a more dynamic character. I found that when I discovered something significant in the subtext or

in the “through line” it was helpful to write those ideas down as they came to me. Then going beyond the “through line”, I began to invent my character’s back story, details that were never given in the script. I would compose lengthy narratives to tell this back story and create a fully formed character. Since “acting...is the ability to react to imaginary stimuli” (Strasberg, 1987), I would enter, through my imagination, this character’s world and walk in this character’s shoes. I began to think *as* the character and form opinions *as* the character rather than *for* the character. I would begin to journal all these new ideas, feelings and opinions and the act of writing them down made the character more real, more tangible, more attainable to me. When I was onstage rehearsing, I had so much more than just the script to draw from. The narrative of the backstory, that emerged from within the journaling allowed me to create a fully developed, living, breathing *person* that had a life outside of mine and outside of the frame set forth by the author while staying true to the author’s given circumstances and spirit of character. The character didn’t change from what the author intended; it *emerged*.

The more I utilized this process the better I became as an actor which was proven by the number of lead roles that continued to come my way. Towards the end of my undergraduate studies when I failed to audition for a particular play, the director called me and asked me why I didn’t audition on the first night and implored me to be there for the second night of auditions as he specifically chose the play with me in mind for the lead role. Because I enjoyed such success, utilizing writing for the purpose of character development has been my operational theory since I was a young theatre undergrad in my twenties up until I began to study English as a discipline. Since my recent stint as an

English grad student, I have honed this process even further as is evidenced by my recent experience in playing Mama.

## **THE CHARACTER'S DIARY** *Preparing for Mama*

My recent studies as an English graduate student have led me to streamline my original writing process as an actor even more. Skipping the narrative composition of a backstory and bypassing the concept of journaling as both myself (commenting on process, or backstory) and as the character (speaking her mind), I began the process already *as* the character with The Character's Diary. Within the diary, the backstory and observations and feelings of the character are obtained without the added mental burden of spelling, grammatical structure and the like, that one considers when writing formal essays or papers. When there is any focus, no matter how little, on the process itself, it begins to move the actor away from the character instead of towards it. I learned, in the English Department, that it was okay to take away the idea of *structure* in composition or journaling and just let the character speak freely, because it was the content that was more important, not the structure it was dressed in. In my earlier writings I was focused on narration through journaling. I made the mistake of trying to understand my character by *observing* what I thought I knew about them and attempting to *create* their backstory. I realized during Mama that focusing on the character in the third person was an unnecessary distraction and a time consuming step, so I changed the focus to the character and *let Mama tell me her story*. Mama was not a writer, she was not concerned with storyline and structure, she just had things to say; so I let her say them. By removing my *self* from the process I removed the unconscious burden of applying rules of writing such as correct grammar, punctuation, structure and the like. I had never

allowed my narratives to be created ‘incorrectly’; perhaps it was a personal obsession; perhaps it was years of elementary teachers pushing for perfection; perhaps it was a little of both. In any case my past narratives followed the rules and I never gave myself the permission to break them. When I finally broke the rules the words came and wouldn’t stop. Mama didn’t have to live by the rules, Mama didn’t speak English as a first language and didn’t even know the rules! Studying English and the work of scholars like Donald Murray and Peter Elbow taught me that it was more than okay to break the rules; it was absolutely necessary at times! They were right. Composition and journaling was still occurring while I worked on Mama’s Diary, but since *the focus was on the character’s thoughts and voice*, suddenly the writing became fluid and effortless. Connecting to the character on the page was private and personal, which created a safe environment to say or be or act in any way I wanted or felt without the fear of repercussions or recriminations from a director or cast mate. I had a safe environment to be Mama and explore any part of her I wanted which instantly created a connection to her rather than an interpretation of her. Since the maturity of an actor has a direct effect on their character development as well, every actor will discover different dimensions and different levels of depth during this process, but in the end every actor will discover *something*. The very experience of discovering allows all of us to grow no matter what level of maturity we are starting from.

As I already stated, I didn’t come to a conscious decision to eliminate the structure of narrative composition and journaling out of some sudden enlightenment; it was the time constraint of preparing for this role with only 18 scheduled rehearsal days and too many irons in the fire that lead to the happy circumstance of writing the

Character's Diary from the character's perspective. For the first time, I stopped looking for character development down whatever road it took to get there and I began to think about how to connect with this character in the shortest amount of time possible and still end up with a fully developed and connected character. The Character's Diary was the culmination of those efforts as well as my "Eureka" moment!

Prior to my preparing for the role of Mama my writing in developing character went everywhere and anywhere. I wrote from a narrator's voice, my own voice, and eventually the character's voice. I needed a quicker way to get to the character's voice without sacrificing the ideas I generated in the other processes. While pondering this dilemma it came to me that I could write the character's backstory from the character's perspective from the beginning. It was such a simple idea. I was always so concerned with *finding* the character's voice that it never occurred to me I could *begin* with the character's voice. Because of the time constraint, I set aside my fear of finding the wrong voice and trusted that no matter where I began the character's true voice would emerge. I was right. It didn't matter if Mama didn't sound quite like Mama in the beginning as she did in the end, because as with all people, and all characters, she quietly emerged and made her voice known.

The Character's Diary is just that. A diary written by the Character, with all the safety and privacy that the term diary implies. No one need see this diary save the character writing it. That being said, for the purposes of education and relevance, I have broken my own rule and included my Character's Diary of Mama as an addendum to this thesis. It is provided as an example of what one Character's Diary could look like, but by no means should every Character's Diary copy or even resemble it. Some diaries may be

typed, others handwritten, some may even include sketches or drawings. Some may seem more grammatically correct than others, and the content will vary far and wide as each character played is as different as each actor playing them. For example, in looking at Mama's Diary you will see that I decided that since a backstory was necessary, *Mama* would begin with entries that occurred prior to the start of the play as it is written. I could have placed the date at the top of each page which included the years at the turn of the century and worked all the way up to the present (which was around 1910 for Mama), but then realized it wasn't necessary. As I wrote, I wrote with the idea that Mama was writing and I wrote as her. It felt a little awkward at first (I mean, I had barely met this woman), but suddenly and without warning she emerged. I put no constraints on myself. I didn't write in chronological order. I had no concern for spelling, grammar or structure, I just let Mama speak. As her story poured out on the pages I discovered that Mama had her ups and downs as well as her fear and strengths. She was very opinionated about others in her family and pulled no punches as to what she thought of each of them since this was her Diary with no chance of anyone else ever reading it, ever. As I allowed Mama to pour out her heart in the Diary, I took care to ensure she stayed within the confines of the given circumstances of the script. As long as the given circumstances were not violated, everything Mama had to say was acceptable. The Diary existed alongside the script. The script provided the given circumstances; the Diary provided the soul of Mama.

Through this Diary I began to feel a connection with this character well before we had the first Act blocked. I found my lines easier to memorize, and the accent already on my lips without having to think about it because as I wrote I began to hear her voice in



my head and became connected with how she sounded. It served as mental practice that prepared me for the execution of the accent in a natural way. When I was interacting with other characters onstage I had quite a variety of choices of emotional reactions because I had such specific feelings about each character and what I felt like around them since I had explored these relationships in my diary. The wonderful feeling came when, in rehearsal, I stopped making conscious decisions and just let Mama speak, react and feel in whatever way became natural. It was like paddling a boat down a river and suddenly hitting the rapids where all I had to do was occasionally place an oar to steer the vessel because it was being driven by the current. Once I started letting Mama speak for herself, each night she had a slightly different interpretation on this scene or that one, depending on how she was feeling in the moment, but it was never wrong because it was Mama doing the talking. The Character's Diary had gotten me closer to this character faster than any technique or piece of writing had ever done in the past. Making the connections to Mama in a safe and private place prior to exposing her on stage gave me the courage I needed to let her live in full view of others. I did not question Mama's choices because I knew they came from the solid foundation of her past experiences. I did not fear the director's questioning of any of my choices, because I knew from Mama's diary, where that choice came from. In the end, the director never questioned any of Mama's choices or declared them incorrect. I credit this to Mama and what she wrote in her diary.

Even though the time constraint was cause for panic, I never set out to mimic or copy another actor's previous rendition of Mama; I allowed her to take shape within me in her own way. The process of journaling past and present events as the character

allowed me to process how she thought, reasoned and felt about things in a way I could understand even if I didn't agree with her at the onset. Our souls began to merge out of this mutual understanding and acceptance, and it became easier and easier to allow her to live at the forefront of my conscious being every time I stepped on stage. My voice, mannerisms, the way I moved, or even just sat all changed as Mama rose to consciousness. I was honored when friends and family who came to see the show would congratulate me and consistently marvel at how they couldn't recognize me on stage at all. They would say things like "I know it was you, but it *wasn't* you! How did you *do* that?"

### **THE CHARACTER'S DIARY** ***Teaching Implications/Pedagogy***

The first step in using the character's diary is recognizing and accepting the fact that writing is in fact an integral part of learning. If a student does not believe that writing can lead to learning as well as *experiencing*, then the exercise becomes futile because once the actor ceases to believe in the process he will find no value in it. Because grammar and structure play such a huge role in writing education at the elementary and high school level, I find that the students I have at the college level balk at the mention of any writing assignment. They are burned out and so over concerned with the "correct" way to write in order to get an A that they completely overlook the content. When I entered the English department as a graduate student, I had found myself having the same concerns. What I quickly realized however, was the English professors were less concerned about *how* you wrote and wanted to focus on *what* you wrote. Of course they wanted academically sound papers but were quick to remind students that the computer was there to correct basic grammar and spelling; what was important was the content. Was the content worth writing about? Did it generate ideas?

Question ideas? Generate better ideas? It was within the writing itself that learning was taking place. I began to sense some validation that the writing I was doing to develop my characters not only had value for me but there was the idea that other actors might find it useful. My biggest fear was that if I presented a student actor with even more writing then was already required they would instantly shut down and tune out anything I had to say about acting because they saw no value in writing to learn to be a better actor. I knew The Character's Diary needed to address the most valuable aspect of acting, character development, in a way that the acting student could directly relate to and access, but even if it did that could I get acting students to accept it?

I stumbled across a study in my first year of graduate school that gave me hope. In his research, Zinsser found that most students did in fact recognize writing as an integral part of their learning and that:

*[P]apers that would be read aloud in class [got students] to write for their peers and not the teacher; [the students] learned by the presence or the absence of response to what they had written. The good paper raised all the right questions – on those days the paper would teach the class. The poor paper was instantly noticeable. There wouldn't be much to discuss – there'd be no place to start, or it was so unclear that we'd have to go back and try to figure out what it was about. A piece of writing is a piece of thinking (Zinsser, 1986).*

After reading Zinsser's finding it was clear that from the onset the student actor must be made aware that the Character's Diary would be a personal piece of writing, not one that is subject to correction or grading. It doesn't matter if the sentences are fragmented, the spelling horrendous, or a complete lack, or over usage, of punctuation is prevalent. What matters is the content, which would be the *voice* of the character. If the character is barely literate, that may be evident in the way that character writes their diary and that's okay, as long as there is substance behind that writing. The character must have

opinions, ideas, feelings and experiences beyond what the script has given them. Just as the students recognized the response of their peers when the paper was read aloud in class, the actor would recognize the response of their director, their castmates, and eventually their audience when they performed onstage. I had to show the actor that even though they didn't receive the immediate reward for the writing they would do in secret, there would be an eventual and better reward when they performed onstage and the audience would respond to their fully developed and dynamic characterizations. So what would this look like in a classroom?

Most theatre programs require that a creative writing course be taken in addition to the requirements of essay and research writing. This creative writing course is typically offered through the English Department and does a great job of giving theatre students the tools needed to develop their writing in this vein. In my experience, the English Department does a great job in this regard and I agree this course should continue to be a necessary element of the studies of any theatre student. What I have yet to witness, however, is creative writing that is produced within the core elements of the theatre program, specifically for the purpose of character development. In my opinion, it's not enough that the actor learn the basics of creative writing; they should then be required to utilize that talent within their discipline as a means to aid their learning and stretch their abilities as a performer.

As I began to realize the benefits of The Character's Diary as a theatrical learning tool I began to wonder if indeed a creative writing pedagogy already specifically existed that was structurally created for the theatre student that utilized this dynamic. As an overachieving theatre student had I merely stumbled upon a writing process that was

already in existence somewhere else? I was hard pressed to find a lesson plan that was tailored specifically for the theatre student that was already published; however what I did find was quite surprising and very interesting.

Molly Ringwald was a popular actor from the 1980's who eventually turned to writing. She received starring "roles in John Hughes' teen films (*Pretty in Pink*, *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, etc)" (Biography for Molly Ringwald, 1990-2012). She published the article *Act Like a Writer* which discusses the "natural curiosity that many people have when they hear about an actor writing fiction" (Ringwald, 2012). Although Ringwald was talking about an actor becoming a writer rather than writing as a means for actors to better learn their craft, she takes a moment to discuss how her love for writing emerged and what she revealed was a process that was so closely linked to mine that it gives me reason to believe that "writing what's not written" within an acting student's academic career is more than a theorized pedagogy; it's an overlooked necessity:

*The appeal of diving into a character has always been the back story: everything that my character has been through up to the point when the audience first encounters her. I have eagerly invented intricate histories that I shared with no one – except during an occasional late night boozy discussion with other like-minded and obsessive actors (Ringwald, 2012).*

The fact that Ringwald employed almost the exact same writing process to develop her characters excited me, her agreement that the importance of "writing what's not written" is an integral part to developing a character validates my point: that it must also be an integral part of a writing pedagogy developed to serve theatre students.

"This then is what we must give our students: insulation from the external world, time to be with themselves, instruction in reflection. We need classes of daydreamers with all the desks turned, so they can stare out the window instead of at the board"

(Murray, 1999). Although Donald Murray probably wasn't envisioning a theatre classroom when he penned that statement, he completely describes what I envision when I consider creative writing from a pedagogical standpoint in a theatre classroom.

In order for a theatre student to learn from the kind of writing I have described above they first need to be assigned the writing in an environment that will best develop their skills as an actor through the writing. The writing needs to become "an exercise in thinking...[whereby the writing is] the [best] route to understanding" (Zinsser, 1986) how to properly develop a character for the stage. The optimal environment for this process actually closely resembles Murray's "classes of daydreamers" and that is the rehearsal process. The writing is for the student's benefit, not the teacher's, so it should be taught as a tool in the classroom that the student can either utilize or ignore when they are developing a character. The Character's Diary could be completed by the student throughout the rehearsal process as a way to connect with their character on a deeper and more meaningful level, so the character may have the chance to *live* on stage as opposed to being *played* or *interpreted* onstage. But the student would have to know what The Character's Diary is and how to create one prior to being cast in a play, so that leaves the classroom. Exposure and teaching of The Character's Diary needs to be taught in the classroom first so that the student actor has the full range of possibilities immediately at their disposal when The Diary is used in the rehearsal process.

### **HOW TO WRITE THE CHARRACTER'S DIARY**

The "ten elements that made writing go [so] well for [Murray]" (Murray, 1999) are the same ten elements an actor needs to consider from the perspective of the Character's Diary: "Solitude, Experience, Faith, Need, Tension, Pattern, Voice, Ease,

Productivity and Readers” (Murray, 1999), We can easily change Murray’s identifying term “Readers” to “Audience” as they essentially mean the same thing. As the actor begins to diary as their character, they will need to consider the above elements from their character’s perspective in order to have a place to begin and some structure to work within. Once they are within that structure, they will speak from the perspective and voice of their character, consider feelings, reactions, and the interpersonal relationship between themselves (as that character) and every other character mentioned in the script, either real or imagined. By the time the actor has completed his Character’s Diary it will resemble an actual diary written by their character complete with their character’s backstory, voice, feelings, experiences and whatever else the character chooses to reveal through the writing. In essence the actor gives their character, as I gave Mama, the solitude to write what they experienced/are experiencing, thinking, feeling, etc in a safe and private environment for only the character themselves to read. In other words, when Mama wrote her Character’s Diary it was with the understanding that the only reader of the diary would be Mama herself. As the actor reading her diary, I became like the audience, a voyeur intruding upon the private thoughts and feelings of Mama, but as an actor letting Mama write *through* her, I was no longer voyeur, I was Mama; and Mama was me. *Mama lived.*

Although I have gone to great lengths earlier to describe this writing as having no confines, I did indeed utilize a structure, a template if you will so that Mama would have a place to begin and end and not leave anything out in the lots of room in between. As I stated earlier, I looked to Donald Murray for the inspiration on how to create my Character’s Diary as his essay touched on all the elements a human needs to express

themselves in written form, even a writing as crude as a personal diary meant for remembrance and reflection. Remember, this diary does not have to be linear; whatever entry the character is writing can be a day in that character's past, present or future. If I am handwriting I would use loose leaf pages that can be moved around, but typically I type only because I can type faster and I don't lose any ideas and the typed pages can be printed and placed in a binder in whatever order I choose easily. There need not even be an order; the discovery is in the memories and emotions that are recalled onstage and memories don't have to be chronological in order to pull the remembered emotions from them. It is a remembrance of a specific moment in time; it doesn't matter where in time it occurred only that the memory exists.

