Two Dead Men, One Director:
Active Analysis and Etudes in Rehearsal for *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

By Jennifer Goff

"This is a weird play," proclaimed a bright-eyed young actress after the first read-through for my production of Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at (my then home institution) Wayne State University in September 2013. I looked around the table to see members of her cohort bobbing their heads in agreement. Four months later, when I found myself helming the first read through for another production of the same play—this time as a guest director at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU)—an actor timidly raised his hand and asked, "So, what exactly happens in this play?"

It is not, perhaps, surprising that a play such as *Dead Man's Cell Phone* might feel foreign to students whose primary exposure to dramatic literature at this point in their training has been steeped in psychological realism. Despite many exciting and noteworthy theatrical innovations, "since the beginning of the twentieth century, realism has been the dominant mode of theatrical expression"—particularly in American theatre.[1] The dramatic environment in which the majority of students have been and continue to be brought up in this country is

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[1] William W. Demastes, "Preface: American Dramatic Realisms, Viable Frames of Thought," *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1996, ix.

one that attempts to hold Hamlet's mirror up to nature: one that "conceals the text's own laws and which we are supposed to take for a relation to reality."[2] The Ibsens and Chekhovs and Millers and Mamets that these students know so well traffic in deep subtext and "correct" answers that are hidden away by the playwrights in the characters' complex background stories, just waiting for the diligent actor to mine them. Ruhl, on the other hand, writes worlds without certainties or answers, and this proved to be unsettling for my two casts of young actors. In order to ground and grow their understandings of this challenging dramaturgy, I incorporated an ongoing series of improvised etudes inspired by Active Analysis techniques that I encountered while studying for four summers at the Moscow Art Theatre School. This experiment led not only to two wildly different productions, but also to a discovery that, though Active Analysis and etude methodology can be useful in any rehearsal setting, it may, in fact, be uniquely useful in unraveling contemporary postmodern dramaturgies such as Ruhl's.

A Brief Note on *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

The plot of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* begins with a deceptively simple and recognizable moment: an incessantly ringing cell phone. But from there, the journey of the protagonist, Jean, is anything but simple. A quiet woman with "an insular quality," Jean is enjoying a bowl of lobster bisque at a local coffee shop when she approaches the man at the next table whose cell

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[2] Todorov quoted in Brian Richardson, "Introduction: The Struggle for the Real – Interpretive Conflict, Dramatic Method, and the Paradox of Realism," *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition,* Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1996, 1.

phone won't stop ringing.[3] When she discovers that Gordon is not answering his phone because

he is dead, she decides to take responsibility for his phone, answering calls that embroil her in

Jean uses a spoon to see if Gordon is breathing – Wayne State University (Photo: Michael Hallberg)

his family, his job, his affairs, and all the complications that come with them. While attempting

to comfort his lover (The Other Woman—who we learn in passing is named Carlotta), his

mother (Mrs. Gottlieb), his widow (Hermia), and his brother (Dwight), she falls in love with each

brother in turn, gets caught up in the international intrigue of Gordon's involvement with illegal

trafficking in human organs, and even spends a brief interlude with Gordon in the afterlife.

Finally, in a strange *deus ex machina*, all of them end up just where they should be—Jean with

Dwight instead of Gordon, Gordon with his mother instead of one of his women, Mrs. Gottlieb

with Gordon instead of in perpetual mourning, Hermia back in the ice follies instead of as the

dutiful wife, and Gordon's mistress running his old company instead of living in Gordon's

shadow—because, as Gordon tells us, "there are no errors in the afterlife."[4] In what seems like

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[3] Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008, 11.
[4] Ibid., 53.

only a moment, the misguided dreams that each character has clung to for the entire show fall away in favor of what authentically completes each of them.

