

2014 Millers Arts Scholar Award Outcome Report: An Exploration of Theatre and Film in Washington, D.C.

Mary Claire Davis

This past summer, the Miller Arts Scholars grant made it possible for me to take two 8-week acting classes at the Studio Theatre Conservatory and to purchase a vintage Bolex 16mm film camera. The Studio Theatre is a professional theatre that produces a lot of contemporary plays, and it also has an acting conservatory for adults. I took and passed Principles of Realism with Nancy Paris and Voice 1 with Denise Diggs. Going to my acting classes were the brightest part of my weekly routine, and I learned so much about myself and my strengths and weaknesses as an actor. In Principles of Realism, the curriculum is based on Uta Hagen and Stanislavski techniques. It focuses on how to build a character in a situation through pantomime, prop exercises, and finally vocalization. I felt like I was going back to basic techniques that I had never actually done before, and this was extremely rewarding. I discovered that my greatest tools for truthful acting are stimuli. The ability to take in and truthfully respond to any stimuli (whether it be in the environment, internal, coming from another person, etc.) is what makes for a 'realistic' performance. This class really helped me get in touch with my body and my five senses, and after spending so much time in cerebral, academic situations this was a beneficial and different kind of learning. For my final scene, I worked on a scene from *A Taste of Honey*. It was difficult, because Jo is one of the most different characters from myself that I have worked on and I had to speak with a Manchester accent. This process helped me to find myself within a character that is very different from me. Everyone responds to stimuli differently, and I became more aware of my own response patterns as a person through acting as another.

When I wrote my proposal, I had hoped to take Improvisation. This did not work out with my schedule, however, and I took Voice instead. I think this was a very good move for me, because my voice is my weakest 'instrument.' I have a pleasant speaking and singing voice, but I'm still working to develop more consistent power behind it. When I get on stage, I project and articulate well, but I have trouble using a strong, expressive speech in my daily life. My throat and shoulders are the first to tense up, and I start to talk from the back of my throat. In this class, we learned about the anatomy of voice production and techniques for resonant vowel shapes and consonants. We also did a lot of exercises that helped us engage with our whole body. The biggest thing for me to work on is to allow myself to lose control sometimes. When I feel too exposed, I start to tighten up and my voice does not resonate as freely. It really is quite a difficult task to fill a room (not to mention 500-person theatre) with your voice without straining or sounding like you are yelling. This class made a huge difference for me as a performer, and my acting teacher at UVA noticed it as well.

The second part of my grant proposal made it possible for me to shoot and develop 16mm film over the summer. My Bolex is now one of my most treasured possessions, and I am very grateful to have been able to purchase it

and the film. Over the summer I began my cinema verité or “observational cinema” project, and in the fall, I used it to make a short stop-motion film for Cinematography class. I began creating cinema verité films, using both my Bolex and my Canon DSLR. The subjects are people who live and/or work in Washington. I met some of them through my acting classes and my internship, and some of them I knew beforehand. My goal is to get more footage this summer and put together a longer piece in the style of the two films that I mentioned in my proposal, *Le Joli Mai* and *Chronicle of a Summer*. It will be a pseudo-documentary following several real people in Washington, D.C. and exploring questions of cultural identity and happiness.

Unfortunately, with having a full-time internship and two acting classes, I was not able to film nearly as much as I wanted. The footage that I got back from the Bolex turned out really well, though, and I have already interviewed several fascinating and diverse people. Sobia is a Pakistani-American student at the University of Maryland. She studies Public Health, but studio art is her passion. She is an extremely modern woman from a traditional Pakistani family, and she her life story and infectious positivity are inspiring. We became good friends at work, and she agreed to be one of my subjects. I had one extended interview with her and followed up by visiting her house and meeting her parents, some of her friends and her 95-year-old grandmother. Another subject is Chris, who transferred from Virginia Tech to study music production at George Washington. He is a Lebanese-American stud who skateboards, plays music and has his friends paint murals all over his walls. He also is cancer-free since his senior year in high school. Devin is a 32-year-old black woman with a young son, and she grew up in D.C. She takes acting classes at the Studio, and is constantly pulled in both directions between her bureaucratic day job and the things she loves: her son, acting, and improv comedy. Joy and Murray Zinoman are a Jewish couple in their 70s who have lived and worked in Malaysia, Chicago and D.C. throughout their 30 years of marriage. Joy founded the Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory. These are all of the subjects I have interviewed so far, but I have several other people who have agreed to be a part of it. I shot a ton of footage just walking around the city, as well.

My faculty mentor was Marianne Kubik, a professor who I have learned a lot from in the Drama Department. Most of my work took place over the summer, so I was not able to share my progress with her as much as I would have liked. When we came back for the school year, we talked about my experiences and where to take my film project. I was surprised by how everything I was doing inspired me in a multitude of ways. My interviews for my film inspired me in my acting classes and vice versa, and merely commuting to and working in DC gave me daily inspiration. Overall, making my art and getting positive feedback in a big city helped me gain confidence and establish independence as a person and an artist. Thank you to the Miller Arts Scholars for these opportunities.



PRINCIPLES OF REALISM

Develop a process using stimulus-response, motivation, characterization, interplay, text, and subtext. Pantomimes, improvisation, and scene work on a character from a realistic play. Recommended in conjunction with **Movement 1**.

Prerequisite: None.

Instructors: Arthur, Burke Pitt, Debelack, Paris, Seiden

VOICE 1

Provides basic techniques for vocal preparation and performance. Develop projection, vocal quality, range, energy, and expressiveness through relaxation exercises and basic physical work. Recommend in conjunction with **Character and Emotion**.

No prerequisite.

Instructor: Diggs, Campion

<https://www.studiotheatre.org/acting-conservatory>

Inspiration:



Stills from my film:

