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The Art of Asking a Question and What It Means to Listen

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ISBN

9798197801333

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Publication Date

2026-06-26

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The Art of Asking a Question and What It Means to Listen

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Acting)

by

Mai Lan Nguyen

Committee in charge:

Professor Ursula Meyer, Chair
Professor Stephen W Buescher
Professor Aysan Karagasli Celik
Professor Shahrokh D Yadegari

2026

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University of California San Diego

2026

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Nguyễn Mạnh Lâm and Ngô Thị Lan Anh, who reminded me to be a lion when I acted a lamb and my sister Nguyễn Lan Hương, who got me my first audition.

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by

Mai Lan Nguyen

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Acting)

University of California San Diego, 2026

Professor Ursula Meyer, Chair

“I don’t know if you noticed, but when you perform, there’s crickets in the audience” - a professor who-shall-not-be-named once said to me at a Spring conference. Ouch. The infamous Conference Room 144. On the outside – completely unassuming serenity. On the inside - a bloodbath.

The professor continued: *“You ask too many questions. Stop trying to think. Stop trying to learn this.”* My first thought: *“Sorry, I’m not supposed to learn at an educational institution? How does that make sense?”* Little did I know that precisely this piece of advice was the catalyst to my growth as an artist at UCSD.

I spent most of my first year asking questions - clarifying questions, questions that asked for permission, validation, and questions that in truth were new, inventive ways for me to apologize

for mistakes I hadn't even made yet. I held onto the idea of getting it right so tightly that most of the time I actually *missed the answers* to those questions.

But guided by the ever-so-blunt professor's advice, I set out on a mission to get out of my head and stop surveilling my progress. I immersed myself in the Polish woods at an actors' intensive program led by Theater Zar. And haunted by the formidable ghost of Grotowski, I was running at full speed with my eyes closed, singing church songs in Latin and doing flips that I thought only acrobats should be able to do. There was no time to explain the "correct approach." No one asked me if I understood or if I was comfortable. I was forced to allow the physical - my body and voice - to guide my next step. I realized something simple yet radical: you don't have to reason through your choices as an actor because what is "right," *feels* right in *your body*.

Coming back to UCSD in my second year, I got to step into many vastly different and demanding roles. A bitter housewife and punk rocker in *Vinegar Tom*, a mischievous clown of a swindler in *Rogues' Trial* and two emotionally volatile women in the Wagner One Acts. I applied the "physicality first" approach that I learned in Poland and tried to move my body faster than my questions could. I stopped waiting for faculty feedback, and instead I embraced working with student directors, discovering my artistic process through practice and experiment rather than instruction. As I relied more and more on my own body to steer my acting choices, I started to understand what was being imparted to me at the conference back in the Spring: following a recipe from others won't make you a better artist. YOU are RESPONSIBLE for your own work.

With this realization, I became ready to tackle the character of Morse in *One Flea Spare*. This was the most challenging, physically demanding, and gut-wrenching role I ever had to do at UCSD. And even though I *began* with physicality as opposed to reason, I *didn't stop* asking questions. In fact, this turned out to be my most heavily researched role at UCSD. But rather than

obsessing: “is this the right step?”, I wondered: “where do I want to go?” It was when I stopped seeking approval, that I began to have a real shot at creating something that was worthwhile. I allowed *my curiosity* to lead me this time rather than *my desire to be good* in the eyes of others. And on the other side of it all, Morse became the role I am most proud of in my time at UCSD, and a character I will always hold dearly in my heart.

Today, I am half a year removed from my laborious process of working on Morse. I have since then stepped into the role of *D’Artagnan* in the beloved *Three Musketeers*, taken a final bow with my cohort on the Gary Marshall stage in our LA showcase, and gotten to perform in something of a dream role as Lucy, a complex and morally ambiguous woman in power, in Katie Dõ’s play, *Fancy Jungle*. I am humbled and feel immensely lucky as I look back on my journey in this program. In each of the ten UCSD productions I was a part of, I was blessed with radically different roles that challenged me in new surprising ways. Those roles were the training. They helped me cement my confidence and taught me how to find excitement and opportunity to play in any rehearsal room.

So if there is one lesson that I learned at this program, it is to take charge of my own craft. It is not to “stop asking questions” but rather to stop asking for permission. It is to hear other people’s opinion and expertise, but to listen to my body. To stop relying on others for feedback, but to trust that I can guide myself towards becoming the artist I want to be. To continually and relentlessly discover and listen to the excitement for the work I get to do.