Ruhl's Empty Spaces

Ruhl, by her own admission, avoids traditional linear narratives, which she feels are too weighted down by a puritan tendency for moral instruction: "Perhaps change is all-important in most dramatic forms; in the arc play, change is usually of the moral variety—a lesson learned."[5] Ruhl specifically discusses her resistance to adhering to dominant Aristotelian, cathartic plot structures. In addition to her playful and deliberate manipulation of form, she also goes out of her way to leave her dramatic worlds open for interpretation and collaboration from the directors, designers, and actors who take on her scripts, delighting in writing "stage directions that are both impossible to stage and possible to stage."[6] Realistic (and highly moralistic) plays like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*[7] contain utilitarian stage directions describing the literal setting, the number of people in the room, and critical moments of action: "Proctor is thrown into room by two guards, followed by Willard," but Ruhl's directions almost seem like daydreams she is sharing or a conversation she is having with directors.[8] In *The Melancholy Play* she says, "It would be nice if the actor who plays Julian were from a country other than the United States. And he or she should be a very good cello player. And handsome, and brooding. If possible,

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[5] Sarah Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater,* New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2014, 32.
[6] Ibid., 169.
[7] A play with which my students were very familiar, by the way.
[8] Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1952, 45.

Julian is a man. If not, women cello players are extremely acceptable."[9] In *Late: A Cowboy Song*,

Ruhl declares that "Red is teaching Mary to ride a horse. It would be nice if it were a real horse.

If not, an abstract approximation of a horse will do."[10] And in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* she calls

for "a cell phone ballet. Beautiful music. People moving through the rain with umbrellas, talking

into their cell phones, fragments of lost conversations float up."[11]

The Cell Phone Ballet – Wayne State University (Photo: Michael Hallberg)

The Cell Phone Ballet – Southwest Minnesota State University (Photo: JD Sargent)

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[9] Sarah Ruhl, "The Melancholy Play," *The Clean House and Other Plays*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006, 228.
[10] Sarah Ruhl, "Late: A Cowboy Song," *The Clean House and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006, 170.
[11] Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008, 57.

She may have specific visions of how these elements are to come to life, or she may not. But whether she does or doesn't, her descriptive abstractions give both tonal guidance and a sense of freedom to the interpreting artists. The deliberately ambiguous poeticism of Ruhl's worlds creates a subtle strangeness to her writing: a feeling that intimidated me with its beauty and intricacies from the first time I encountered the script. Magical elements from all of her plays swam through my head as I read stage directions like "Embossed stationary [sic] moves through the air slowly, like a snow parade. Lanterns made of embossed paper, houses made of embossed papers, light falling on paper, falling on Jean and Dwight, who are also falling."[12]

The scripts Ruhl delivers to those who would produce them are intentionally unfinished in a sense, as she notes in an interview with Polly Carl: "I always find plays beautiful that have a little bit of that sense of the unfinished, and then the audience—or the designer, or the director, or the actors—fills in the empty space."[13] Similarly, in the notes before her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Ruhl addresses her readers/collaborators: "I have seen this play designed many ways; on a plot of grass with a small golden replica of Knole; on something of a dangerous playground on an open space with costume racks. The design is left purposely open."[14] In this sense, Ruhl's work is very much a product of her postmodern circumstances, as "*no* narrative can be a natural 'master' narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are

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[12] Ibid., 37.

[13] The term "empty space" usually belongs to Peter Brook's 1968 treatise on theatre which claims that "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (9). Ruhl's turn of phrase may be loosely connected to Brook's in their shared invitation to create, but her reference seems to be more directed at the spaces left between the lines of her scripts than the literal empty space of which Brook spoke. Polly Carl, "Sarah Ruhl in Conversation with Polly Carl," *HowlRound*, 7 September 2014, Web, 8 September 2014.

[14] Sarah Ruhl, *Chekhov's* Three Sisters *and Woolf's* Orlando*: Two Renderings for the Stage,* New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013, 135.

only those we construct."[15] Even the primacy of playwright or text is questioned in this porous

dramaturgy. There is always an element of this kind of collaboration in a production process,

but the degree to which artists' imaginations are called upon by Ruhl is, in my experience,

significantly deeper than the traditional director/script relationship. There is an open invitation

written into her work that ensures that different productions will have room to develop their

own identities. There are questions without answers. There are stage directions with no rules.