Although the Diary is not specifically structured in any formal way when written, I did consider the following ten elements as I wrote for Mama. Even writing as someone else it's sometimes difficult to begin an entry. Keeping the ten elements in mind and referring to them when I got stuck helped to keep the ideas coming and the writing going. The following elements are not a necessity that needs to be followed to the letter, but rather motivation to begin and inspiration on what to write about when working on the entries. Whenever the actor thinks they have covered it all, they can go back to the ten elements and see if there is another stone that can be overturned by considering an entry on an element that perhaps wasn't considered before.

### ***Solitude***

*Writing is ingoing...the theme is solitude. That is where it all begins, alone (Murray, 1991).*

Murray understood that writing needs patience on behalf of the writer. He talks about sitting with "pen uncapped...daybook open...waiting without expectation"



(Murray, 1991), which is exactly where I found myself when I wanted to write as my character. I would literally lock myself away from pending distractions while I waited for inspiration to hit. Sometimes that would mean finding a quiet place where I could stare out the window, at the wall, at a candle, whatever my eyes were drawn to, and I didn't think at all about writing. I began to imagine rather my character (in this case Mama) and what her day was like, it didn't matter if it was a moment in her present, future, or past, I would just think about her. I pictured her as looking like me, even though she wasn't me. Since my focus was on daydreaming and not writing, it was easy to drift around, seeing her cooking, talking to her children, having an argument with one of her sisters, or a moment with her husband. I didn't force a story to happen; I just let my mind wander trying to keep Mama as the central focus. Sometimes, if I was having an emotional day, either angry, or happy, or anywhere in between those emotions would be played out by Mama in my daydream, which usually yielded the best and most interesting writing because it came from a place of meaning and depth. If I was angry, sad, or elated I imagined Mama in her world and suddenly Mama became me, or I became her, but in any case our souls began to intertwine and Mama suddenly had something to say. I would begin to write; not in a way that was organized or correct, but rather to mark the moment, note what I was feeling, what caused it, how it played out so that when I finished I had a memory documented. This is an example of a documented memory as taken from Mama's Diary:

*I remember walking to school at a very young age. I think I was about 7, Jenny 12, Sigrid, 11 and Trina 9. Uncle Chris walked with us, he was around 20 I think and had to work not far from the school. He didn't have a horse but always left early with us girls; I think he did it for mama (his sister) who hated the idea of her girls walking the quiet road as the sun wasn't fully up. The school was nothing more than a big room about a*

*mile from our house, all the kids walked to it no matter what their age. There was eight grades but only one teacher and she took turns teaching each grade which meant if I finished my math problems early I could listen to the teachings for the grades higher than mine. Anyways, I was walking slower than usual which of course upset my sister Jenny who was older and more important than me. Uncle Chris didn't seem to mind as he kept in step by my side, but Jenny, exasperated stopped walking and tapped her foot waiting for our approach. When I was just a foot or so away from her she kicked the dust from the lane onto my shoes! My clean shoes that mama sat by the fire polishing so carefully last night and I instantly burst into tears! "hurry up you big baby or there is more where that came from". Before I had the time to suck in a breath Uncle Chris has snatched Jenny's Arm and held her so high and tight it seemed only her toes touched the lane! "Clean them. Now." He said it very low, very quiet, but his teeth were clamped together and his tone was scary. Even Jenny looked scared and she never looked scared. Uncle Chris let her go. She stared at him for a very long time and he stared back. All I could do was stand there and sniff back snot while the tears fell and want to die on the spot, for so many reasons! Surely I would pay for Jenny's scolding later! But then Jenny looked at me. Really looked at me. Her eyes softn'd and she pulled out her white hankerchief and knelt at my feet "JENNY NO!!!" I screamed, or hoarsely said, it sounded loud in the crisp early morning air even if it wasn't. I was so humiliated and ashamed that Jenny should clean my shoes. I deserved it, I was dawdelling, I was making her late and she WAS older and more important. "Marta, it's okay" jenny said in a soothing voice. "I was wrong for soiling your clean shoes and its not fair to you or mama that I done such a thing". We must have wasted a full five minutes while Jenny spit shined my dusty black shoes with her white hankerchief until they were as clean as mama made them the night before. Then she stood up, put her arm around my shoulders and said "here, we can walk close so I can help you keep up". But she didn't help me keep up, she slowed her pace to match mine. After that I never got the "pay" I thought Jenny would give me for Uncle Chris making her clean my shoes. She never mentioned it again. She still bossed me around endlessly and yelled at me for my shortcomings, but I suddenly didn't mind so much. I endured her big sisterness with the knowledge that under the underneath of it all Jenny really did love me. If she didn't she would never have cleaned my shoes (Phillips, 2015).*

The act of writing not only solidified that memory and made it real, but it connected me to Mama; I was writing as her while *feeling* as her. I could relate to her directly because we were going through the same thing, together. As Mama wrote the above entry, I remember tears stinging at the back of my eyes and a lump forming in my throat. Even

though the story had been imagined, the feelings that came from the moment were quite real. Every time I read it, the lump came back and the tears threatened. For some reason this moment in Mama's memory resonated with something deep in my soul even though I didn't know what that was directly. All I knew was that I had a feeling connected to a memory. I could draw on that memory in rehearsal and performance when I was interacting with Jenny onstage and those emotions would bubble to the surface, because for me they were tangible, relatable, had already been *lived* and experienced.

Writing in the Character's Diary as the character is very much like an autobiography in which events, real or imagined, link to real life in a way that is relatable so will carry emotional qualities to them. "Anyone's [writing] could give clues to the writer's life, to the writer's way of living, to general tendencies and attitudes" (Stafford, 2006). In this case, the character is composing their autobiography so there is no need to worry about mistakes. Trust that your character has a story to tell and let them tell it in whatever way they need to. Every person is relevant. Every person has something to say. Your character has something to say when you first meet them and even more to say as you get to know them. Do not stop writing until the show is closed. Every rehearsal and every performance is a chance to get to know your character better. Continue to let them express themselves through the Diary. You will be amazed at the discoveries!

### ***Experience***

*I have a history of surprise. I know that language will lead me to meaning. I will write what I do not expect to write.  
I know that as I write I will receive the blessings of failure and accident: the failure will be instructive, the accident insightful.*

*I will write what I do not intend in voices [I] have not yet heard.  
...will have failed to say what [I] meant to say.  
...[will] have to discover what [I] have to say (Murray, 1991).*

When Murray talks about writing from a place of experience, he is not talking about “language, punctuation and form” but rather the experience of writing to discover what comes out (Murray D. , 1991; Murray D. M., Learning By Teaching, 1982; Murray D. M., A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition, 1968). Murray trusts the process because he has experienced the process and found it to work in the past so he accepts that it will work again. He is hoping the inexperienced writer will accept that the process will work even though they have yet to experience it for themselves. The same is true for the Character’s Diary. I can say the process works because I have experienced it and found it to work so I trust the process. The actor must, of course, accept on blind faith that the process will work based on my experience until they have experienced it for themselves. However, the only way to trust the process is to apply it, which is what Murray encourages the inexperienced writer to do. When writing the Character’s Diary I don’t force the content. Don’t think about what sounds right and try to tailor the writing around that. First, imagine the character letting whatever place or experience they are in to just happen. It need not be something from the script; it can be anything it happens to be. Then, once the character begins speaking or thinking, start writing. Don’t force it; just record it. Trust that the character has something to say; because they will. Just as Mama told the story of the shoes, your character will begin to tell their own stories. Begin to imagine yourself as the character and let your thoughts and feelings mingle together. The purpose of the Character’s Diary is not to write a book or a story, on the contrary it doesn’t even have to make sense! Its purpose is to connect the actor with the character in such a way that the actor begins to take on that character’s persona. How that character walks, talks, speaks, feels, interacts, reacts and any other

thing that springs to mind. For instance, I knew how I would correct my kids if they did something wrong, but suddenly I found myself asking, “What would Mama do”? What would her correction look like? Sound like? I began to adopt her phrases, her accent, and her gestures and suddenly and without warning, Mama would appear whilst I was correcting my own children in my own real life! She was beginning to make herself known both in The Character’s Diary and in my own body. I began to take on her physical attributes, how she sat, stood, moved and gestured without even thinking about it because I had allowed her to live on the page. As I wrote as Mama, I *experienced* Mama. I felt what she felt. I watched the scenes play out in my head, experiencing them, feeling them, while capturing them on the page. I *experienced* the writing rather than forced it. The experience of writing created a physical connection to Mama as I let her take over my mind, feelings and body. When I needed to reconnect to Mama prior to rehearsal or performance, I could pick up my Character’s Diary and begin to read and suddenly I would feel her in my body, as I stood up straighter, tilted my chin slightly and squared my shoulders. Her voice would be in my head and her accent on my lips as I recalled how I...we...Mama was feeling when the entry was made. The experience of Mama captured on the page was a tangible portal that allowed me to reach within and bring Mama to the surface once again. The importance was in letting the writing happen. I didn’t need to know prior to writing what Mama had to say, I just wrote until I discovered what she had to say.

Write anything and everything. Don’t toss aside the idea as writing as your character as simply being a rhetorical task with no meaning. “Rhetoric is where we find meaning in the world around us; rhetoric is the device of language that connects us to

reality” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985). Don’t shy away from metaphor in rhetoric; embrace it! Write everything that comes to mind down and don’t try to make sense of it in the moment. If images come to mind rather than words, record them because they metaphorically relate to your character in a deeper and often more meaningful way. “Metaphor allows for the interplay between the inner world of the individual and the external, sensory world. Through metaphor, humans continually can renew their connection to the world” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985). For example, the story of the shoes grew out of the fact that Mama saw Jenny’s love in the way Jenny treated Mama’s shoes, not Mama herself. Just the act of someone cleaning shoes being worn by another holds so much meaning and emotion. They are lowering themselves before you and attending to what would arguable be the dirtiest part of the body since it is in contact with the ground. When I needed that emotion on stage, I didn’t remember the entire passage; all I envisioned were the shoes to bring the emotions to the surface. An image may come to you, you write about it, or perhaps like me, you will write a passage, and a metaphorical image will emerge either way it happens a connection will be made or remade. “[T]he notion of metaphor revitalizes humans in their encounters with the world. It is a way of knowing and coping with the world by always having available the possibility of reinterpreting a situation” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985).

### ***Faith***

*My story is significant  
...my experience is significant  
...what I have to say is of value to others.  
Listen to what...is not yet quite said (Murray, 1991).*

Just as Murray instructs us to have faith in ourselves as writers that what we have to say is significant and valuable to others besides ourselves (Murray, 1991), so too must

we place that same faith in the characters we are living onstage. If we do not believe or value our character, how do we expect an audience to? This is where Murray's suggestion of arrogance comes in. Be arrogant inasmuch as it is appropriate to allow your character to speak and move through you. As actors we sometimes like to critique ourselves as we play our characters thinking it can only serve to make us better. This is wrong! If we are busy watching our own performance we have not significantly moved out of the way to allow our character to live through us. If we are "watching" that means we are "correcting" and if we are correcting we are no longer connected to our character. We are *playing* them rather than *living* them; and, yes, there is a difference! We must have faith that our characters have something worthwhile to say and do when we embody them, if we don't have that faith then we never truly get out of the way to allow our character to live. Our only job onstage is to maintain the connection with our character and let them live through us. We do not force our characters. We do not watch our characters. We do not correct our characters. We *live* our characters.

This is an extremely important concept to keep in mind when working on The Character's Diary because how the character is treated when allowing them to keep their diary is exactly how they will be treated onstage. Care must be taken never to force the character to have a feeling, idea, experience or opinion. Let inspiration strike wherever and however it happens. This takes faith. Faith that the character will have something to say and therefore something to write about. It is a very vulnerable place to be and the actor may find that they do indeed force writing, consciously make up experiences, correct what the character is doing and force their will upon the character, and that's okay. What is important is that the actor begin to recognize when they are doing that so

that they can consciously stop doing it. Maybe the actor will begin by doing some of these things, but in the middle of it the character will take over. Let them! Have faith that when the character takes over what they have to say is even better than what you would *will* them to say. Writing the Character's Diary is exactly the place to learn what the difference between the two feel like and it has to be experienced to be understood. Recognizing the manipulation of character while writing in The Character's Dairy saves the actor from going backwards or wasting precious rehearsal time because they will immediately recognize that they are manipulating their character rather than living them and will stop doing that. They can consciously get out of the character's way because they will be cognizant of it happening. What's wonderful is that the actor will have recognized what the difference between manipulating their character and living their character feels like as they are working on the diary. The technique the actor uses to consciously stop manipulating and start living their character in writing will translate to the stage as they will automatically utilize that technique onstage having already practiced it in the writing. I can't tell you what that technique looks like because it is mental, it is a feeling, a notion, and it will be different for everyone. It is something the actor must experience in order to understand and recognize. Have faith that it will happen. Since rehearsal time includes others and is limited by time, it is not the optimal place to learn how to do this. The Character's Diary is private and safe and can be worked on anytime outside of rehearsal. Once the difference between manipulating the character and living them on the page is experienced, it will increase faith that the character can live onstage through the actor as easily as they do in the diary. The more it



happens, the more faith increases and eventually getting out of the character's way will just become second nature.

Most importantly have faith that the writing doesn't have to be good in order to gain from it. I'm not just talking about spelling, grammar and structure. You don't have to have perfect grammar and structure, this is not a lesson to be graded. Structure it in any way that helps you understand the *ideas* you are getting on the page. Your prose doesn't have to be lovely or flowery. Some days you just might make lists. You will make connections to your character differently than another person and you will connect to different characters in different ways. If you write a diary for one character, then start another show and write a diary for a different character neither is better or worse than the other, they just are what they are. Have faith in the experience. William Stafford was asked in an interview about he would start off his daily journaling, he replied;

*I believe the little boosts that come, come from the writing itself and from the recollecting. I'm trying to back away from saying that there is any way to force this to happen. It's more as if something happens and I welcome its happening. So I begin to write it down. It isn't that I have a technique to make it interesting if I respond to the signals that the experience is giving me" (Stafford, 2006).*

Stafford is describing faith. He is not forcing anything, he simply begins and once he begins he responds to whatever his pen brought forth that day. It's that simple with your Character's Diary. Don't force it. Have faith. Just begin.

### ***Need***

*We must go within ourselves to discover and accept our obsessions, those things that irrationally interest us, the mysteries that haunt us... (Murray, 1991).*

Murray describes being "driven to write by an internal need or obsession; writing because [he] must" (Murray, 1991) which is quite akin to how we as actors should feel

about the characters we are cast as. If we are to be wholly connected to our character in a way that allows our very souls to intertwine then we damn well better be obsessed with that character, otherwise why accept the role in the first place? Actors are called upon to play characters that are absolutely nothing like them in real life, a nun, a gay person, a straight person, a serial killer, the list is endless, but every character will have something to say; deep down, somewhere within the depths of the actor's own being there must be that "irrational interest", that "obsession", that "mystery". As Murray says, we have to be willing to explore "what haunts us" if we wish to fully expose our character to an audience. When we are playing characters far removed from ourselves, or a moment in a character's life that we have not experienced directly we need to become obsessed with how to connect with our character on that level.

