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Editor's Introduction

How to use the Collection

This text presents a range of monologs and scenes for students in their mid-teens to mid-twenties, drawn from contemporary plays recently produced in North America and Europe. It also contains a tip sheet for preparing and rehearsing the material, nineteen useful exercises for strengthening oral presentation and acting skills, and a list of resources for further investigation. The book is intended as a text for work and study by individuals or groups in class and studio settings.

One noteworthy feature of this anthology is the fact that I've purposely selected its contents from unpublished plays, except in a handful of cases. This means that you won't be able to refer to the context of the entire script in order to interpret the behavior of the characters or the dramatic action of the scenes. Instead, the collection compels you to exercise your imaginative skills in a heightened way by making original and often personal choices for assigning motivations, discovering physical actions, establishing relationships, and so forth. Readers seeking the full text of a play can sometimes refer to the playwrights' credits section where play publishers, when available, are listed under the title.

Also noteworthy is the widely different length of the extracts included here. My intention was to include pieces as short as sixty seconds or as long as seven to eight minutes within a single volume so that the collection could help you learn many fundamental acting skills besides auditioning. I've discovered, for example, that acting students who wish to concentrate solely upon shorter pieces (which are often required in competitive audition contexts), can profit immensely from editing down a longer piece. Editing down teaches you to cut to the chase, sharpening your skills with storytelling, playing events, and developing effective contrasts and conflicts in short, compressed extracts. On the other hand, if you prefer to create more complex characters and multifaceted relationships, you can avail yourself of the longer extracts. In fact, several of the selections are complete one-act plays that can be performed in less than ten minutes (*Rockettes*, *Falling*, *Jennie*, and some others).

The supplementary material that follows the monologs and scenes (tip sheet, exercises, useful books) appears in response to a large number of teachers who have asked for suggestions when

directing rehearsals or working the material in class settings. Most of the exercises are taken from my auditioning textbook, *The Complete Audition Book for Young Actors* (Meriwether, 2003). These have been developed over years of teaching university actors in scene, monolog, and auditioning classes; and from numerous workshops for professionals and amateurs that I've conducted in the Americas and Europe. I've found that these basic exercises produce excellent results with students of high school age and above; while the list of selected resources includes those books and Web sites that my own college-level students regard as the most useful and relevant to their work.

Selection Criteria

I've selected the extracts in this anthology according to several well-defined criteria. First, all the work included here is taken from plays that have enjoyed a production in some form: staged readings, in-progress workshops, or fully-staged shows. This requirement is the best litmus test of a play's quality because only in the crucible of public performance can the strengths and weaknesses of a new work be detected. Only a live audience will tell a writer many things about how his or her play can relate to and communicate with spectators moment-by-moment, as good writing for the stage must always do. You can be confident that all the selections here are strongly playable and written expressly to be spoken and presented.

I've also paid special attention to the gender balance of the entire collection when deciding which plays to include and which not. Thus, there are more selections for women here than for men, a fact that seems to me to reflect the gender makeup of most acting classes and workshops I've taught at various age levels. But there are also unisex pieces here in which the characters are gender-neutral. Ry Herman's *Voices in My Head*, Ruben Carbajal's *Portland*, or Mark Wheeler's *Missing Dan Nolan* are examples of extracts that can be interestingly explored by reversing the gender of the characters. And there may also be more, depending upon your approach to the scene or monolog.

I've avoided including any classical material in the collection and chosen only contemporary work written within the past decade. I've done this in part because classical material, while extremely challenging, is already well represented in specialized anthologies, while this collection is geared to cutting-edge work that is less well known and available. Additionally, classical

material requires unique and special skills that many young actors simply haven't developed. Finally, I think that young students in general find recent topics, language, and stage conventions more relevant and accessible to them, and therefore you'll be able to show yourself in a better, more confident light. Contemporaneity often invites a closer identification with the dramatic relationships and situations than older plays can accomplish and carries the added benefit of avoiding shopworn characters and conventions of social manners and language that may seem artificial to you.

I've been very careful, of course, to select material that is age-appropriate for students from their mid-teens to mid-twenties. I feel strongly that every actor, regardless of age, should always try to play to his or her strengths when presenting a monolog or scene. There are certainly occasions when you'll need to "stretch" yourself with very challenging material, but I regularly advise my own students to avoid attempting this in competitive situations like trying-out for roles or winning scholarships or participating in contests. Finding material that is appropriate for you means finding monologs and scenes within your emotional range, a range that will gradually expand and deepen as you gain more experience.