As Linda Hutcheon points out in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, "among the many things that

postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning." This

"willed and willful provisionality," manifests itself in Ruhl's work in these built-in opportunities

for co-creation.[16] In a conversation about *The Clean House*, Ruhl commented on the way one

production was able to bring her stage directions to life in an unexpected way:

> There's a scene where Lane, a doctor married to a doctor, imagines her husband
> kissing the breast of his new lover, who is one of his patients. The stage direction
> says, 'Ana wears a gown. Is it a hospital gown or a ballroom gown?' Well, Marilyn
> Dodds Frank, who plays Ana, walked out in a renaissance ball gown made of
> lavender hospital-gown material. It had a train that was about 20 yards long. So
> she begins walking out in this purple gown, and it just keeps coming and coming
> and coming. I would never have thought of that. That was a high point of my life
> really.[17]

The joy Ruhl took in the creative interpretation of her inviting stage direction is central to her

dramaturgy of possibilities and collaboration. Thinking back from our first read to our final bow,

the exploration of this process slowly exposed Ruhl's dramatic layers to reveal the nuanced,

exciting, bizarre, postmodern world that she and we created together. The chance to stage the

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[15] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London:
Routledge, 1988, 13.
[16] Ibid., 127.
[17] Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl," *Bomb*, Spring 2007, Web, 16 April 2012.

work twice provided insight into the empty spaces and ambiguities left for directors and actors by the playwright. With each element we made more concrete, we unlocked more potential for understanding of the world of the play. As performance studies scholar Tzachi Zamir notes, "acting has to do with particularization in another sense also: the necessity to actualize a single possibility that is merely included in the cluster of possibilities that configure the text."[18] I extend this observation to encompass the entire process of mounting a production, as each directorial, acting, and design decision builds on the framework laid out by the playwright, making manifest one interpretation and solidifying each production as its own distinct entity— its own way of filling in Ruhl's "empty spaces."

Active Analysis and Etudes

Active Analysis is a technique developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky in the final years of his life and passed down and refined primarily through the work of one of his closest students, Maria Knebel. This lesser-known[19] rehearsal method is intended to take the place of extensive discussion and table work, opting instead for a process "through which actors embody a play by exploring its conflicting vectors of action and counteraction in improvisations."[20] It is these improvised "etudes" that are the center of Active Analysis. According to David Jackson, "the three main aims of Active Analysis [are] to counteract the passivity engendered by 'round the table' analysis; to link the psychological and the physical; and to produce 'scenic speech,' i.e.

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[18] Tzachi Zamir, "Watching Actors," *Theatre Journal*, 62.2 (May 2010): 238.

[19] Active Analysis is soon to be less lesser-known, as James Thomas's *A Director's Guide to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis* is due out in 2016 from Bloomsbury Press.

[20] Sharon Marie Carnicke, "The Knebel Technique: Active Analysis in Practice," *Actor Training, 2nd Edition,* London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 99.

audible words rooted in thoughts, objectives and actions."[21] In an Active Analysis setting, actors would be encouraged to wait before memorizing lines, as rehearsals would include improvising the key events of the play, allowing the actors to use the infamous "if" to experience the event, to react authentically, and to create original dialogue from that experience first. "These etudes, or sketches, serve as stepping-stones that lead the actor towards creative assimilation of the author's text."[22]

In addition to improvising the literal events of the play, master teacher Sergei Zemtsov of the Moscow Art Theater School encourages the use of missing scene and dream etudes— etudes that Knebel notes "were used for investigating the background story of a role and for the events occurring between the acts" long before Stanislavsky began to solidify his method of Active Analysis.[23] Missing scenes are improvisations of events that happen beyond the events of the script: Solyony's duel with Tuzenbach in *The Three Sisters*, for example; or the day that Nora asked Krogstad for the illegal loan in *A Doll's House*. Dream etudes, on the other hand, are more imaginative in content, and more often than not turn into nightmares as they become an opportunity to examine the desires and fears of the characters. It is important to note that dreams must be imagined from one character's point of view: whose dream is it? Missing scenes can be seen more objectively, as everyone participates in the same moment and reacts to it in his or her own way, but a dream is a slice of one character's reality, and the other characters behave as they might be perceived from that one central character's point of view.

