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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Understanding Max

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In Acting

By

Malik Misheaux Proctor

Thesis Committee:
Cynthia Bassham, Chair
Professor Annie Loui
Professor Andrew Borba

2021

DEDICATION

To

My friends and family

In recognition of their strength

A thank you

If it wasn't for the Yams and the Macklins

I never would have made it out of UCI with my life.

Your strength has allowed me to grow

And come into myself.

And God

You are my light and my creator

The glory is yours not mine

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I would like to thank my fellow MFA actors throughout the three years and five cohorts that I encountered. You all have been soldiers in arms during this journey. Your humor, your energy, and your art have allowed me to be inspired to do great things.

I would also like to thank the black drama students and members of the Black Door Theatre Group both graduate and undergraduate. You were a rest haven of sanity and encouragement to my spirit.

I must thank my fellow 2021 cohort members: Hailey Byerly, Brandon Foxworth, Hope Andrejack, Reshma Meister, Abel Garcia, Hunter Ringsmith, and Sophia Metcalf. You all have saved my life. You have brought me positive energy, laughs, and beautiful art throughout these three years. I am better because I know all of you and I cannot thank God enough for the opportunity to go through this journey with such an immensely special group of people. Yam squad forever.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Understanding Max

By

Malik Misheaux Proctor

Master of Fine Arts in Acting

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Don David Hill, Chair

The evolution of my acting at UCI has been deeply intertwined with my life's journey. As a student at CSULB, I participated in several shows that allowed me to learn while doing plays and building different instincts in real-time. In contrast, UCI has provided me with valuable skills primarily within the class setting and also given me the opportunity to let concepts resonate with me over time. During my time here, I have gone through several personal and family experiences that have influenced my ability to participate in class and my energy level within my work. Our first year project "Hold Steady" was one of a handful of my play experiences at UCI and I believe it is the case study for my acting journey.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of my acting at UCI has been deeply intertwined with my life's journey. As a student at CSULB, I participated in several shows that allowed me to learn while doing plays and building different instincts in real-time. In contrast, UCI has provided me with valuable skills primarily within the class setting and also given me the opportunity to let concepts resonate with me over time. During my time here, I have gone through several personal and family experiences that have influenced my ability to participate in class and my energy level within my work. Our first year project "Hold Steady" was one of a handful of my play experiences at UCI and I believe it is the case study for my acting journey.

During my first year of grad school I was going through personal turmoil. I lost two relatives and was going into a journey of sobriety. I also began to have consistent disagreements with my family which caused me to break communication with them for most of the year. Additionally, I was confronting many facets of my mental health which became a part of my acting. I felt the clash between the culture that I come from, which was primarily the suburb of Long Beach, California, and the culture of Irvine. Long Beach presented a more accepting multicultural environment whereas I felt uncomfortable navigating Irvine as a black man. These unspoken tensions contributed to my mental health struggle. Throughout all of my classes I began to stretch my emotions in ways I had never experienced within the class setting of my undergrad. During spring quarter, I began attending therapy sessions on campus. This was a large step for me because I had long held stigmas against therapy. These sessions in conjunction with Richard's scene work class for "Doll's House" contributed to expanding my empathy and understanding of myself. This larger self-understanding allowed me to apply more empathy to the characters that I approached. I started to confront my fear of being honest with myself through the lens of acting. "Hold Steady" presented me with a different challenge at that pivotal time period.

“Hold Steady” was of course a Tira Palmquist original play that we performed as a cohort in the Winter of the 2018-19 school year. The play displays the complicated relationships between old friends in their late 20s. My character Max is an english teacher and a published poet. He struggles to reconcile his early dreams with his current life. He came from a background that would be stereotyped as lower class and wears the chip of inadequacy on his shoulder. He has to operate with logic, make his point clearly without being seen as threatening, and entertain the room in order to function normally in the room. He is the “intelligent black man” that is oft depicted in film and television. He is in many ways an archetype that has permeated the social image of black men, especially young black men. I cannot yell like everyone else. Sure I can yell. But only when you want, how loud you want, and for how long you want. Max, in many ways, is me. I could visualize Max as an older version of myself. I felt that in order to sincerely bring Max to light I must be open and willing to truthfully live within my triumphs and my insecurities. Throughout the play, Max wrestles with his relationship with Amari, who is a part of the friend group. They are in a relationship but Amari does not feel comfortable sharing that with the rest of the group. Max is mentally conflicted. While on one hand willing to respect her wishes in order to ensure her maximum comfort; he questions if she is unwilling to go public because she is ashamed of him or unsure if she wants to be with him long-term. I personally have experienced a similar scenario while romantically involved with a peer in an educational setting. The reasoning for keeping the relationship private was completely logical, but insecurity sometimes defies logic. In approaching Max, I was confronting my own deep-seated insecurities. Feeling as if I am not worthy of love. Feeling like the love I do feel is not worthy of being reciprocated. Max writes just like me. Oftentimes, I feel as if I communicate in my music better than in my natural conversation. My words are concise. My voice is emotional. Max writes because as a young black man who thinks and feels, his pen replaces the voice that society will not allow him. My focus was to navigate the inner feelings as honestly as I could. I had to, in essence, fall in love with my castmate. I had to allow the hope of that love to keep me energized despite the possibility of disappointment.

There had to be a light at the end of the tunnel. But additionally, I had to be malleable and willing to change with the circumstance.

As a stationary play that is based in pure realism and even set in modern day, “Hold Steady” presented a unique opportunity to live in pure realistic humanity. For Max, I wanted to move through space very aware but trying to be loose. I care about my friends like I care about my actual classmates. My relationship with each person informed my level of ease.

I feel that I grew immensely from playing Max because I had to confront traumas while also being a living, breathing human on stage. I had to focus on my partner over everything else but also be aware of my environment. I had to speak from the heart but not do too much. As the end of play shows, both me and Max benefit from existing as our true selves over anything else.

I Thank God for “Hold Steady.” It was the first show I ever performed at UCI and it was the fullest experience of my time here. I am proud of the honesty in my work and thankful to my classmates for a timeless journey.