Language and Characters in the Collection

While guided by the criteria just mentioned, I've especially tried to create a body of work here that presents a broad spectrum of language challenges for you. Teachers struggle relentlessly with this, training you to appreciate the flexibility, power, subtlety, musicality, and expressiveness of words. Certainly our electronic age has done much to reduce language to the level of pure function and denotative meaning. Most of us are only rarely conscious of continually shaping our discourse for speaking effectively; we just talk and everyone accepts that that's honest communication. Interestingly enough, even in a society that is so dominated by hack writing for pop magazines, commercial advertisements, motion pictures, and TV shows, many Hollywood acting coaches have told me how rare and exciting it is to find a young actor who does know how to speak well, who understands how to enter into the thought processes of a human being through his or her language, and who possesses techniques for rendering that character convincingly and naturally through his or her language.

You should also realize that an actor is not primarily concerned with directly expressing himself or herself through art; he or she is instead an interpreter of others' words. While all of us, actors included, strive to be perceived as sincere in what we say, the actor's task is to make another person's words seem sincere — not his or her own. Thus, it's irrelevant to ask an actor doing a TV commercial whether or not he believes that a certain brand of dog food is good for his pet, or whether an actress portraying Ophelia believes that Ophelia is justified in surrendering to despair. The job of the actor is to do these things as though the character believed they were right to do. In our modern world, great emphasis is placed upon communication skills, which generally means self-expression: the ability to form ideas, to articulate them effectively and persuasively to others, to join in the public or corporate debates over issues and workaday problems. While many can do this with success — both in the workplace as well as in blog sites and other informal contexts — none of this self-expression has anything to do with what an actor must accomplish.

Some of the selections in this anthology, of course, will offer you dialog in an everyday realistic form which is the most accessible to you no matter what experience you've already had. Be careful, though, because while remaining conversational, writers often pattern such discourse in ways that require interpretation beyond that of natural conversation. In other words, you can't just start talking it. In good writing, for example, pauses are carefully and deliberately placed (*Voices in My Head*), short and choppy sentences are reflective of important thought processes (*Falling*), and clichés and slang can become key indicators of character traits (*By Looking*). This is why doing a paraphrase of your text (one of the exercises included at the end of this book) is a crucial first step since it will reveal how differently you think and speak and feel than the character does.

There are also a number of pieces whose language will challenge you with heightened lyricism that is not everyday or natural in any sense of the word. Speaking these lines realistically will seem very phony to you. You have to be emotionally and spiritually up for it. For example, the scene between Nancy and Sylvia taken from *Have Mercy* leads Nancy to the point of almost religious ecstasy when she breaks into those long passages expressing her guilt and fear of damnation. Similarly, Cody's reverie from *Harvest* about his boyhood is a nostalgic and poetic

account of how good his life used to be — and can only be motivated by the sensitive young woman who is hanging on every word of his lyrical fantasy. You have to let yourself go with language like this: let yourself slide intuitively into the character's world and feel their emotional condition instead of simply reading words off the page and hoping their plain sense meaning will express the heartbeats of the character. Remember: this character is not you; he or she is different from you. And many of those differences will be reflected in his or her language.

Other selections will ask you to create a huge subtext with your words in order to reveal what the character is really saying. This is where modern plays differ so radically from classical pieces — there is no subtext in Shakespeare. When paraphrasing these modern selections, you must read between the lines that are only tips of a huge subsurface iceberg of emotions, past experiences, or tangled relationships. This is the way in which modern playwrights work. These characters rarely say what's on their minds. They dance around painful conflicts, embarrassing admissions, and paralyzing fears, and you can't simply rip the lines off and skate across the surface of the text. Cyndi's painful confession to Paul of her superficiality when she claims she really feels unworthy of his love in *The Gifted Program*, or Kendra's hilarious pretended innocence in *Shot At* as she questions Jason about the "mysterious" gunshot are good examples of how a rich subtext must inform your interpretation as you speak. And as you might expect, some subtexts are easy to spot while others will challenge you maddeningly!

And then, of course, there is the most challenging language of all: language that demands that you reveal yourself at your most vulnerable, where cardboard emotions or indicating will never convince an audience. Tristram's admission to his girlfriend of his boring, dull personality in *Suburban Redux* will make the listener squirm in his seat only if you can speak the monolog as honestly and simply and personally as possible, hiding nothing. Nor can you avoid or down-pedal the absolute intensity required by the character of Zinni in *Window of Opportunity* who must speak as though having a child were food and water and breath itself to her. Nothing less than passionate conviction and belief will work for you in performance of texts like these. They'll force you to touch bottom with all your emotional resources, using yourself to bring these characters to life.