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[21] David Jackson, "Twenty-first-century Russian actor training: Active Analysis in the UK," *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training,* 2.2 (2011): 170.
[22] Maria Knebel, "Active Analysis," *A Director's Guide to Active Analysis*, Trans. James Thomas, MS 2009, 119.
[23] Ibid., 132.

These extra-narrative etudes exist in the empty spaces left by the playwright, allowing actors to explore the world of the play beyond the limitations of the plot, building their characters' history into their own active memory. And, in a script like Ruhl's that leaves so many spaces open for exploration, these etudes prove to be a particularly apt device on the road toward creating a unified world.

The Script Before the Script

As I noted above, in ideal Active Analysis circumstances, memorization is postponed and the time usually devoted to table work is extended, allowing for copious improvised exploration of the events of the play. This is a format that fits well into the open-ended rehearsal schedule of most Russian theatres, but it is more difficult to fully engage in on the always-too-brief American rehearsal timeline. In order to give my student actors some experience in this unfamiliar analytical approach, I devised a truncated event-related exercise based on my formalist analysis of the text. I gave them an assignment to create tableaus for each of those events. This exercise began slowly, with me reciting the title of an event, and allowing the actors a limited time window to create each tableau. One of the biggest challenges at this stage was encouraging the actors to create the spirit of each event rather than a literal representation thereof. Active Analysis does not ask them to block the play; so in my truncated exercise, the actors created a snapshot of the essence of each moment. Another challenge is involving characters who are not part of a given scene—I insist that all characters participate in the analysis of each event at this early stage of rehearsal. This is intended to encourage actors to see that their characters—whether directly participating in a given event or not—have

opinions and reactions in regards to the action of that event. Once the actors were happy with

the tableau, I gave them their next event and the process repeated until they created the entire

plot. In this abstract exercise, we told the story in a way that was uniquely ours, and the rest of

our rehearsal process was devoted to fleshing out the bones that we created in these early

rehearsals. Next, once all of their tableaus had been created, I asked them to go through the

whole thing again, giving them five to ten seconds to move from tableau to tableau, but the

movement had to be intentional. They couldn't just take their places—they were required to

move in character from tableau to tableau. This allowed them to explore how key moments

might be connected to each other. This exercise, more than simply being a truncated version of

a larger process, also keys into Stanislavsky's search for the "Inner Vision" of a play: his "term

for a chain of imaginary pictures that enable an actor to 'see' the internal life of a character."[24]

Though clearly not as in-depth as the analysis suggested by Stanislavsky and Knebel, the

exercise did provide important insights for each cast into the way the key events of the play

related to each other. They were able to, in some small way, internalize the chain of events.

However, unlike many of the plays on which Active Analysis would have been developed, the

world of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is not one of obvious cause and effect. It does not usually

resemble the world that we live in on a daily basis. Attempting to make sense of the events as if

they were happening in the real world would make some of them unimaginably strange or

terrible (the overall lack of concern with Mrs. Gottlieb's self-immolation at the end of the play,

for example, becomes fairly troubling if held up to the expectations of the real world). The

given circumstances are not fully defined by the action of the play; they demand further

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[24] James Thomas, *A Director's Guide to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis,* MS. 2015, 220.

exploration and interpretation. Knebel states that "only when the actor sufficiently masters the given circumstances in etudes can he begin to create freely."[25] Our small, event-driven foray into Active Analysis was not going to give us all the insight into the world of the play that we would need. We needed etudes that would expand our knowledge of the world and its rules in ways that would support the text, while also creating our own.