Say I have to play a killer. This is a dark character, extreme, and one with which I have no direct connection to. I need to find a way to feel (even if it means not feeling) as this character would in any given moment. If I accepted the role of this character then I need to first admit to myself that I have, at the very least, an irrational interest in what it's like to be a serial killer. The most difficult aspect of this character would be understanding how this character would feel in the face of killing. Since I never killed anyone, and don't aspire to, how can I even begin to guess? I would start by thinking about "the mysteries that haunt me" concerning death.

When I sit down to write my Character's Diary of a serial killer I would begin by thinking of my own experiences with death and near death. Because I have the added benefit of having been a police officer for 15 years I already have an obsession with killing because every cop has in the back of their mind the question of what they would

do if they found themselves in an actual life and death situation. What would it feel like? How would I react? If I shot someone and they died in front of me what would that feel like? I actually experienced a life and death situation where a felon I was arresting had, in the fight, pulled my weapon from my holster and attempted to shoot me in the face with it. In that moment I began to fight him for the loaded weapon. I remember knowing without a shadow of a doubt that if I were able to regain control of that weapon I would turn it on him and shoot without hesitation. I didn't just *know* I would shoot him, I *wanted* to shoot him. It was a war between only the two of us and it was going to be him or me dead. I certainly didn't want it to me. I didn't want to shoot or kill him as a matter of enjoyment, I wanted it as a matter of survival; but I most certainly wanted it.

This is an important life experience that I can use to connect with the serial killer character. It's not the reason *why* I wanted to shoot another person, it was the fact that I wanted to at all. That want was a strange and foreign emotion. It wasn't the same as any want I've ever experienced for any number of reasons and I can't describe it. I can only recall feeling it. As an actor playing a serial killer, I would sit down to write my Character's Diary and I would recall the events of that day, I would remember it in as much detail as possible and once I had it fully back, I would begin to look at it from not my point of view, but the character's point of view. How would the character look, feel, react? It is a very small connection to start with, but a significant one because it allows me to explore that mystery through someone else's eyes.

By now I can hear you saying, "oh come on, not everyone is going to have *that* kind of experience to draw on. But I would submit that you probably have something quite tramatizing that is closer to that experience that you would think. Ask yourself,

what do I know about death? Have I ever seen a dead body? It could be in the hospital, on the street, at a funeral. It could be a friend, relative or stranger. How did you feel when you saw it the first time? Compare that to another time. Have you ever had to put a pet or an animal down? Death is death. Do you hunt? What is that feeling like? I hear tell of stories when a new hunter bags their first deer. The body is so overcome with conflicting emotions and adreneline that the hunter begins to tremble violently and uncontrollably, with this event being known as “buck fever”. Did you ever accidentally hit an animal with your car resulting in its death? Were you ever so hurt and confused and angered with someone in a moment that you wished them dead? Did you ever get in a physical altercation with someone, a fist fight? What was that like?

My point is, by the time we are old enough to be cast in the role of a serial killer we probably have had some experience with death. We have, at the least, thought about it whether it was our own or someone elses. It is in the exploring of these moments and our “irrational interest” or “obsession” with it that we will find our personal character of a serial killer. We all have “mysteries” of death that “haunt us”. Don’t obsess that you have not had enough experiences in life to write a Character’s Diary, this is a cop out. We all have a story to tell and age or situation in life does not make one persons story better than anothers. We are human beings and that in itself is what makes us interesting. “The things that happen to us make up our own pattern of experience [...] each of us is one of a kind” (Allen, 1982). I remember my youngest experience with death must have been when I was around eight or nine years old. I remember my Uncle had died and my parents rushed to my uncle’s home with us in tow at a very early morning hour. I remember sitting on the couch watching my aunt cry, my father make phone calls, my

mom fix tea. I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to be feeling because there was so much emotion swirling in the air around me that I didn't know what was mine and what was someone else's, it was all very surreal. But when I consider the memory it all comes back, the strangeness of it all. In hindsight I understand what was going on, yet I can still recall the feeling of *not understanding*, which is important because if a character I play needs to play a surreal moment like that, *that feeling* still exists within my memory to remember. This is a childhood memory, at such a young age I had a story to tell because I had a life I lived. It may only have been nine years, but nine years is still a long time to experience life. "[Y]ou – at whatever stage you are now – have a great deal to share with the rest of us about what life is like to you. Since you are one of a kind, if you don't tell us what life is like to the special, one-of-a-kind human being that is you, then, forever and always, one piece of experience will be lost" (Allen, 1982). It is within the Character's Diary that we must expose those qualities in order to find that connection with the character, no matter how small, so that we will have something to build upon.

An actor must have this same obsession with every character they play no matter how mundane or extreme the character appears at first glance. Beyond emotional recall, it requires critical thinking on the part of the actor. Every choice must make sense to the character and fit with the given circumstances of the play. If an actor has not had the experience the character is having the actor must then break down the emotional qualities of that experience and see where they can connect to the *emotional quality*. It is the obsession and the interest in the character that must drive the actor to explore parts and depths of the character that the playwright only alludes to, or perhaps doesn't even include at all. The actor must be motivated. When I was in rehearsal for *I Remember*

*Mama* I found that in every scene with Mama and Jenny, Jenny's dialogue was such that she came across as being mean, arrogant, and high handed with Mama. I never had a sister. In my experience if someone acted like that with me constantly I wouldn't be in their life. Why did Marta keep letting Jenny (who was so mean) into her life? It was a question never answered in the script, but *I needed to know*. I had to find the *love, the sisterlyness* between Marta and Jenny. I found that love in the memory of the shoes I illustrated earlier. When I was onstage with Jenny, no matter how mean she sounded I remembered the shoes and I layered within Mama's irritation with Jenny a *warmth* that the actor playing Jenny would respond to! Had I not been motivated to find the *reason* that Marta still had a relationship with Jenny then this special connection between Mama and Jenny would have been lost and the dynamic of the relationship between the two characters with it.

Finding these connections is what makes the character yours and yours alone. It is how the actor becomes the character. Never attempt to mimic another person's interpretation of a character no matter how brilliant. Connect to every character on a personal level that allows the embodiment of that character and although different, the performance will be just as brilliant.

### ***Tension***

*Writing that has gone well has been ignited by a tension that is usually caught in a phrase, a fragment of language that will unlock a draft (Murray, 1991).*

As an actor, I would paraphrase Donald Murray's quote above to read '*Acting that has gone well has been ignited by a tension that is usually caught in a phrase, a fragment of dialogue that will unlock a performance*'. As you are studying your script and reading

over your character's dialogue there is always something, either said by your character, or said by another character about your character, that resonates with you personally. It is this turn of phrase that sets off some reaction or emotion that should be explored in The Character's Diary. It may have an entry all its own, or it may creep up in the middle of another entry, its location doesn't matter; what matters is that time is taken to explore it. Look again at Mama's entry about the shoes; she goes off on a tangent about the schoolroom, about how she would finish her math problems early so she could learn the harder lessons. This seems like just an odd recollection but it *says* something about Mama. It speaks to Mama's motivation to learn, her ability to learn. This small digression reminded me in a later entry that Mama would be very motivated, and very capable, of learning English when she came to America. She wouldn't learn just enough to get by, she would learn as much as she could because she was *motivated to learn*. Just like with the math problems, Mama was always pushing herself, testing her limits. It was in a digression during a prior entry of the diary that "...through a fragment of language [I was able to] unlock a draft" (Murray, 1991). I knew I digressed in the entry about the shoes, but I had to be motivated to go back and find out *why* Mama digressed in that entry and what was important about that digression, what that digression was trying to tell me about Mama.

There may be something in the dialogue of the script that immediately resonates with the actor and is an indicator that it is a central tension that may lie within the character as well. Whatever this line or series of lines may be, it is important to figure out why they are important to the actor personally as well as why they would be important to the character because this will serve as yet another connection to help the

character's soul become one with the actor's soul. Tension can occur anywhere; in something the character says or does, or experiences. Tension can even be found outside the script, outside the rehearsal process and outside the Diary. "Hearing music or making music will sometimes start words flowing" (Allen, 1982). Perhaps something will happen in everyday life, a moment witnessed or experienced, a sound heard, a song played that reminds the actor of their character. Consider this experience a teacher had at Mount Edgecumbe School:

*A boy came in after school last night and played the autoharp for about an hour. He sat in the chair, clutching that harp to him as if it were a baby and, with a dreamy expression, became oblivious to all distractions. Suddenly he stopped, tore a sheet from his notebook and began to write.*

*After a few minutes, he thrust a poem at me. "What do you think of that?"*

*I liked it. It was short and to the point, but he wouldn't part with it and I don't have a copy to send you (Allen, 1982).*

When a moment happens the key is to record thoughts and feelings while they are fresh. If a pen or computer isn't handy, vocally recording notes on a cell phone will help reawaken the moment when finally alone with the Character's Diary. Tension may be recognized immediately because the actor relates or reacts to it (either positively or negatively) immediately, or it may reveal itself as the actor explores other parts of their character. Whenever and wherever tension is discovered time must be taken to consider it and explore it within the Character's Diary. Tension may be recognized in rehearsal, but because of scheduling and time restraints there is not always the luxury of fully exploring this inspiration because the director needs to move on. The discovery in rehearsal can be noted in the script and later explored in The Character's Diary. Again,



do not force an idea or concept. I typically begin by allowing the character to savor the moment and describe that moment for themselves, without my interference.

During the rehearsal process I began to realize this ‘tension’ in the interaction of the characters of Jenny (Mama’s sister) and Mama. I did not have the luxury of thinking deeply about it in the moment as we were moving through rehearsal, but when I sat at my desk alone with Mama’s Diary, Mama began to reveal an underlying bitterness that was present in her relationship with Jenny that went beyond the exasperation called for in the script. Take a look at this entry:

*Jenny was always jealous of the attention I received at being the youngest. Jenny was a full five years older than me. I remember how neighbors and family who would stop by always had ‘a special treat for the baby’. Me. I was the baby, and even though it was just a piece of candy or a small toy, Jenny would be furious. She probably figured she was around longer and deserved special attention more than I did. It seems it’s always the baby that gets more attention because babies are smaller, younger, weaker and cuter. Don’t get me wrong, noone brough me treats when I was 12, but I can see how Jenny being 12 and watching her 7 year old sister get things she no longer did could lead to jealousy. She thought I was being rewarded for just being little, so she would go out of her way to make it known, to everyone, but me especially, how much older, smarter, better she was than me. Of course, this didn’t get her treats which probably added to the frustration. Because I was the last one born, I got the attention for the longest. Jenny had Sigrid on her heels in the age department and then Trina came along, so I don’t think any of my sisters really had a chance to get the baby treatment because there was always another baby on the way. But me, I was born last, and I was spoiled the longest. Sigrid and Trina didn’t seem to take it as bad as Jenny. Maybe because Jenny always had the edge of “being the oldest”. But it was in my coming that “being the youngest” started to win out because “being the oldest” only meant “you should know better”. Sigrid would sometimes chime in with Jenney in her teasing, but only because Sigrid would so desperately want Jenny’s attention. Sigrid was always hanging about on Jenny’s heels. Trina though kept to herself. When she had to choose, she went with the older girls because I was usually held back with my parents. But Jenny, Jenny was the worst. Which is why I would go out of my way to make her like me. I let her boss me, I did her chores, and I endured her teasing. When it seemed to never work, I began to avoid her. Hang back with Mama or Papa or Uncle Chris, the people who doted on*

*me. Soon I became content with watching my older sisters from afar and not trying to join in with them. This would make me sad, they were having fun and all I could do was watch because joining in would mean ridicule. So I learned to do for myself, find my own joy, tie my own shoes (Phillips, 2015).*

In this entry Mama told of the jealousy that Jenny had for her since they were little.

Although in the beginning Mama would overcompensate to make Jenny, who was older, like her, Jenny only became meaner and crueler. This created a bitterness and resentment in Mama that although she tried not to show, always simmered just below the surface, even now when they were adults. Mama came from a close family and having moved to San Francisco was forced to rely on her sisters to learn the culture and the language. Jenny's sarcasm was always biting and her insults cutting yet Mama tolerated them to the extent that it motivated her to become independent quickly so that although she would still interact with Jenny, would not be forced to rely on her for anything. Mama still had a love for Jenny; she was her sister after all, but Mama found it easier to love Jenny when Jenny wasn't around and keep her at arm's length when she was.

None of this tension was revealed in the script beyond Jenny's occasional cutting remarks or sarcasm, but was revealed when something Jenny said or did resonated with me onstage in rehearsal. I had no idea what was going to come out of it when I sat to write about it in Mama's Diary, but the entry created a physical as well as emotional tension within Mama whenever she interacted with Jenny onstage. It's important to note that tension does not have to be negative in order to exist. Tension exists in any emotion or depth of feeling. Tension also existed in the warmth Mama revealed that was found in the diary entry about the shoes. Tension can be found in many places. For Murray, tension was found when he visited a museum and while looking at the weapons said to

himself, “the swords survive”. He did not need to add “the soldiers did not”, because it was already present in the fact that the weapons remained when the soldiers did not (Murray, 1991). The point is we must be aware that tension exists, recognize it, then take the time to explore it as it creates yet another layer to who our character is and how we connect with them personally.

### ***Pattern***

*...forget the power of design in all its forms – genre, structure, order – and see them after the fact... (Murray, 1991).*

Murray discusses how we can obsess over the pattern or structure of our writing to the point where the structure becomes the focal point and we put off writing while attempting to create structure. He likens this to Ernest Gaines’s idea that a novel is like taking a “train to Louisiana; you know in that moment you are getting on a train and going to Louisiana but you don’t know what anything is going to be like in between” (Murray, 1991). I myself obsess over pattern and structure. I worry about how what I will say will be structured before I even know what I want to say. I did that with this thesis, pulling up and looking at other people’s theses only to find they are all very different from each other in pattern and style. I needed, or rather thought I needed, to know what the final product would look like before I started working on it. “Almost all good writers change the plan somewhat as they write. Characters become real people, and they have a way of speaking up when the author expected them to duck their heads and gaze at their feet” (Allen, 1982). It wasn’t until I did away with that irrational desire and just began to write that my thesis began to take shape and form. The pattern emerged from the writing; not the other way around. In fact, worrying about the structure *actually kept me from* the writing. It is the same for *The Character’s Diary*.

In earlier sections I suggested writing on loose leaf paper, or typing, perhaps placing “the character’s date” at the top of each entry so that the pages can be arranged or ordered. In this section, I wholeheartedly disagree with that. If you are going to date the pages, date them because it’s in your character’s nature to do so; not because it’s a needed structure. Order pages because your character wants to, not because it’s a necessity. Or don’t order them at all. Patterns will emerge after the fact but do not need to exist in order to begin. There is absolutely no need to impose a date, an order, a way of doing things on the Character Diary’s. If patterns emerge *after the fact* that’s okay, consider what *those patterns say about your character*. If a pattern is noticed in the middle of writing The Character’s Diary, trust the character has a reason for it and let the character speak to that reason. In retrospect the patterns, or lack of patterns, may speak to a character’s state of mind.

Be aware of an emerging pattern in The Character’s Diary but don’t impose one. Just write. Let the chips fall where they may. Date, time, and order may not be important to your character. Perhaps your character picks out a pretty hardcover diary and writes in that only. Maybe your character types on a blackberry and emails the pages to you for printing later. Maybe your character’s entries are one line, or one paragraph, or 15 pages. Maybe they color, or draw, or sketch. Maybe your character travels through time so random events that are chronologically out of place are absolutely necessary to *them*. Don’t worry about pattern or structure, because it’s not how *you* want to keep your diary, it’s how your character wants to keep *their* diary. Ignoring structure and pattern and just beginning to write is actually more freeing, as I found when I finally sat down to write this thesis. I worried over structure so much, that I did more and more research

each time I changed my mind about how I would structure this thing. Finally, in a meeting with my thesis Chair, Dr. Buchanan told me “just start writing something...anything...we’ll worry about what it will look like later”. I took those words to heart and sat down and just began to write. Before I knew it six hours had passed and I had a little over 5,000 words. Patterns and structure emerged organically out of the course of the writing but I ignored that because I needed to get the content on the page. Because this is an academic paper, structure and pattern will probably be revisited and revised after the paper is done whereas *The Character’s Diary* doesn’t have that constraint, but the important idea to draw from my experience was that focus on pattern prevented the writing and hindered the process. This is especially true with *The Character’s Diary*. Don’t impose any patterns on *The Diary* and don’t let others impose patterns on it either. Just let the character write, and then be pleasantly surprised about what is discovered in the character’s writing and the patterns that emerge from their writing (or don’t emerge). Murray insists that “pattern is flexible; it is molded by meaning. Through pattern [we] begin to see the subject” (Murray, 1991). I agree that “pattern is flexible and molded by meaning,” for *The Character’s Diary*. I suggest we ignore pattern and see first the content of the subject. If the actor absolutely needs a structure in order to begin, then let the character choose the structure in the beginning and give them the freedom to change it in the middle. What’s important is that the character is making the decisions and doing the talking – after all it’s their diary.

### ***Voice***

*An individual human voice is what we seek in a text, that voice is what keeps us reading and makes us believe what is written” (Murray, 1991).*

*“Voice – the music we hear as we write – instructs the writer: it reveals the subject and the writer’s attitude toward the subject. The voice of the evolving draft reveals meaning and feeling (Murray D. M., Following the Voice of the Draft, 2003).*

Once the actor has sought solitude and the daydreamer’s stance to begin writing The Character’s Diary and in faith allowed themselves, through the character, to explore that character’s experiences, any tension discovered existing between the actor and the character, as well as identifying all obsessions with that character, thinking about what haunts them, only then will the actor begin to hear the character’s voice. “The most important quality of a writer is voice, and voice is only found by writing, continual experimental writing in which beginning writers dress up in the voices of others” (Murray D. M., The Literature of Tomorrow, 1990). Don’t be afraid to “try on” the character’s voice when it is heard. Notice the musicality of it, the pitch and tone of it, the pace of it. It will be heard in the head first, then replicated in the throat when spoken. As the character’s voice emerges from the writing the actor will easily practice speaking it because they already know what it sounds like. A character may even begin to speak aloud when they are writing in their diary, don’t be startled by it; embrace it! The character’s voice may be higher, lower, more or less nasal as well as have a dialect or accent that is slightly or extremely different from the actor’s voice. Don’t stifle the voice that emerges or be embarrassed by it when writing because it is the most important part of writing after meaning (Murray, 1991), give it freedom to be what it needs to be to express the emerging character. As you are trying on voices for your character pay attention to the one that emerges as that character’s true voice. Don’t try to force a voice in writing, let it emerge and then once it emerges, let it live freely. Maybe it won’t sound as beautiful or majestic or fantastic as you expect or want, but that’s okay. Let it be what it

is. The true voice of any character is the same as the true voice of any writer. It's the most genuine, the most believable the easiest to adopt. Willam Stafford speaks of voice in writing and his words hold true for when you finally adopt the voice of your character.

*Your voice is fastened on you. And you can keep people from knowing what that voice is, but I don't think that you can get a voice that's any good without letting your whole self be that person. So I keep hearing people say you should find a voice and then use it. And they want to be, they want some, Dylan Thomas, or some sonorous voice, whereas maybe their true voice is some kind of whining voice. Well, that's what they ought to do. Then pretty soon they'll become Kafka or someone. And you imagine Kafka says I'm going to be like . . . and then chooses someone he couldn't possibly be like anyway, though he could fake it. But we wouldn't have Kafka (Stafford, Crossing Unmarked Snow, 2001.)*

As you write as your character you will begin not only to hear your character in your mind as you write but also as you go back and read what you have written you will hear that same voice in the pages. Don't ignore this voice or try to change it; adopt it. When you realize the voice begin to use it onstage when you are speaking as your character.

This will be the most natural and genuine sounding voice onstage and will instantly connect you with the character you met within the pages of your Diary. The souls will intertwine in the writing and one voice you will share on the stage. Once you begin speaking in your character's true voice it will come as naturally to you as your own.

After all your character is you and you are your character so even though your character's voice isn't your own voice, it is still a part of you because you embody your character.

I am not even talking yet about accent, dialects and the like, although this is also a big part of voice, because I have reserved the next sections of this thesis to discuss them more completely as they relate to specific areas of the English discipline. Not to mention the fact that attempting to adopt an accent or dialect is a very delicate part of character development and needs to be addressed separately regardless.

Notwithstanding a specific accent or dialect the character typically won't sound like the actor. It could be in the rhythm, the pitch, the musicality of their speaking or any other number of vocal patterns and factors that the difference arises. What's important is that the actor doesn't affect their character's speech consciously, but rather lets the character utilize the vocal chords of the actor in whatever way comes to that character naturally. Sometimes a playwright will write a vocal pattern (intentionally or not) into your character's dialogue. An actor will have to choose whether to embrace that pattern, such as the way Tennessee Williams wrote Blanche's dialogue in a way which almost forces one to speak in a lilting, flowery, breathless manner in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or fight against it, such as in the heavily patterned prose and poetry Moliere gave Henriette in his play, *The Learned Ladies*. Take every opportunity to speak aloud in the character's voice and be aware of what it sounds like. Actors are trained to hear vocal patterns and musicality and will understand that falling into a vocal pattern can lull an audience to sleep. Actors need to have a varied interpretation of all the dialogue, even Blanche's lilt must have a range of emotion under it. Actors will use their technical vocal skills to hold the lilt, musicality, cadence, or pace of the spoken language and they will use their Character's Diary to create a range of emotion whereby they can choose which emotions are threaded throughout the spoken dialogue.

An example of emotion through dialogue occurred during the rehearsal process of *I Remember Mama*. The young man playing Nels, my son, expressed displeasure at his dialogue in the hospital scene. He said to me, "every line sounds the same, but there's only so many ways you can interpret exasperation". I told him, exasperation works for one line, but choose another emotion or feeling for the next line. When he seemed at a



loss I reminded him that Papa could not be at the hospital and asked him what that made him, he said, “the man of the family”. I told him to say the line as Papa would, to be the man of the family. This was his eureka moment; he adopted Papa’s manner and tone in the same manner the actor playing Papa interpreted his lines, and suddenly found another layer to his character. Just because the script said “(*exasperated*)” in the stage direction didn’t mean that his character couldn’t be more than that. As humans we very rarely feel one emotion at a time. We feel emotions fleeting, in tandem to each other and on top of each other. We must take the time to be aware of all potential emotions our character can have in any given moment and let them feel them as we give them their voice.

Part of an actor’s voice is their body. We express any range of emotion on stage with everything we have at our disposal, our face, body, gestures and voice. As the character’s voice develops when writing in their diary, pay attention to what they look like when they speak. Do certain gestures come to mind over and over? A specific way they walk or hold themselves? Once there is an awareness of these physical attributes they can be adopted. Stand and walk around the room while thinking in the manner which is most comfortable for your character. This helps develop a deeper connection with the character by allowing physical sense of what it feels like to be the character. As voice, movement and gestures are explored in private while working on The Diary they will become an integral and natural part of the character as muscle memory, both vocally and physically, is adopted. Speech and movement should never be affected or forced, it should just occur automatically. Four weeks of rehearsal, five days a week, is not enough time to adopt such natural sound and movement if the actor only uses rehearsal time to explore it. It is the time spent outside of rehearsal deep in the character’s psyche, *being*

them, that allows such practice. The Character's Diary not only helps with character development and connection on a mental level, but in a physical manner as well. Since time would always be set aside to work on The Character's Diary, there will always be more than enough time to embody the character outside of rehearsal. The more time the actor spends working on The Character's Diary the quicker the actor will reconnect with the character each time they revisit them.

### *Ease*

*I write easily and I write fast. [...] Fast writing allows me to keep ahead of the critic that lives within me... I wrote the poem as fast as I could to hear what I had to say (Murray, 1991).*

When Murray speaks of 'ease of writing' he is addressing the guilt that one experiences if writing comes too easily. He asserts that when we sit down to write, we feel that writing must be hard, so we make it hard because if the writing came too easy then it must not be good enough. "A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people" (Thomas Mann as quoted by Murray D. M., 1968). Don't get caught up in thinking The Diary is going to be hard. It's okay to find writing easy, in fact most good writing actually comes from a place of ease because when we just sit down and write without struggling to make our writing just so, suddenly we find what we have to say and we say it. When we attempt to set specific standards for our writing, those very standards block what we have to say (Murray, 1991, Murray D. M., 1968, Murray D. M., Learning By Teaching, 1982)

I agree with Murray that we are our own worst enemy when it comes time to sit and write. We criticize our own work as we go and begin to edit and censure before we have allowed our thought or idea to develop fully. We get so overly concerned with

structure, what the writing needs to *look* like in the end, that sometimes we cannot even begin. I experienced that with this very document. As mentioned earlier, I became so concerned with what a proper thesis would look like, that I created a block that prevented me from even beginning it! When I finally began to write the paper took shape on its own and there were no blocking of ideas for the sake of structure. Everything made it to the page in the beginning, even if it didn't make the final cut it was still okay, because the thoughts and ideas were completed within the writing and not censured *before* they were fully developed. "Prolific writing – that is, writing uninterruptedly for five or ten minutes to release thoughts and images into visible language, without pausing first to organize them into rational discourse – is a technique so fruitful and flexible that we find occasions for it in all our work" (Ponsot & Deen, 1982). So I wrote uninterrupted for hours until I had everything possible on the page. It wasn't pretty; it wasn't perfect; but at least I had something to work with.

This is the same with *The Character's Diary*. Let the words come out on the page in whatever manner they come. There will be time to think about it and decipher it all later. What is important is that the actor allows the character to speak without correcting, editing or censoring them. The only audience is the character in reflection so there is no need to be concerned with spelling, grammar, structure or any of the confines that are placed upon writing. It is much like what Peter Elbow has to say when he discusses the importance of freewriting or; automatic writing:

*Editing, in itself, is not the problem. [...] The problem is that editing goes on at the same time as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. [...] It's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words (Elbow, 1998).*

Elbow discusses how keeping a freewriting diary can make one a better writer. He says that if you take ten minutes a day and just write, “not a complete account of your day; don’t think hard or prepare or be in the mood: without stopping, just write whatever words come out – whether or not you are thinking or in the mood” (Elbow, 1998), you will learn how to write without editing or censoring yourself as well as come up with new subjects to write about. It is “afterward [when you] look to see what words or passages seemed important – attracted energy or strength [that you will find] your cue [on] what to write” (Elbow, 1998). This is a great way to approach The Character’s Diary.

Take the time to sit and write without worrying about what the writing will look like when it is finished. The actor may have an idea or direction already in mind and it’s okay to begin to explore that, but if they start to go in a completely different direction they should not halt the process. Elbow warns that “[y]ou will waste energy and weaken your writing if you try to prevent digressions before they happen. Let them happen. After they happen, simply find an opportunity to put yourself back on the original subject. [I]n some cases you will realize that the digression is sufficiently engrossing or important that you should stick with it” (Elbow, 1998). The main idea is that the actor should approach writing The Character’s Diary as easy. Even if it takes a few sentences or passages to get into the voice of the character, that’s okay, just let it happen and see where it goes. In writing whatever comes to mind with no constraints on what to write about, the actor will discover much to write about and may find that they have a harder time picking which insight or discovery to explore first rather than wondering what they would write about at all. It’s okay if the Character’s Diary makes sense to no one but the character writing it and the actor reading it. It is *the actor’s* connection to the character

that is being discovered and as long as that connection is being made, it doesn't matter what the Diary looks or sounds like in the end. What matters is that the character's voice is found. It is in The Diary where the actor will first discover on the page what their character has to say, so that later on the actor can allow their character a voice on the stage.

### ***Productivity***

*I never know when the writing will go well...be promiscuous, wasting language, wasting ideas to find the few that work. The writing breeds the writing (Murray, 1991).*

Murray speaks about Productivity and how the writer should "waste" all the writing on the page, that writing is not "a saving business" (Murray, 1991). There is no need to worry about "saving" writing for another section or another time, because what you want to "save" is probably exactly what you need to be writing in the moment. The same is true for your Character's Diary. If you begin writing about one thing and are suddenly inspired to write in a completely different direction, don't stop yourself or plan on writing in that direction later; go for it! Write everything and anything that comes to mind, "wasting" it on the page. This way you don't lose the initial insight or emotion you stumbled upon and what's more you allow it to develop more fully by allowing it flow out naturally.

As I wrote as Mama I found that I would begin by writing about some aspect of her character that I chose: her past, her dreams, her children. As I wrote, at some point Mama would step in and talk about what was important to *her*. I was writing quickly but taking care not to edit or censure, sometimes it would take a few words, other times a few paragraphs, but Mama always made her presence known and rarely did she want to talk

about what I wanted to talk about. Afterwards, when I went over what I had written I would discover another layer to Mama I hadn't considered, another emotion that I could add to the string of emotions to choose from in any particular scene. When I was onstage as Mama the muscle memory of rehearsal allowed me to proceed with my blocking and hit my mark, but my mind was focused on the memories of Mama. When dealing with Katrin or Christine or Dagmar or Nels (my children in the play), I was able to recall memories of them from a previous time (that the author never included or considered) and it was real enough to allow me to interact with them in a specific way, a way that I didn't interact with the other characters in because of the meaning of that memory. The Character's Diary allowed me to play out these moments because I had already experienced them in my imagination and recorded them in my Diary. "Fantasy is a form of thinking which is magical in character, 'magical' because it is free from the laws and realities of the external world, and therefore operates with special powers to bring things about. These things are brought about in the mind alone [...]" (Wilson, 1983) and for the actor, once brought about in the mind can later be recreated in some manner on the stage. For instance, when I interacted with Dagmar (who was my youngest and I physically touched in some way more than any character in the play) it was because each time I saw her and spoke to her I remember the fear of when she had the croup and how we almost lost her. I can recall the moment, the emotions, the terror. The result of the remembrance is that I don't express fear or terror when I interact with Dagmar, but rather a tenderness and joy that she is still with me. I would reach out and touch her face or her hair not because I love her more than my other children, but because it is a reminder that she *lived*. Of course the audience isn't aware of the dialogue that I have running through

my mind, but they are aware of the special bond that Mama has with this child and are free to run that dynamic through their own experiences creating their own personal insights about Mama.

The purpose of the Character's Diary is to explore every facet of that Character, when some new thought or emotion interrupts the progress don't try to steer away from it, let it interrupt. Let your character say what they have to say in whatever way they choose to say it. As you go back later and read what you have written you will be able to pick out the moments that you immediately connect with or that creates a new emotion or insight. If you fail to allow the character to speak thinking you will "save it for a later time" you will miss out on what you need to hear.

### ***Audience***

*My curriculum begins in solitude and ends in community. [...] At the beginning of each day's lesson I am alone but as I write my classroom is packed with the living and the dead, those I know will laugh at this line, grow sad at that one, nod at the significant detail, appreciate how this line turns, how that word surprises (Murray, 1991).*

Although Murray is talking about writing his lessons alone, he is aware that his future readers, his students, his audience is present and listening. The same is true when you are preparing to embody a character for the stage. As you write in your Character's Diary it is for you and your character alone. But when you go back to read and learn and draw emotion and memory and experiences from your character, you begin to become aware of what the audience may take away from this interpretation opposed to that one. Just as "the writer does not exist without a reader" (Murray D. M., *A Writer Teaches Writing*, 1968), the character does not exist without an audience. Although it is not necessarily within the actual writing of the Character's Diary that you consider your

audience, but rather in deciphering what you have written and deciding what to use and what to ignore in terms of developing your character. An actor cannot be every single thing they discover about their character in every single moment, but just as a writer wishes to “carry ideas and information from the mind of one person into the mind of another” (Murray D. M., 1968), so too will a character express their ideas and information to the audience. You will find multiple ways to interpret a line or monologue. The key is to recognize all those different ways, try them out in rehearsal and continue to have them available during performance. “A writer speaks in terms the reader will understand” (Murray D. M., 1968), so an actor must allow their character to perform in a way the audience understands, a way that makes sense within the parameters of the script and how any given scene is progressing onstage. Use the writing of the Character’s Diary to flesh out every possible emotion and interpretation that is available for your character and in performance let the energy of the audience and the scene guide you as to what feelings surface more than others. Always remember, your performance creates a dialogue with the audience. In this instance the composition of the Character’s Diary tells you what you want to say and all the ways you can say it, but it is in the performance that the exchange of ideas takes place.