In addition to the language challenges that you'll encounter in the book, you'll also find an excitingly unique gallery of characters to portray. Hopefully you'll enjoy discovering many of those roles within your own personality (because using yourself is what acting is really all about); but even when this isn't the case, you'll likely find yourself fascinated by the dreams and disillusionment, the brilliance and the charm, the loves and hates and fears of the characters who live within these pages.

Some of these roles are straightforward and familiar in the sense that you might very well encounter their emotions and needs in your ordinary everyday life. For example, the teen runaway Jennie, the title character of Meri Wallace's play, opens a touching window for us into that difficult moment of decision-making when she decides whether or not to leave her suburban life for something — anything — that might promise something better at this critical point. Similarly, Bernie and Evie in Faye Sholiton's *V-E Day* strike a familiar chord of young love as they meet and fall for each other during the heady and exhilarating days on the home front in World War II. Or Lulu and Dana in Shirley King's *Donny's Diner* might be any young professional women sitting across from you in a deli, gossiping about their careers and relationships and what they plan to do together that evening.

Other characters are not so ordinary, and in fact may even border on loony. There are the two brothers, for example, Hans and Johan, doing a twisted, comic, sibling rap-routine on a Christmas-theme in Lindsay Price's *Deck the Stage*. Similarly, you may find it incredible to imagine that a modern youngster like Baby, in Gwendolyn Schwinke's *Thrown by Angels*, could be so completely unaware of the society around her after being raised by a loopy dad who confined her in the house and raped her for years. And is young Tomlyn in Elise Geither's *The Doe*, suffering from a too-vivid imagination that borders on lunacy when her nightmare begins to intrude upon her waking moments?

Finally, there are other roles here in the collection that may ask you to stretch your imagination in order to discover life from a radically different standpoint than what you've been used to. Rebar and Soran, for example, young immigrants on-the-make from Kurdistan in Deborah Brevoort's *The Poetry of Pizza*, actually sit and weep copiously together in the kitchen over the lack of fresh pistachios (before "the girl" enters the restaurant). Him and Her in Matéi Visniec's *The Story of the Panda Bears* need

you to express their love with passionate conviction and exhilaration sparked by their mutual obsession — a relationship that seems ultimately to break down by the end of the scene.

Try to avoid the impulse to skim through the selections here, and instead take the time to read each of them aloud, listening to the heartbeats of what these characters are expressing and sensing your own personal response to their words as you do so. Such moments of honesty, discovery, and self-realization present great opportunities for you to use yourself and compel the listeners' attention. Open your imagination to the urge you'll feel for inventing a history or personal circumstance to their lives — the character biography or backstory that motivates them. Zero-in on what possible reasons they may have for speaking to each other, and what they absolutely must communicate to us in the speech or the scene.

If you challenge yourself to pique the listeners' curiosity, to move them to sympathy, to share in your character's laughter or fear or sorrow or joy in the space of a minute or two, then you'll be doing yeoman's work as an actor. You'll compel others to watch, listen, and share in your experience as you tell these characters' stories in performance. The short acting prefaces before each selection will guide you towards the heart of the writing, and the class exercises at the end of the book will certainly sharpen your acting skills if you perform them religiously. The rest is up to you!

A Reminder about Cultural and Intellectual Property

In all the anthologies I edit, I feel compelled to remind readers that the work in the collection is intended *only* for studio exercises or for reading. When it comes to performing it, producing it in public readings, or adapting it in any way via the electronic media for other audiences — educational, amateur, or professional — then permission *must* be obtained and royalties paid to the agent or author.

Perhaps this caution needs to be frequently restated in this age of the Internet where so much is available online or otherwise reproducible at little or no charge. Readers must remind themselves that plays — like other unique, cultural artifacts — are not equivalent to the cheapened bytes and factoids we slug through and manipulate by the thousands every day. They are the intellectual property of human beings who have spent many years earning, and who therefore deserve, proper acknowledgment and compensation for producing and distributing them to the public.

Bear in mind that I'm attempting in this book to highlight and promote the work of a handful of uniquely talented and very highly motivated artists whose worth, importance, and cultural value in our society is already deeply discounted, frequently debased, and even despised. Their plays are their honest work — their products. Pay for them. If you wish to perform any of these monologs in public, credits appear at the end of this volume; call or write for permission. These artists are not unreasonable in what they expect from us.