Missing Scenes and Dreams

As I have already mentioned, as a microcosm, the students who comprised my casts and design crews had had very little exposure to non-realistic theatre. Ruhl does not pepper her plays with long-hidden traumas to be unearthed in the final act; she creates a whole separate world in which these characters live, and she allows them to do so in their own way—one which always remains consistent with the play's meaning. Elinor Fuchs asserts that "a play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space."[26] The task in rehearsing a show such as Ruhl's is to develop the rules that are unique to our version of her world, not to demand that they fit into the rules of the "real" world at large. In my efforts to alleviate my actors' resistance to the foreignness of the play's given circumstances, I built etude time into every night of our rehearsals. "The task is to filter the given circumstances through their own sensibility in order to 'evaluate' the facts, to understand their meaning in the context of the play and to start the

[25] Maria Knebel, "Active Analysis," *A Director's Guide to Active Analysis*, Trans. James Thomas, MS 2009, 131.
[26] Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater*, 34.2 (Summer 2004): 6.

process of feelings themselves in the role and the role in themselves."[27] The playwright

provides the given circumstances, and it is up to the actors, director, and designers to bring

those things to life. In order to do this, the actors must be able to imagine themselves in those

circumstances, to treat them as true, even though they (and the eventual audience) know them

to be fictional.[28] The etuding process is intended to create experiences that expand the actors'

memories as their characters, playing the rules of the distinctive world to their outermost

borders. We set out to understand how this world works and how these characters would

respond under other circumstances within that world. "The stage world never obeys the same

rules as ours," particularly in a magical world like Ruhl's, so if it does not obey our rules, then

what rules does this world obey?[29]

In each of my rehearsal processes, we used these etudes to teach us about the history

and rules of the world that we were creating. In order to make this world an ensemble effort, I

made an unpopular but useful decision: everyone would be called at the beginning of rehearsal

every night. The first 30 minutes of each rehearsal was devoted to these etudes, and this time

was led by the cast, not me. I feel that this distinction is important in that the cast benefitted

not only from the ensemble work that was built into the beginning of each night, but also from

the responsibility I placed on them to mold the world of our production. Far too many actors

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[27] David Jackson, "Twenty-first-century Russian actor training: Active Analysis in the UK," *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training,* 2.2 (2011): 170.

[28] This is a phenomenon discussed by many acting theorists. 17th century French philosopher and historian Denis Diderot called it the paradox of the actor: that s/he must truthfully represent the emotions that s/he knows to be false (R. Cohen 161-162). Stanislavski expanded on this with his focus on the "magic if," which encourages the actor to imagine themselves under the given circumstances of the characters; "'If' always launches the creative act and the Given Circumstances develop it further" (Stanislavski 53). All of this is encapsulated quite succinctly in acting teacher Sanford Meisner's creed of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (Morong).

[29] Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater*, 34.2 (Summer 2004): 6.

(especially student actors) can think that their work is more or less finished once they get the role. Putting the nightly etude work in their hands was a concrete way to show them that they were not only actors but also co-creators.

The process of choosing events to explore in these etudes can be tricky. Though, unlike the previous exercises, they are not working with events that are part of the script that will be presented to the audience, the explorations undertaken by the group should retain their roots in the text. What are the lines that have us wondering? What are the events mentioned in or conspicuously absent from the play? I had a few questions prepared for our first few etude sessions so the actors could see the kinds of questions that would lead to fruitful results. It helps to start with events that are specifically referenced in the script: "Hermia, come with me! You can put a cold compress on my head"—what happens then?[30] Or, "One time we had dinner and Gordon was nice to me"—what is Dwight's memory of this moment with his brother?[31] Perhaps a wedding or a funeral or some other common rite of passage may be implied. When we ran out of concrete events mentioned in the script, we turned to certainties that are expressed by the characters but that were unclear to us as readers. One question that came up in both of my productions, for example, was "Why don't they talk about Mrs. Gottlieb's cooking?" When Jean mentions her cooking in an attempt to deliver a loving message from her recently deceased son, the matriarch explodes, proclaiming that "he could not have meant that nicely!" and storming out. Jean is consequently admonished by Hermia: "We don't talk about her cooking."[32] So both of my casts decided to explore the reason why. At Wayne State, the

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[30] Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008, 30.
[31] Ibid., 36.
[32] Ibid., 30.

cast enacted the rehearsal dinner for Gordon and Hermia's wedding: Mrs. Gottlieb had made the entire meal herself and was quite proud to contribute to her son's big day this way.