Live theatre is different every night. Each night the audience is different, the nuances of the other characters onstage is different. The secret is to be aware when a scene is going in another direction and go with it. Don’t be scared if the interpretation varies in a scene, feel secure knowing that your character has multiple interpretations because they have a wide variety of memories and insights as you have discovered when you read their Diary. Allow your character the freedom to express themselves in this way



one night and perhaps a different way another night because you sense that is where the scene is going, or that is what the audience needs. It is not far fetched to imagine that your character could feel sad in a scene on Friday night and in the same scene, on Saturday night, feel determination. Be aware that each audience will bring a different energy to each performance and based on that energy allow your character to adjust.

With all that being said, do not write with any future audience in mind when you are in the act of composing your Character's Diary. Yes, the future audience exists but you should consider them only *after* you have written everything and become a *reader* of your Character's Diary. When you are composing your only audience is your Character who is writing the diary through you, don't consider anyone else during the writing process. The audience as "self" is one of the most important aspects of any type of writing. As William Stafford said in his *Meditations on the Writing Life*;

*As a writer, inside the writing, I don't care about the audience. You know, Whitman can worry about it. Critics, embassies, can worry about it. But as a writer, I could care less. You know, don't jiggle my elbow. I am doing something here that you got to get inside of. So I am not trying to create an audience or do something about my time. I am my time...*  
(Stafford, 2006).

As the writer of the Character's Diary don't worry or care about the audience, Stafford is right, you are "doing something that you are trying to get inside of" so write only for the eyes of the Character who is composing it. Afterward, when you are the reader of the diary, you can have your future theatre audience in mind as you pick and choose which memories to draw upon for their emotional qualities.

## **CHARACTER'S DIARY**

### ***Overall Impressions***

When we look at composing the Character's Diary, I am asserting that the actor and the writer are in essence doing the same thing, having a dialogue with their audience. There is a definite voice and exchange of ideas taking place; the writer through the use of the written word; the actor through the portrayal of his character onstage. The actor, in fact, is utilizing the written word, the dialogue of the playwright, as well as their own interpretation of the character to convey meaning to the audience. In observing the similarities between the actor and the writer is it that far of a stretch to realize that if the actor allows his character to engage in the act of writing, through the Character's Diary, it can be a tool by which the actor can quickly recognize and determine the many layers to his character as well as begin to identify with that character in a way in which their souls intertwine and they can allow their character to be heard? "The total life of the writer is the source of his work. All of these go into his writing, in varying quantities: the senses, as of taste and touch, the rate of metabolism, the blood pressure, the digestion, the body temperature, the memory of things past, perhaps going back to the childhood not only of the writer but of the race itself, the liveliness and alertness of the brain, previous reading of books, shrewdness of insight into human character, the libido, the ear for the sound of language" (Engle, 1964). So, too, is the total life of the actor the source of his craft. The parallels between writing and acting are endless because both are expression of the world through language. One on the page; the other on the stage.

"The most accurate definition of writing, I believe, is that it is the process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it" (Murray D. M., Learning By Teaching, 1982). As actors, we too are attempting to discover what our

characters have to say, what they mean when they say it. Writing the Character's Diary gives us quick access to the subtext of the dialogue and the through line of a role because we allow, through composition, our characters to actually have experiences, beyond what is given by the playwright, that communicates deeper meaning and depth of emotion that cannot be readily realized by reading the script. A script by definition is merely a blueprint; it is up to the actor to discover what lies beneath the surface of the character they are to embody. The journeys of the characters in a script are not over when the playwright completes the play; the journey is complete when the actor brings the character to life on the stage for an audience. The playwright composes for the page specifically so the actor can finish the composition on the stage. The playwrights gift to the actor is the character in the story whilst the actor's gift to the playwright is breathing life into those characters. What a character has to say is just as important to an actor as it is to the playwright who birthed that character. The Character's Diary has just as much a place next to a script in that it becomes the soul which the actor places in their mind and body so that onstage that character may live and interact among other living characters in the presence of a living audience.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

#### *Developing Character Identity Through Linguistic Variables*

I remember clearly sitting in my graduate level sociolinguistic class and filtering everything I was learning through my training and grounding as an actor. “The term “sociolinguistics” means many things to many people, and of course no one has a patent on its definition” (Hymes, 1974). The word broken down in its most simplistic terms contains “socio-” which means society and “-linguistics” which means language; therefore when I refer to sociolinguistics I am talking about the language of a society. Where things really begin to get murky is in the definition of society. We all filter the reference of “society” through our own idea of society. It could be as broad as the society of America or as narrow as the society of the place and the moment in which we currently live, as well as anywhere in between. For the purposes of character development, I look at the “society” aspect of sociolinguist as being the smallest community in which the character I am developing is from. If they reside, as Mama did, in America I must look into what state of America (California), what city (San Francisco) and what year (1910), within what community of practice (small neighborhood comprised of other Norwegian immigrants, most of which are Mama’s relations). Once I figure out the society part, I can begin to look at what the linguistics of that area in that time must have sounded like. This is what sociolinguistics means to character development.

Caution must be taken to not fall in the trap of over simplifying this concept of “language of society”. It really is more complex than simply understanding what the dialect of a region is or the accent of a language is and then adopting it. To merely

recognize that an accent or dialect exists and then adopt it according to the belief of what it sounds like, there runs the risk of speech *sounding affected*; that is, like the accent was merely “put on” in order to achieve it, without the benefit of sounding natural or native. There is a place for such affected speech, perhaps in a farce or a Saturday Night Live skit, but if a dramatic character is to be portrayed onstage in a believable way, the sociolinguistic work in character development has to be taken to ensure that the character’s speech doesn’t sound like a caricature of who they are supposed to be. It’s never enough to recognize an accent and mimic it. There must be an understanding of why it’s there, what it’s origins are, and how certain dialects, accents, words and phrases contribute to the *identity* of those who live in the area and speak in that way. People are aware of what they sound like in relation to what other people in other areas sound like. A person native to Fargo, North Dakota sounds very different from a person who was born and raised in Bronx, New York. Neither strive to sound like the other because who they are and what they sound like when they speak all contribute to their own perceived identity as a person. Their dialect/accents is woven into their identity and they embrace it, not mock it. Actors must take care not to sound like they are mocking their character with the addition of an accent or dialect that is unfamiliar to them. Actors must embrace what their character sounds like, and in order to do that they must understand why the accent/dialect is so important to their character’s personal identity.

In order to prove and understand how strongly the sense of identity of an individual is rooted in language let’s look at the famous study *The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores* conducted by William Labov in November, 1962. In this study, Labov looked at the speech of employees in three department stores,

Saks (a high ranking department store with high prices and prestige), Macy's (a middle ranking department store with midrange prices and prestige) and S. Klein (a low ranking department store with lower prices and lower prestige). The employees were asked on which floor the shoes were located which would elicit the casual response "fourth floor". The interviewer then asked the employees, "What?" to which "fourth floor" would be repeated in an emphatic manner. In this manner the interviewer was able to record 4 instances of (r), two in casual speech and two in emphatic speech in a natural setting that collected data from speech that was below the level of consciousness of the store employees who were the speakers (Labov, 1972). In Labov's own words:

*We begin with the general hypothesis suggested by exploratory interviews: if any two subgroups of New York city speakers are ranked in a scale of social stratification, then they will be ranked in the same order by their differential use of (r).*

[...]

*[T]he hypothesis will predict the following result: salespeople in the highest-ranked store will have the highest values of (r); those in the middle-ranked store will have intermediate values of (r); and those in the lowest-ranked store will show the lowest values (Labov, 1972).*

In other words, the operating theory is that the higher the prestige the store (Saks), the more likely the employees will pronounce the (r) sound both casually and emphatically, and the lower the prestige of the store (S. Klein), the more likely the employee will fail to pronounce the (r) sound both casually and emphatically, with the middle range prestige store (Macy's) having (r) pronunciation falling somewhere between the other two. The actual background prestige of the individual employees were not considered because "C. Wright Mills points out that salesgirls in large department stores tend to borrow prestige from their customers, or at least make an effort in that direction [because] a person's own occupation is more closely correlated with his linguistic behavior – for

those working actively – than any other single social characteristic” (Labov, 1972). The assumption was that the salespeople would *borrow prestige* by speaking in a manner that was more closely associated with the customers they assisted. What is relevant to keep in mind during character development, however, is not the above method and hypothesis of this famous and important study, but rather, the result.

It was found that the salespeople did in fact borrow prestige but not entirely in the manner previously hypothesized. The salespeople from Macy’s didn’t borrow prestige by speaking like the customers they waited on inasmuch as “...they came very close to the mark set by Saks” (Labov, 1972). The salespeople of Macy’s actually spoke more like the salespeople of Saks leading to the conclusion that they were “speaking up” to the job to which they aspired more so than to the customers they directly assisted. The fact that the answering of directions to elicit the “fourth floor” response is such a mundane and everyday task that it lies either just at or below the level of conscious awareness only serves to further drive home the point that the sense of identity is so deeply rooted in language use that we attend to it both in conscious and unconscious linguistic behavior. It is for this very reason that the actor needs to actively and deeply consider the sociolinguistic background of the character they are developing, especially when taking on a dialect or accent. The dialect/accents must not be merely adopted by the actor, it must be grounded in the *identity* of the character. So, what is *identity*?

“Ultimately discussions about negotiation for solidarity, support and face boil down to the issue of identity and, indeed, what we might call the ‘negotiation of identity’. Identity is a difficult term to define, probably because so much has been written about it in recent years, often in less than clear fashion” (Block, 2003). For the purposes of

character development we will look at identity through the sociolinguistic concept of the speech community. Although identity is expressed through linguistic use, the actual language itself arises out of the small social environment that is the everyday norm for the individual. This personal social environment is known to sociolinguistics as a speech community and operates with the notion that “One starts with a social group and considers the entire organization of linguistic means within it...” (Hymes, 1974). The reason actors, striving to discover character identity, need to look at the social group or the speech community as a whole rather than just the linguistic use of language in isolation is because “...the linguistic and communicative boundaries between communities cannot be defined by linguistic features alone” (Hymes, 1974). Forms of speech, unity among members of the community, identity of commonality, cultural patterns and definitions of situations all play a part in defining the identity of the speech community as well as the identity of each single individual within that speech community, as well as the fact that community membership can depend upon matters that do not involve language at all, such as birthright or relation (Hymes, 1974). Bearing these sociolinguistic theories in mind, let's look at how they operate in the realm of character development.

## **SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Preparing for Mama***

As I prepared for the role of Mama I needed to take into consideration not only the sociolinguistic aspect of Mama's speech but also the fact that English was not Mama's native language. Although I believe there is a valid role that sociolinguistics plays in the communicative competence of second language acquisition (Block, 2003; Lantolf, 2000; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Rubin, 1983; Wolfson, An Empirically Based



Analysis of Complimenting in American English, 1983; Wolfson, D'Amico-Reisner, & Huber, *How to Arrange for Social Commitments in American English: The Invitation*, 1983) for ease of understanding I will not address the sociolinguistic/SLA connection until the last part of this paper, and will strive to stick only to the sociolinguistic concepts at this juncture since not all roles will carry an SLA component also. Suffice to say the actor will deal with sociolinguistics merely in the case of regional dialects and differences in which the characters they are developing have English as their native language but their speech is still considerably 'marked' due to regional and/or other considerations.

I should also mention that I learned the Norwegian accent/dialect of Mama on my own. I learned the technique of the sounds from the manual *Accents & Dialects for Stage and Screen* which I purchased directly from Paul Meir. Paul Meir is a reknowned dialect coach who has worked with many famous American and British Actors to help them develop accents and dialects for various roles. I had the pleasure of working with him personally on a Scottish character I played in Youngstown State University's production of *FlatSpin* in the early 2000's. The program I have contains 24 of the most needed accents represented in written form as well as on Audio CD. I prefer this manual because Rhythm, Stress, Intonation, and Tone are included as well as Signature Sounds and are presented both in audio format and phonetically written sentences (Meier, 2009). There may be other programs out there that you would prefer, but this is my personal favorite.

In the case of Mama the first thing I had to consider was her particular speech community. As I mentioned earlier she was living in San Francisco in a neighborhood

comprised of other Norwegian immigrants, many of whom were her relations. The given circumstances of the script were as follows:

- The action of the play was set in San Francisco between 1905-1910.
- Mama was presumed to be “around the age of 40”.
- Mama came to America before her living children were born.
- Mama’s living children were born in America.
- Mama had her first baby at 18 years old and lived in Norway.
- This baby died at 2 years and was buried in Norway.
- Mama’s relations all came to America before she did.
- Mama’s husband Lars was a carpenter making “good money”.
- Despite Lars’ employment Mama struggled to make ends meet with four children and Lars suffering strikes and lay offs in his employ.
- Mama becomes an American Citizen.
- At the beginning of the play, Mama’s oldest child is entering 9<sup>th</sup> Grade
- At the second Act of the play, Mama’s 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest child is in 12<sup>th</sup> Grade
- Mama was close with her relations in San Francisco (Van Druten, 1971).

Based on these given circumstances I created in my Character’s Diary the following timeline:

1870 – Mama is born in Norway  
1886 – Mama is 16 and marries Lars (who is 26)  
1888 – Mama is 18 and gives birth to first baby  
1890 – Mama’s first born dies  
1891 – Mama and Lars arrive in America  
1910 – Mama has spent 19 years in America (Phillips, 2015).

Not all Character’s Diaries would require a timeline, but in this case the timeline helped me to make decisions about what it was like in the society where and when Mama lived in America. Based on the given circumstances of the play and the timeline I created I made the following assumptions about Mama’s community.

- Mama lived in a working class neighborhood.

- Most everyone on her street were immigrants from Norway or Germany.
- Many on Mama's street were her relations, more specifically;
- Mama's oldest sister Jenny (widowed),
- Mama's next oldest sister Sigrid and her husband Ole,
- Mama's next oldest sister Trina (unmarried at 42), and
- Mama's Uncle Chris.
- Mr. Thorkelson (the funeral director) is not a relation to Mama, but is from her village in Norway and is engaged to Trina lives there as well.
- Uncle Chris is the only one with a car, so Mama would have to walk everywhere she went. (Lars would have driven the horse and buggy to work).
- With four children and living check to check, Mama would not have attended any type of schooling or formal training to learn English.
- Mama learned English from her relations and neighbors who had come to America before her, from her husband Lars who spent 7 years in America before he came back to Norway to find a wife, and from her children as they grew who were born in America. (Phillips, 2015).

Based on the given circumstances and the assumptions I made from those circumstances I determined the following sociolinguistic outcomes in terms of Mama's character development.

- Although Mama had no formal means to educate herself, she was highly motivated to learn the English language not only so she could attend to everyday needs such as grocery shopping while Lars was working, but also so she could understand and communicate effectively with her children.
- Mama was determined to become an American Citizen and in her efforts to achieve that goal took all necessary steps to assimilate herself in American culture and take on an American *identity* which necessitated proper use of the language.
- Mama rarely used her native language, even when speaking with Lars or her sisters. They all recognized that constant use of the English language was the best way to practice and learn it, so never spoke in Norwegian to each other.
- As Mama's children grew, Mama would encourage them to correct her grammar so that although she never lost her Norwegian accent she would still communicate in, for the most part, grammatically correct sentences.

- Because Mama was well into her 20's by the time she was correctly using the English language, she never lost the more major components of her native accent such as;
- The vocalization of (v) on a –wh prefix ('what' was pronounced 'vhat') or a –wh sounding prefix ('one' was pronounced 'von').
- The vocalization of (d) on a –th prefix ('that' was pronounced 'dat').
- The rising intonation at the end of most sentences.
- The 'musicality' of the Norwegian language was imposed on the English sentences as a whole in terms of how rising and falling intonation was natively learned when speaking Norwegian. This 'musicality' was blanketed over the English language presenting with what would be recognized as a "thick accent".
- Mama would have a tendency to gesture more when she spoke which was a habit that was engrained while learning English whereby she would use her body language and gestures as a means to be understood clearly when she hadn't yet learned the words.
- Although she would have dropped out of school when she married at 16, Mama was proud of her accomplishments in travelling to America and becoming an American Citizen so she would move with a sense of purpose and pride. She would assert herself physically by sitting up straight, standing tall, and moving always with a sense of purpose and importance; even if she was just "fixing supper" (Phillips, 2015).

As you can see if you page through the addendum of *Mama's Diary*, I did not make definite sociolinguistic considerations in order as presented in the tidy list I presented above. As each entry was made, I took into consideration the reasons why Mama said what she said, and did what she did and although I was working on the accent throughout all of rehearsal, it wasn't until I began to make the conscious sociolinguistic connections to Mama's identity that the accent began to sound natural and not forced. It was only after the diary was finished that I was able to refer to it for this thesis and create the list from the entries. This doesn't mean that I wasn't conscious of the sociolinguistic aspects. I was very conscious of them. But rather than *impose* these considerations onto Mama from the onset, I let her tell me, piece by piece in each entry, what they were. It was in the evaluation of these entries prior to rehearsal that I was able to connect the linguistic

variables of the accent I was learning with the identity of Mama. When the foreign sounds began to take on tangible meaning in context to Mama's life the accent stopped sounding 'put on' and 'forced' and took on a native quality that actually would seep into my everyday life outside of rehearsal. Because of the conscious sociolinguistic connections I was making while evaluating Mama's Diary in the development of the accent, as well as the 'intertwining of souls' that was occurring as Mama composed her diary I found that I had to consciously 'turn off' Mama during my everyday life routine rather than 'turn on' Mama when rehearsal came. I became so closely associated with her that, even at this writing, she bubbles near the surface and slips into being during such mundane activities such as cooking, cleaning or communicating with my children. Her mannerisms, her movements, her linguistic variables all find their way into my life constantly. Like when I said "Tank you" to the teller at the bank and "is goot" when my husband told me he finished the motorcycle he was working on.

Since we are still in production at this typing, I am quite content to allow Mama to continue to live alongside me, even at the expense of her invading my reality. Not only am I assured that she will be there in full force come performance time, it serves to remind me that the composition of the Character's Diary has become more than a fast connection to my character as I go from life to the stage, it has served as a *constant connection* to my character because, indeed, our souls have intertwined. Where The Character's Diary connected me with Mama's emotions, back story, motivations and reactions, the sociolinguistic implications of developing an accent and an identity grounds those emotions, motivations, intentions, actions and reactions into a fully developed, living, breathing *person* onstage and off. The way Mama sounds, gestures

and moves are natural and native because they are grounded in memories that make sense both scripturally and sociolinguistically.

## **SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Teaching Implications/Pedagogy***

Suffice to say, in order to adequately consider the sociolinguistic aspects of a given character's identity the actor would have to have at least a basic knowledge of sociolinguistics overall. I have given some insights in this paper on how I applied sociolinguistics to the character of Mama, but there are many different nuances to the study of sociolinguistics that are not mentioned here and could be useful to a different character. I would encourage the actor to seek out and take a sociolinguistic class even if their current school of theatre does not require one, or, at the very least, reasearch the sociolinguistic field on their own. Because it is such a broad and studied field I would recommend that at least the following considerations be made while writing The Character's Diary so that when The Character's Diary is reread and evaluated, the actor can recognize a trail of crumbs the character left for them to discover. As always, the more the actor knows about any subject the better equipped they will be to apply it to their needs. In the event the actor has yet to start studying or researching the field of sociolinguistics, I have listed the most basic considerations:

- Remember, for the purposes of the Character's Diary we are looking at sociolinguistics in it's most basic definition "the language of a particular society".
- Break down 'society' even more to represent the 'speech community' or the small personal society that the character currently lives in; this could be their neighborhood, their prison block, a workplace...it all depends on that particular character's situation.
- Be conscious of the fact that language use is an inherent part of identity.

- When looking at adopting an accent or dialect connect the accent/dialect sociolinguistically to the character by identifying what particular linguistic aspects are grounded in the character's identity: Phrases, words, linguistic variables in terms of sound and cadence all represent something to that character; find out what.
- While learning the accent/dialect don't try to force it; it may sound uncomfortable and 'put on' in the beginning but as the mouth is trained to form the sounds, the mind will be trained to connect the new sounds to emotions and memories of the character, eventually a natural and nativelike sound will emerge: The key is to do the work, but let the accent/dialect evolve. Don't try to merely mimic what has been heard by "putting on" obvious aspects of a given accent.
- Remember that identity in a speech community is more than language: Ask questions; what social factors play a role in membership? Birthright? Common connections such as criminality in a prison or police officer in a precinct should be explored as well.
- Physically explore connections in a speech community. All police officers tend to take on a certain physical being in terms of stance, movement and gesture that is different from the physicality of a common criminal. Is the character a dancer? A bartender?
- Explore the physicality of the speech community the character is a part of, then explore how the individual character's physicality emerges in relation to that community: A police officer who is imprisoned would have a different and developing physicality that may change over time depending on when in the script he lands in jail.
- Don't overlook a character's individualism in relation to their speech community. People can have things in common but they are still different.
- Be aware of the sociolinguistic 'given circumstances' of the script and accept these circumstances (because they cannot be changed) when working on The Diary. The given circumstances are the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions the script answers directly in the dialogue or the author's notes. It could be found in any dialogue the character speaks, or any dialogue between other characters as well.
- Don't overlook what other characters have to say about your character!
- Be aware of the sociolinguistic aspects when writing in The Diary, but don't try to force any aspects (other than the given circumstances) on the character. See what the character has to say first. When reviewing and evaluating the entries be conscious of sociolinguistic implications that emerge naturally as they will be

closer to the identity of the character than something that is just 'made up'.

Of course this is by no means an exhaustive list of sociolinguistic implications, but it is a good start. The important thing to remember in character development is the actor must stay true to the given circumstances of the script but must also build the 'before' and 'after' circumstances while recognizing any present circumstances that arise that the playwright has not addressed. The key is finding a character's identity. This is not done by *adopting* the accent/dialect, but by *connecting* the accent/dialect to the character's emotions and memories as they relate to their specific speech community. Be aware of the sociolinguistic implications, but don't force them. While working on *Mama's Diary* I didn't consider the sociolinguistic implications until I had a substantial part of *Mama's Diary* complete and the sociolinguistic aspects naturally emerged. It was when I was able to tie in the sociolinguistic identity of *Mama* that her accent became native sounding and natural and that wasn't until the third or fourth week of rehearsal. That doesn't mean I didn't practice the techniques of the accent prior to that; I practiced the techniques from day one. It just wasn't until I was able to understand how the language contributed to *Mama's* identity that the accent became natural. This time frame will be different for everyone depending on the character they are playing and how far that character's speech is from the actor learning it. I had never in my life spoken or heard a Norwegian accent until this play. The success I enjoyed in both developing the accent and being able to integrate it so fully into my character's identity to achieve natural delivery in such a short time is a testament to how indispensable the *Character's Diary* really is, as it served as yet another Tarzan Rope that allowed me to go from technically correct speech as taught by Mr. Meier to native-like delivery in the portrayal of *Mama*.



## CHAPTER 3

### SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT *Sociolinguistic Implications of Linguistic Variations*

Although every character will have sociolinguistic considerations because, unless they live alone on an island, every character will have at least one speech community that will affect the choices an actor makes about that character's identity and linguistic features, not every character will have a second language variable to consider. For the purpose of this thesis I am discussing character development where it is assumed the language being spoken by the character is English. As discussed earlier, we know that the English language is comprised of many accents and regional dialects. Sometimes, as I had to deal with in the case of playing Mama, a character will speak English but it will not be their native language. The common reaction to this event is to merely speak in accent. This has worked for many to many varying degrees but it is my contention that there is more to be considered than simply 'what was the character's native language' if an actor wishes to fully develop the character they portray as well as have a natural and native-like quality to their speech that goes beyond 'adopting an accent'. As noted earlier, to simply 'put on' an accent, one runs the risk of it sounding just like that, 'put on'. When dealing with a character that has English as their second language the actor needs to combine the sociolinguistic components that were present when the second language was acquired and weave those components into the character's sense of identity as well as consider the implications the sociolinguistic components will have on the linguistic variables of the character's accent/dialect.

Sociolinguistics does play a role in achieving communicative competence in second language acquisition (SLA). Dell Hymes introduced the sociolinguistic definition

of “communicative competence” in SLA as considering the competence of the L2 speaker to be more about how they are able to communicate socially (by both being understood and having understanding) in their L2 than about grammatical correctness. The definition includes the theory that language use is based in human social interaction including conscious as well as unconscious use and understanding (Hymes, 1974; Block, 2003). It is the ability to combine linguistic and sociolinguistic rules to convey meaning in communicative interaction (Lantolf, 2000). Since much, if not all, of what a character does revolves around social interaction, be it interactions that occurred prior to the moments onstage, the interactions that are taking place on stage or both, the significant role SLA plays in combination with the sociolinguistics of the time the L2 was learned is an important consideration when developing that character’s accent and identity.

There is much study and research that recognizes the importance of linguistic rules and meaning and how they operate within social and cultural rules and meaning just below the level of consciousness (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Rubin, 1983; Wolfson, An Empirically Based Analysis of Complimenting in American English, 1983; Wolfson, D’Amico-Reisner, & Huber, How to Arrange for Social Commitments in American English: The Invitation, 1983). Although I am all for actors going out and educating themselves in this realm, suffice to say there are some key components that can be drawn from these studies that are important to keep in mind in the creation of The Character Diary. Once an actor is aware of these components, they will be able to consider them more fully during the creation of The Character’s Diary. As a more practical way of learning, let’s look at this application through the process of creating Mama’s Diary.

## **SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Preparing for Mama***

One of the first considerations actors need to make when dealing with a character that has learned English as a foreign language is to determine what age the character was when they began to learn it. This information may be given by the playwright within the given circumstances of the play or the actor may have to make a determination on their own. This is an important consideration because there is a theory within the field of SLA known as *Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)*. “In it’s most succinct and theory-neutral formulation, the CPH states that there is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to aquire a language, be it L1 or L2, to normal, nativelylike levels. Once this window of opportunity is passed, however, the ability to learn language declines” (Birdsong, 1999). Without having to prepare an entire essay on the CPH, an oversimplified explanation of the theory is that it is due to the evolving neural plasticity of the brain, as well as the fact that cognitive immaturity is much better than cognitive maturity in L2 learning because most adults tend to balk at the idea of relearning grammatical points and tend to overanalyze the data of the new language against what they know to be true in their own language (Birdsong, 1999).

In other words, both physically and mentally speaking adults have a harder time learning a second language in that they resist the new rules associated with how to use that language, whereby children may learn the L2 at a slower pace, but they accept the rules and the constraints and are able to learn it with a native like quality. “It is generally believed...that the language instinct is dramatically decreased around the age of puberty” (Gordon, 2007).

In all fairness, I must point out that although many studies have indeed revealed that children do in fact learn an L2 with nativelike speaking, many are on the fence as to whether it is actually true that an adult cannot hope to achieve nativelike speaking. The results of many studies show that adults rarely achieve the nativelike acquisition of their L2, but this could be because of other factors that have nothing to do with their physical makeup, such as retention of identity developed in their L1 or motivation to only learn what is needed (Birdsong, 1999). In any case, it is a relevant consideration to your character's diary because if your character learned English prior to puberty, according to the CPH they would have a nativelike quality in speaking English. If the character learned English as a child, it would be up to the actor then to determine *where* the character learned English to determine if they would have a dialect that favored the area in which they learned English, such as British, American, or Australian for example.

In the case of Mama I considered the given circumstances of the script and evaluated determinations I made during the creation of Mama's Diary in creating Mama's accent as follows:

- Mama did not learn English until she came to America at the age of 20.
- Mama had no formal training.
- Mama learned English from mostly family and friends who lived in her neighborhood.
- Mama lived in San Francisco, California but rarely left her neighborhood.
- Mama's neighborhood was comprised of family and friends who were Norwegian and German immigrants.
- Mama was very motivated to learn English because her children were born in America and Mama wanted to become an American citizen.
- Because Mama was so proud of her American citizenship, she was willing and motivated to learn English as she accepted it as part of her overall identity.

- Because she lacked formal training, Mama initially learned English from others who had a Norwegian accent. She did not work on losing her accent at the onset.
- Once Mama's children got older, she would have them correct her grammar and sentence structure, so Mama achieved communicative competence that was at a fluent speaking level.
- Due to Mama's age and the lack of formal training and possibly her age at learning English, there was an undeniably thick accent whereby she was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to pronounce certain English prefix sounds correctly such as (-wh) and (-th).
- Because Mama was so close with her family and still felt a connection with her deceased child back home, Mama was not motivated to lose her Norwegian accent completely because it was woven into her identity in that it represented where she grew up and where she was from originally.

I realized that it was important to not only recognize that Mama learned English as a second language but *where* Mama learned English. Sociolinguistic implications of place and identity came into play to determine just how much of Mama's accent remained and how well she was able to maneuver the English language overall. Mama's identity was complex in that she was motivated and proud to become an American citizen so spoke fluent and grammatically correct English, yet was not willing to give up her Norwegian identity of accent that tied her to her family and friends in the speech community as well as her past. Once I recognized and evaluated these implications I was able to make conscious decisions on what mama's accent would sound like.

A key component to the Norwegian accent is its Germanic influence. There are two dialectal variations I considered, upper class and lower class. In the upper class dialect the prefix sound (th-) would be pronounced (z-), so "that" would sound like "zat"; in the lower class variation the prefix sound (-th) would be pronounced (d-), so "that" would sound like "dat" (Meier, 2009). Since I determined Mama came from a small

village in Norway, I opted to use the lower class variation of (d-) when pronouncing prefix (th-) sounds, as follows:

“that” was pronounced “dat”  
“this” was pronounced “dis”  
“there” was pronounced “dere”  
“they” was pronounced “day”, and so on.

There was however, one instance in which I opted to use the upper class variation. Paul Meier teaches that dialects and accents are not uniformly applied always (Meier, 2009). Casual speech will differ from emphatic speech, as we saw in the Labov study, and people are aware of and exposed to different regional dialects in their native languages. Mama has a line that reads “And what is that” (Van Druten, 1971) in casual speech in response to her youngest daughter. Because the word “is” with the ending (-z) sound precedes the word “that”, it sounded and felt more natural for Mama to run the sounds together resulting in the line being pronounced “And vhat iz zat”, opting to use the upperclass variable “zat” instead of the lowerclass variable “dat”. Operating on the assumption that Mama has been exposed to the upperclass variation I determined that she considered it a correct usage in that it would not sound “funny” to her ear. Since Mama was speaking in casual conversation, her utterance would lie below the level of consciousness and thus would be spoken in the easiest manner possible. I found that more effort needed to be made to say, “Vhat iz dat”, and less effort was required to say “Vhat iz zat”. It stands to reason that with Mama’s exposure to both dialects and the fact her utterance lied below the level of consciousness, the utterance would happen with the least amount of effort possible. Although this was the only time this event occurred within the entire dialogue of Mama’s speech, it lead to a more natural sounding accent because there was no ‘fumbling’ or forced intonation with trying to say “Vhat is dat”.

The other major linguistic variation for Mama, as mentioned in passing above, was the prefix sound (wh-) which in both Norwegian and German would be pronounced (vh-). Examples are as follows:

“what” was pronounced “vhat”  
“when” was pronounced “vhen”  
“where” was pronounced “vhere”  
“why” was pronounced “vhy”  
“one” was pronounced “vhon”

Remember, it wasn't the prefix spelling that caused the linguistic variation, it was the prefix *sound*. So the word “who” would be pronounced “hoo” because it does not have a strong (wh-) sound at the beginning. In both instances of prefixal sound changes it is important to note that in the Norwegian language the accent or stress is placed at the end of a word, not the beginning. So when uttering the (d-) and (vh-) words it's important not to ‘hit’ or stress the beginning of the word. The utterance is not plosive, but rather softer because in Norwegian cadence intonation rises slightly at the end of a word and at the end of most sentences.

I noticed some supporting role actors in the play adopted the accent by giving a plosive (vh-) and (d-) sound which created a mockery of the accent as opposed to a nativelike quality which is exactly what actors would want to avoid. This is another reason why the Character's Diary is so important. Not only does it force the actor to think of the many details of Character Development as well as attaining a natural sounding accent/dialect, it forces the actor to continue working outside the rehearsal process. Students like to be given credit for their work, so work outside the rehearsal process that goes unnoticed is not seen as worthwhile. But it is very worthwhile, because it reveals itself later on the stage through the actor's powerful performance. The payoff

not only comes when the actor recognizes their performance is brilliant, but in the moment that the audience shows their recognition of the performance when they congratulate the actor on their amazing talent. The audience did not see the work the actor did leading up to the performance, so they may recognize the actor's talent as "natural" because the actor made the performance of the character look effortless. An audience shows recognition for the actor's work and appreciation for a great performance even if they attribute the performance to the actor's 'God given talent as an actor'. Either way credit is being given to the work done in secret through the accolades received in public when a character is brought to life onstage. An actor lives for the applause and it is in the moments of bringing a character successfully to life onstage that the actor will receive their reward.

## **SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT** *Teaching Implications/Pedagogy*

As with sociolinguistics an actor does not need to hold a degree in SLA inasmuch as they need to be aware of the implications SLA holds for a character who is speaking English, but English is not their native language. The sociolinguistic considerations are highly important no matter what character is played, but when it comes to SLA and character development an actor must take care to consider the sociolinguistic aspects of *when* and *where* their character learned English because it may have been in a different speech community than the one the character is currently residing in. If their character is speaking English as a second language the following considerations need to be made when writing The Character's Diary:

- At what age did the character learn English? Was it during the sensitive period (before puberty) of the CPH?



- How old is the character during the actual time period the play is set in? Are they very young in the first act with a thicker accent that over the years, by the second act, begins to wane over time?
- Where was English learned? British English sounds different than American English or Australian English and so on.
- Once country is determined, consider the region of the country English was learned in. Would the character be speaking an upper or lower class version? RP (or the Queen's English) would be different than working class English in Britain.
- How much training did the character receive in English? Days, weeks, months, years? Immersion or classroom?
- Was the training formal, such as in a classroom? Or did they learn as Mama did from other immigrants?
- How well did the character learn English? Did they merely achieve communicative competence or did they become fluent? Are their sentences complete or broken?
- What was the character's motivation to learn English? Survival? Forced to by another person or situation? Other factors?
- How much does the character assimilate English into their Identity? Are they willing to attempt to lose the accent? Is the accent thick or incidental?
- What are the given circumstances of the play? Does the play answer any of the above questions either through the character's dialogue or the playwright's notes? Any decisions made cannot violate the given circumstances of the play.
- Make conscious decisions based on sociolinguistic and SLA implications evaluating which parts of the accent will be kept and which parts won't. Stress, intonation (rising or falling), cadence and other linguistic features all play a role; it's up to the actor to determine how much of a role.
- Consider the sociolinguistic aspects of the character's current speech community: How does it affect identity, accent and gesture? Consider the speech community that the SLA was learned in. What gestures or physicality may be 'left over' from that speech community which could add another dimension to the character.

As with the sociolinguistic aspects of character development, this is not an exhaustive list but it is a good start. The key is to not overlook the SLA influence.

Everytime an actor adds another layer, another dimension to their character the more lifelike and real the character becomes onstage. The most subtle factors of language can have profound affects on character development because identity is so closely tied to

language. Don't be overwhelmed with trying to learn multiple theories of SLA. What is most important to the actor is the sociolinguistic role that is played in SLA and how that has affected or influenced their character over time and place. I found that when I applied the sociolinguistic and SLA aspects to Mama's Diary it helped create a dialect that was natural and natively like. Mama took on gestures and mannerisms that emerged from her language just as much from her intentions. Her identity was so closely tied to the language that the small nuances of considering her SLA (such as the "zat" usage) only added to her liveness and believability onstage. Because I took care to consider both the sociolinguistic and SLA implications Mama wasn't played by me. She lived through me.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINAL THOUGHTS

I trust you, as an actor, will find the first section regarding composition and The Character's Diary easier to digest and apply. This is because when you begin the process of character development you are actually doing just that, you are composing, you are using the dialogue and the given circumstances that the playwright gave you. If you are doing it right, your character will not be a carbon copy of what another actor portrayed as your character at a previous time. The script is only the blueprint; what we do with it as actors in developing our characters is composition. We choose the intentions, the backstory, the actions and reactions, the way the character sounds, moves, gestures, sits, stands, walks...all are factors that directly relate to the composition of our character. I chose Donald Murray as a blueprint for the character's diary because he breaks down for us all the elements of written composition in an eloquent and understandable way that directly relates to the composition of a character onstage. When I first read Murray, the way he presented the elements of writing resonated with the same elements I was using as an actor. Although I had written backstories for my characters prior to reading Murray, it was in his presentation of each element of writing that I discovered the actual connection between writing and acting. Just as the writer must attend to solitude, experience, faith, need, tension, voice, pattern, productivity and audience in written composition so too must the actor consider the same factors in character composition. It's not enough to understand these elements exist and are related; if the actual act of applying the elements to acting through composition is not applied then no connections to character will ever be made. These elements are the backbone of the Character's Diary in

that the actor must consider each in a personal and direct relation to the character to establish that connection. As each element is considered in kind the actor must let the character compose the diary. Any emotions, memories, relatable events in the character's life should emerge because each of Murray's elements are filtered through the life and personality of that character. Keeping all these elements in mind allows the character to reveal their motivations, memories, revelations and insights into their existence, which creates an actual, tangible connection with the actor that not only allows the character to live onstage, but live within the actor in a way that intertwines the two souls. Murray offers these elements as a way to allow students to connect with their writing in that their writing should *mean* something. The character an actor portrays is the embodiment of the *meaning* of that character. The Character's Diary creates wonderful Tarzan ropes that through writing and re-reading help the actor to instantly connect to their character just prior to rehearsal or performance, a connection that is especially difficult to obtain when the actor doesn't have the luxury of "living their character in real life" as Method Acting suggests. It allows the method actor to live their character in 'real life' on the pages of the diary while they are outside of rehearsal in a way that allows the actor to immediately reimagine time, place, emotions, and memories by simply reading over a few passages. Writing as the character in secret affords the luxury of exploring any and all avenues without the fear of judgement of others. It allows the actor to embody the character in a safe place so vulnerabilities may be explored which in turn helps the actor to recognize and tear down any personal walls that get in the way of the character 'living' onstage. There is no set structure, no ordering of time and events, and no need to worry about grammar because The Diary is a private and personal document for the

character's eyes only (which also happen to be the actor's eyes). The only rule is that the character is given permission to explore any and all avenues of their identity, motivations, past, present and anything else that arises. Keeping in mind the elements of composition as set forth by Murray serves to remind the actor to explore *every aspect* of character composition, thus leaving no stone unturned. This is the heart and soul of The Character's Diary and I trust, as the actor gets used to writing as their character, they will find the easiest.

Whether or not a character will speak with an accent/dialect, the character will definitely not sound like the actor. I add the sociolinguistic aspect of The Character Diary as a layer that will help the actor explore identity through language. Gestures, mannerisms and movement can emerge from language use and the sociolinguistics of a speech community inasmuch as they can emerge from character intention. I find that an actor's biggest challenge is what to do with their hands and bodies. By making an effort to recognize the speech community in which the character resides, actors can solve this problem by looking at the movements, gestures, and mannerisms associated with that speech community. As humans, we tend to 'look' like those we spend the most time with in that we mirror movement. Once the speech community is identified, police station, prison, immigrant neighborhood, youth center, whatever that speech community turns out to be, there will be a sense of identity that not only reveals itself linguistically in phrases used, accents or cadences, but also in how the members of that community carry themselves physically. There is a wealth of information an actor can derive about their character if they only take the time to look at who their character spends the most time with. In any case, care must always be taken to determine and look at where the

character came from and where they are now. More than one speech community may need to be considered, but each will have a profound influence on the character and it will be up to the actor which influences to keep and which to discard. The bottom line is there will always be decisions and having decisions that are grounded in the given circumstances of the script and developed through The Character's Diary are the ones that will yield the best results.

In the case of a character who speaks English but it is not their native language, there is yet another layer of decisions to make. I don't intend that the actor get caught up in the theories and debates of SLA, but rather know that they exist and understand that the sociolinguistic setting in which the character learned English will impact the character's identity. Each sociolinguistic situation carries with it a social, political and cultural climate that the character will either embrace or rally against. I don't add the SLA aspect to make life more difficult, I add it so that more choices become available. Writers make choices in composition; actors make choices in character development which is the "compositon" of the actor. Every layer and dimension that can be added to the character makes them that more believable in performance. It is important that the accent/dialect is learned from a reputable source so when the character reveals memories and information in the diary, the actor can make conscious decisions about how much of, and what aspects of the accent/dialect will be used. When choices about accent/dialect are grounded in the sociolinguistic circumstances of the character's life, those choices cannot be wrong. What would be wrong is to just 'adopt' or 'put on' any accent without proper care being given to *why* the character sounds like that.

Finally, don't be deterred by the fact that the majority of the work is being done 'in secret'. It's easy to assume that if no one sees The Character's Diary the actor won't get credit for all the hours spent in character development. This is a lie. The actor will get credit. When they walk into each rehearsal with intentions and motivations to try they will get credit for being prepared and for allowing their character to grow by their director and cast mates; or maybe they won't. Maybe they will just keep working. But this is no reason for despair! The actor absolutely will be given credit in the final performance! When they bring a complete, living, breathing, vulnerable character to the stage and allow them to 'be' audiences will respond and they will respond positively. Not only will the actor recognize and enjoy audience enjoyment of the show as it progresses but the applause at the end will be well worth it. There is much to be said of the personal satisfaction of bringing a completely developed character to the stage. Not only will audience members rave about the actor's great talent, but the actor's colleagues in the industry will take notice as well. Directors will want them for roles, actors will want to perform alongside of them, all because of the work that was done "in secret".

The Character's Diary is a way of practicing method acting in a safe place because the page allows the character the freedom to say or do anything. It helps the actor tear down personal walls that prevent the character from emerging and it allows a safe place for exploring all avenues and making choices about who the character is and what they have to say. It will create Tarzan ropes that will allow the actor to quickly connect with their character because they will always have instant access to the character's memories, feelings, intentions, emotions, past, present and the like. Remember, we are more than actors, we are composers, but our composition is

fleeting...a brief moment in rehearsal or performance. We do not want to fall into the trap of ‘recreating’ what we learned in rehearsal during performance. Once we start ‘recreating’ we stop composing and just copy. The Character’s Diary lets the character live in a tangible way that is not fleeting, but rather always evolving. Even when the character stops writing in the Diary, the character is continually in composition, evolving each performance, because their life is based on more than a fleeting moment in rehearsal.

As an acting instructor who is considering teaching The Character’s Diary to students who are trained in, or currently learning, Method Acting and students who are struggling to fully develop and connect with the character they are playing because they are having trouble applying the theories of The Method, know that The Character’s Diary is a benefit to *all* actors, regardless of how skilled they are in their craft. Each character offers new directions, new developments and new paths of discovery. Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Levels tells instructors that “a learning objective should describe what students should know or be able to do at the end of the course that they couldn’t do before” (Oregon, 2015). Bloom lists six levels of cognitive development being, *knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis* and *evaluation*, in that order with each level building on the one before it propelling the student to move through each level into higher cognitive learning (Oregon, 2015; ICELS, 2015). The Character’s Diary is pushing the student to learn at both of the highest cognitive levels which are *synthesis* and *evaluation*. Synthesis is “the ability to put parts together to form a new whole. This may involve the production of a unique communication, a plan of operations, or a set of abstract relations. Learning outcomes in this area stress creative behaviors, with major



emphasis on the formulation of new patterns or structure” (Oregon, 2015). Evaluation is “the ability to judge the value of material for a given purpose. Learning outcomes in this area are the highest in the cognitive hierarchy because they contain elements of all the other categories, plus conscious value judgments based on clearly defined criteria” (Oregon, 2015). The Character’s Diary utilizes the *knowledge* of both Method Acting and English in a *comprehensive* way by forcing the student to grasp the meaning of specific aspects of both disciplines and interpret them in relation to each other by *applying* that combined knowledge in the act of creating the Character’s Diary then *analyzing* the content of that Diary in regards to what it means to *be* their character on an emotional and physical level to achieve the *synthesis* of the completely developed character living *through* the actor onstage in performance. The Diary forces the student to move through each Cognitive Level with the express intent to achieve *synthesis* (the embodiment of a fully developed character onstage) as the main objective by being able to *evaluate* all the material they created leading up to and including the point of *synthesis*. “Learning objectives at [the level of evaluation] judge the logical consistency of written material, judge the adequacy with which conclusions are supported by data, judge the value of a work (art, music, writing) by the use of internal criteria, judge the value of a work (art, music, writing) by use of external standards of excellence” (Oregon, 2015). Since the main objective is to reach the highest level of cognitive learning then the process would be beneficial to actors of all experience levels because the level of synthesis (character development), when achieved, can only increase for each individual as they *evaluate* the achieved synthesis in each application. In other words, when operating at the level of synthesis an actor will continually get better at developing and

embodying their character because the actor is constantly *evaluating* the progress, how the choices the characters make and the emotional responses the characters feel stack up in reference to the data of the script, the character's background and all the information created and discovered in the Character's Diary. What's more actors will evaluate how well they achieved total synthesis of character in relation to overall performance, director and audience feedback, as well as in comparison to other characters brought to life in the past. It doesn't matter if an actor is just starting out or has a lifetime of experience, everyone has the capacity to learn a little more, dig a little deeper, embody their character a little more fully. On the flip side of that coin, every character is different and offers its own challenges to overcome so using The Diary as a method to move through each cognitive level of character development allows the actor to meet the needs of each aspect of character development their particular character warrants without sacrificing anything along the way.

Murray utilizes the Cognitive Levels in his approach to writing by using each of his elements as a stepping stone to achieve the *synthesis* of piece of writing which the writer achieves by *evaluating* every element about writing up to achieving synthesis as well as evaluating the outcome. The method actor uses The Method to achieve the *synthesis* of a developed character onstage through *evaluation* of the given circumstances of the script and subtext. The challenges the method actor faces are how to apply the theory of The Method when they never done it before, and in the case of the experienced actor, hitting a plateau of only ever being able to 'go so far' in character development with no way to surpass their previous efforts. The Character's Diary forces the method actor to use both Murray's elements and the elements of method acting in combined

application to achieve the synthesis of a living, breathing character onstage in a *tangible* process that is more than ‘application of theory’. The Diary is individualized to each character played and utilizes concepts from two disciplines (English and Method Acting) to achieve the desired result of forcing the actor to confront (and evaluate) every aspect of each character instead of glossing over seemingly un consequential aspects in favor of obvious choices. It is a journey through composition (whose desired cognitive level is synthesis through evaluation) in combination with method acting (whose desired cognitive level is also synthesis through evaluation) to allow the actor to achieve the highest cognitive level of character development: *embodiment*. This is achieved through The Character’s Diary, a tangible, individualized connection to each character an actor is asked to play; it is the write way to act!

**ADDENDUM: MAMA’S DIARY**  
*An Example of One Character’s Diary*

**Mama’s Timeline:**

1870 – Mama is born in Norway  
1886 – Mama is 16 and marries Lars (who is 26)  
1888 – Mama is 18 and gives birth to first baby  
1890 – Mama’s first born dies  
1891 – Mama and Lars arrive in America  
1910 – Mama has spent 19 years in America

**Mama’s Sisters:**

Jenny: 5 years older than Mama (oldest)  
Sigrid: 4 years older than Mama  
Trina: 2 years older than Mama

**Mama’s Uncle:**

Uncle Chris: 13 years older than Mama

**Mama's Husband:**

Lars: 5 years older than Mama

**GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES OF PLAY:**

Set in San Francisco, California around turn of the Century 1901 – 1910.

Mama from Norway

Came to San Francisco as an adult and she was already married to Lars

Mama had her living children in San Francisco

Nels the oldest, then Katrin, then Christine, then Dagmar (1 boy 3 girls)

When Mama was in Norway with Lars their first baby was a boy and died at the age of two.

Mama's family, (Jenny, Sigrid, Trina, Uncle Chris) all moved from Norway to America years prior to Mama's arrival.

Mama and Lars live paycheck to paycheck. He makes "good money" as a carpenter, but they never seem able to save very much. (with four kids its no wonder)

Mama became an American Citizen.

## JENNY'S JEALOUSY

Jenny was always jealous of the attention I received at being the youngest. Jenny was a full five years older than me. I remember how neighbors and family who would stop by always had 'a special treat for the baby'. Me. I was the baby, and even though it was just a piece of candy or a small toy, Jenny would be furious. She probably figured she was around longer and deserved special attention more than I did. It seems it's always the baby that gets more attention because babies are smaller, younger, weaker and cuter. Don't get me wrong, noone brough me treats when I was 12, but I can see how Jenny being 12 and watching her 7 year old sister get things she no longer did could lead to jealousy. She thought I was being rewarded for just being little, so she would go out of her way to make it known, to everyone, but me especially, how much older, smarter, better she was than me. Of course, this didn't get her treats which probably added to the frustration. Because I was the last one born, I got the attention for the longest. Jenny had Sigrid on her heels in the age department and then Trina came along, so I don't think any of my sisters really had a chance to get the baby treatment because there was always another baby on the way. But me, I was born last, and I was spoiled the longest. Sigrid and Trina didn't seem to take it as bad as Jenny. Maybe because Jenny always had the edge of "being the oldest". But it was in my coming that "being the youngest" started to win out because "being the oldest" only meant "you should know better". Sigrid would sometimes chime in with Jenney in her teasing, but only because Sigrid would so desperately want Jenny's attention. Sigrid was always hanging about on Jenny's heels. Trina though kept to herself. When she had to choose, she went with the older girls because I was usually held back with my parents. But Jenny, Jenny was the worst. Which is why I would go out of my way to make her like me. I let her boss me, I did her chores, and I endured her teasing. When it seemed to never work, I began to avoid her. Hang back with Mama or Papa or Uncle Chris, the people who doted on me. Soon I became content with watching my older sisters from afar and not trying to join in with them. This would make me sad, they were having fun and all I could do was watch because joining in would mean ridicule. So I learned to do for myself, find my own joy, tie my own shoes

## THE SHOES:

I remember walking to school at a very young age. I think I was about 7, Jenny 12, Sigrid, 11 and Trina 9. Uncle Chris walked with us, he was around 20 I think and had to work not far from the school. He didn't have a horse but always left early with us girls; I think he did it for mama (his sister) who hated the idea of her girls walking the quiet road as the sun wasn't fully up. The school was nothing more than a big room about a mile from our house, all the kids walked to it no matter what their age. There was eight grades but only one teacher and she took turns teaching each grade which meant if I finished my math problems early I could listen to the teachings for the grades higher than mine. Anyways, I was walking slower than usual which of course upset my sister Jenny who was older and more important than me. Uncle Chris didn't seem to mind as he kept in step by my side, but Jenny, exasperated stopped walking and tapped her foot waiting for our approach. When I was just a foot or so away from her she kicked the dust from the lane onto my shoes! My clean shoes that mama sat by the fire polishing so carefully last night and I instantly burst into tears! "hurry up you big baby or there is more where that came from". Before I had the time to suck in a breath Uncle Chris has snatched Jenny's Arm and held her so high and tight it seemed only her toes touched the lane! "Clean them. Now." He said it very low, very quiet, but his teeth were clamped together and his tone was scary. Even Jenny looked scared and she never looked scared. Uncle Chris let her go. She stared at him for a very long time and he stared back. All I could do was stand there and sniff back snot while the tears fell and want to die on the spot, for so many reasons! Surely I would pay for Jenny's scolding later! But then Jenny looked at me. Really looked at me. Her eyes softn'd and she pulled out her white hankerchief and knelt at my feet "JENNY NO!!!" I screamed, or hoarsely said, it sounded loud in the crisp early morning air even if it wasn't. I was so humiliated and ashamed that Jenny should clean my shoes. I deserved it, I was dawdelling, I was making her late and she WAS older and more important. "Marta, it's okay" Jenny said in a soothing voice. "I was wrong for soiling your clean shoes and its not fair to you or mama that I done such a thing". We must have wasted a full five minutes while Jenny spit shined my dusty black shoes with her white hankerchief until they were as clean as mama made them the night before. Then she stood up, put her arm around my shoulders and said "here, we can walk close so I can help you keep up". But she didn't help me keep up, she slowed her pace to match mine. After that I never got the "pay" I thought Jenny would give me for Uncle Chris making her clean my shoes. She never mentioned it again. She still bossed me around endlessly and yelled at me for my shortcomings, but I suddenly didn't mind so much. I endured her big sisterness with the knowledge that under the underneath of it all Jenny really did love me. If she didn't she would never have cleaned my shoes.

## MEETING LARS:

I turned 16 today! I figured on it being just an ordinary day with cake at the end, and that's what it started out as....but boy did things change! Mama wanted me out of the house while she and my sisters cooked and baked so everything would be ready when Papa came home from work, so she gave me some change and sent me off to town to buy some penny candy for everyone; what a treat! As I was stepping off his front porch with my bag of sweets I misjudged the first step and stumbled all the way down into the dirt. I was so embarrassed! Mostly because everybody in the area came rushing over. "I'm fine, I'm fine, I said as I tried to stand...but I wasn't fine, my ankle hurt dearly and I couldn't put any weight on it. Someone yelled for the Doctor and he came by, and as I tried to wave him off someone took hold of my hand and said "Marta, let him look". I had heard that voice before, I twisted around best I could and saw an older schoolmate of mine; "Lars!" I said! "I thought you were in America"! "I was" he said simply, "Now I'm back". But of course he was back, hasn't his papa been very ill lately? Lars was in Jenny's grade and much older than me; well; five years. So he must be around 21 now, but he looked so different. Stronger, older, I don't know, anyway, back to my ankle which thankfully wasn't broken. Doc said it was sprained and if I stayed off it for a while it should heal quite nicely. Stay off it a while! I was over a mile from home right now and I walked! I didn't say anything back to doc, just murmured thank you and blinked at him. Several hands helped me up and I stood there a moment, gaining my balance on my good foot while I gingerly rested my toes of my hurt ankle. I stood for a moment not knowing what to do, when Lars said; "come, I have my horse, I will take you home". How did he know? People dispersed quickly once it was determined I was okay, but now I had a new reason to turn red in the cheeks. As I hobbled hopped with Lars assistance on my weak side I could see that his horse was definitely saddled and there was no buggy attached to it...

The ride home was comfortable, I sat in front of Lars and his arms were around me as he held the reins. He went slow making sure I didn't fall and that I wasn't scared. But I wasn't scared I was elated. When we got to my house, everyone came running out at the same time; I can just imagine them standing at the front window staring when we were still quite far wondering who would be riding a horse down the lane as it was too early for papa to be returning from work. Lars got down first, then lifted me effortlessly from the saddle. Mama began fussing right away, she ordered Lars to carry me; CARRY ME into the house where she had him set me down and prop up my foot which she piled with rags filled with ice that Trina had ready; how did she have that ready already? That was Trina though, always quiet, always thinking, always prepared. Once everyone calmed down and I told the story of my stupidity, Mama got over her worry and chided me for being so careless. Then she told Lars that he was staying for supper and that was that. He didn't protest. He smiled and said "thank you, that would be nice" then looked at me....why was he looking at me? And why didn't I look away already? It was embarrassing and fascinating and I've never been so happy to have suffered injury.

Lars came by many times during that year, that year that I turned 16. A few days before my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday he came by but by the time I had finished gathering the eggs which I was doing when I saw him come up the lane he was gone. I was miffed he didn't wait to see me. Mama said he had business with Papa and the two of them had left. When they got back Mama asked Lars to stay for dinner and he said he couldn't! He never turned down an invitation to stay when he had come all this way! He did say he would be back for my birthday dinner so I felt better about that, but he wasn't out the door and I was missing his conversations already.

My birthday? Did I have a birthday? I don't even remember what was for dinner! Did I eat? It was all so normal then it wasn't! Lars asked me to marry him! Papa smiled, Mama cried and Jenny "haarrurummphed". Married. I was getting worried. Most girls my age already were married. Poor Trina, 19 years old and still no husband in sight. But she was so happy for us, pouring us coffee and slicing extra big pieces of cake. Married. I'm going to be married....

Our cottage is just under a mile from Mama and Papa. I can walk there whenever I want. Papa gave us a small piece of land just big enough for farming and Mama gave me dishes and towels and cups. Lars built the house and most of the furniture in it! Apparently this business of Papa and his had been going on for six months! I was so happy to be left out of it now because it is a wonderful surprise!

LITTLE LARS:

Shortly after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday I gave birth to a healthy beautiful baby boy! Everyone keeps stopping by the cottage! It's been two weeks and I've yet to make a meal or clean my own house! Trina has been wonderful! She dotes on Little Lars and lets me rest long stretches of the day before she brings him in to me. So much activity! Lars is another one! He runs to the house when he gets home from work and it seems Little Lars is in his arms and he just doesn't set him down until I insist its time for Little Lars to go to sleep for the night. Life is just perfect.

We buried Little Lars today. He was two years old. Measles they said. Does it matter even the disease? My baby is gone. I have no words. His grave is under a beautiful tree on our piece of land. I want to drag my bed to that tree and sleep there, next to my little one. That's all I want to do, sleep. Sleep and not wake up.



AMERICA:

It's been two years already since we buried Little Lars. It went by fast...no slow...I don't know. The days dragged on and muddled together and now Lars says it's been two years since Little Lars died. Lars has been beside himself with me. He announced today that we were leaving for America. For a fresh start, to start a new family. He said I couldn't be here anymore staring at that tree from the rear window. Jenny, Sigrid, Trina, Uncle Chris have all been in America for the last four years. I have no one to fill my days with and no interest in starting another family. Okay. I said. It will be a long ride by boat to America. Weeks? More? I have no concept. I don't care. Maybe it will sink.

What a boatripe! Okay, okay, a ship! Lars scolds me constantly about calling it a boat. He says you row a boat! You steer a ship! The wind and the waves take my breath away! For as far as the eye can see water, water, water, who knew there was so much! The world is much bigger than it has let on! Maybe America will be better! Maybe America will be different! So much hope there! So many dreams in America! Will America have room for my dreams too? They are not that big just some children, healthy strong children...

Look there's Jenny! HI JENNY! The San Francisco skyline is fascinating! Not at all like Norway! But there's Uncle Chris! HI UNCLE CHRIS! TRINA! SIGRID! I can't stop waving and smiling like a crazy person, there are all the family! That looks like Norway! Who would have thought! Norway exists in the country that is not at all like Norway! It's all different and the same. The love is the same! I can't get off this boat fast enough! Open the big doors! I want to hug Uncle Chris!

What is this language? Everyone is speaking Norwegian then they are speaking not Norwegian! Is this what American sounds like? English, Lars says it's English. He has taught me some words and phrases on the boat, but not like this. Not this fast, run together of words and sentences! How many thoughts just came out of Sigrids mouth? I don't know!!!! I don't understand! But I will understand! I will bug them all, make them teach me until they are blue in the face. I am smart and I can learn I know I can. But I want to know what they are saying NOW...."Norwegian, Norwegian! Say in American slow and then repeat in Norwegian so I can learn"! I wailed, "Little One"; "Lille von", uncle Chris said....of course we will.

Pavers! I breathed...our street is made with Pavers! Bricks! How can we afford this? I asked Lars. Relax Marta, we can. We rent here in America. We own our home in Norway, but we rent this home here, so it's not as much. ....Okay I said....but....What is *rent*? Rent a home...who heard of such a thing. Like taking a room at a boarding house but you take the whole house? This America is something to get used to.

## THE CHILDREN:

I am 22 when Nels is born. My but he is handsome! And strong! Very Strong! The doctor's assure me he is a strong handsome boy! I am so proud! I feel better having Nels in hospital...knowing there is a hospital...Little Lars had no hospital, only a doctor who came to the house. Hospitals have many doctors and nurses too! So many to look after just one! Trina is coming to stay for a little. I am glad to have her, Lars is too, he is working construction and comes home late at night sometimes as they work on deadlines here. So things need to get done no matter how long it takes. But it's okay, I have trina, don't worry so Lars. This is not the same as before. This is different. Nels will be okay because we live in America, and Nels is American! Oh my God! NELS IS AMERICAN!

I am 25 when Katrin is born. A daughter. A beautiful daughter. She looks like me already! As much as Nels looks like his Papa, Katrin looks like her Mama and is named after her grandmother...my mother. Look at those eyes, even as a baby there is so much thought going on in those eyes. Like she is considering everything around her! This one! Oh I can't wait to have conversations with this one!

My goodness, I can't stop getting pregnant! I am 26 when Christine is born! Another one! Identical to her Mama! Katrin will need a sister! It is good Christine is a girl! Maybe we try for one more boy, that way we have two sets! Lars laughed loudly when I said that! "they are children Marta! Not tea cups!" but he agreed to try! But of course, he is a man! Why wouldn't he?

But we don't try right away, right after that conversation Lars got laid off, we stopped thinking about having more children and concentrated on feeding the ones we had! They are so little. I worry, but Lars said it will be fine. Construction is to begin soon on bridges, he will work there.

I am 32 when Dagmar is born! We weren't even trying! If I was trying, I would have tried for the boy, but I am glad we didn't try! She is a beautiful girl. The only one of my children who are not "black norweigian!" She has light yellow hair like lars and his blue eyes! It seems only fair, Nels, Katrin and Christine all have my dark hair and hazel eyes. But Dagmar....Dagmar belongs to Papa utterly!

Nels has been my best teacher! He sits patiently with me after school for hours and helps me with my English. I make him come home and teach me everything he learned in school because I can't go to school. His first grade lessons help me make English sentences correctly. So many rules! But it is a start. Already my English is becoming more correct than Uncle chris who is happy to just get by. I don't want to get by, I want to learn it well. I have four children! I can't have them talking amongst themselves and I don't know what they are saying! So before they are old enough to have secrets I have Nels teaching me! He is a fine teacher! I am so proud of him! 7 years old and teaching his Mama! Sometimes Katrin sits on my lap and listens. I hope she is getting some early training, she is only five and not in school yet, but sitting here with mama and Nels, she

will be smart even before she begins. So much opportunity in America! So much learning!

SIGRID:

Sigrid is really getting on my nerves today; Oh my goodness she just gets cattier with age. She goes on about her Arne as if no one on earth ever had a ten year old son before! I love my nephew but does she have to put down my children to make it seem like he is better? I could just pinch her sometimes. I only put up with it without saying a word because Arne *is* so different. He doesn't say much, hardly anything at all. Never jumps in to play with the other kids; and when he does, always ends up getting hurt. That boy's bones are as brittle as dry twigs...so if I have to listen to her make snide comments about Nels outgrowing his strength, I keep my mouth shut. I'd rather have a strong boy that my sister is jealous of than a weak boy that needs to be mothered constantly. She makes me so angry, but I won't say a word because I do feel bad for Arne. And I feel bad for Sigrid, because meanness is the only way she knows how to handle her fear.

UNCLE CHRIS:

Uncle Chris bought an automobile today! My goodness what was he thinking! He brought it over while Lars was at work and the kids were at school and said GET IN! so I DID~ what was I thinking? It had no top and Uncle Chris had to crank it in the front! When it rumbled to life I could feel it shaking under me! Like a nervous horse that won't stop shivering! And when he got behind the wheel, my goodness! It took my breath away going up and down the hills of san Francisco so fast! The wind blowing my hat from head and uncle chris hitting that horn scaring the horses! That horn! So annoying! I can honestly say I will never like the sound of that screeching horn or the way it startles me! The automobile is fine, the horn however, needs to be removed!

We buried Uncle Chris yesterday. It's 3:00pm and for the first time ever I miss the sound of his screeching horn. Who knew I would grow to love that loud thing startling me every afternoon when he stopped by on his way home from work. I've dropped coffee cups, plates, and one time spilled a full pot of coffee when that horn sounded. But today there is nothing. Just silence. No obnoxious uncle to make his presence known with his loud horn and booming voice. It's so quiet I can hear the clock tick the seconds. It's so quiet I can hear a tear drop. I am 40 years old, and Uncle Chris was 60 when he passed. I wish I was 7 again, and Uncle Chris 21 and our long walks to school in Norway. It seems far away and at the same time only yesterday. I wipe my eyes, I hear the children returning. I put on a smile and open the door wide to greet them with a booming voice "children! How far you walked! Thank you for the milk and butter! Dagmar you carried it all by yourself? Good girl! Who wants coffee sugar?"

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