Jean with Mrs. Gottlieb and Dwight – Southwest Minnesota State University (Photo: Jennifer Goff)

Unfortunately, she turned out not to be much of a chef, and she left the entire wedding with pretty graphic food poisoning. At SMSU, however, this etude ended up answering two additional questions as well: where is Mr. Gottlieb, and why does Mrs. Gottlieb eat so much meat? In their etude, we saw a lovely family dinner that Mrs. Gottlieb had prepared—a delicious ratatouille. This dish ended up somehow poisoning Mr. Gottlieb, so we had his death, Mrs. Gottlieb's carnivorous tendencies, and the silence surrounding her cooking explained in one fell swoop. These two different etudes did more than answer a question; they were also fairly indicative of a notable atmospheric difference between the two productions. The Wayne State production had a lighter, cartoonish, manic tone, in which an etude that involved an awful lot of flatulence was right at home; on the other hand, the SMSU production had a dark tinge to the atmosphere (drawn in part from a conceptual parallel to *Alice in Wonderland*) that made accidentally poisoning a husband seem perfectly reasonable. Drawing from Ruhl's empty

spaces, and from the initial discoveries from our tableau analysis exercise, each night's etude provided deeper insight into the rules that had grown out of the script.

The inspiration from dream etudes can be a little tougher to locate, but for my casts they often came from asking the question, "what is my character afraid of?" These fears can usually still be located within the text, even if they are not explicitly stated. For example, though Gordon is clearly not conflicted about his work, he has never told his family what he does, which certainly implies that something is stopping him. My Wayne State cast addressed this fear by improvising a nightmare of Gordon's in which all of his Christmas gifts for his family were accidentally switched out for human organs, leaving his family horrified when they were confronted by the harsh reality of his work. My SMSU cast, on the other hand, looked at Dwight's description of his relationship with his brother in which he explained that "Gordon was the mover and shaker. I always sat back a little."[33] So they improvised Dwight's nightmare in which Gordon's corpse rose up from the coffin at the funeral and the family tossed Dwight into the box instead, happy to trade him in for the superior brother.

Conclusion

Though none of these etudes would ever be seen by an audience, each one taught the group more and more about living in the world that we would be performing, making them more agile and confident within it. As Ruhl explains, "Think of subtext as to the left of the language and not underneath it… There are… pools of silence and the unsayable to the left or to

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[33] Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008, 32.

the right or even above the language."[34] Our etudes were an attempt to open up those pools of silence for ourselves.

In developing Active Analysis, "Stanislavsky wanted to teach directors to place the actor in conditions that would develop the actor's feeling of personal responsibility for the role from the very beginning."[35] This is precisely what my two casts encountered in our experiments. In the context of Active Analysis and etude work, responsibility for creation of the world of the production became increasingly dependent on the ensemble. Both questions and answers about the world the characters share were developed and subsequently owned by the actors in a way that deepened their sense of the psycho-physical unity of the production. The actual details that emerged about each world are far from definitive, but they provided valuable points of access for these student actors to a dramatic world that they initially found intimidating and opaque. In scripts such as Ruhl's, which deliberately provide opportunities for co-creation above and beyond the traditional modern realist scope, careful analysis of the script is, of course, a necessary and painstaking process. But the opportunity to bring that analytical process to life for student actors on uncertain ground with the text was a deeply meaningful and empowering experience.

I might compare the etude process to learning a language: if you can only say a few necessary sentences in a new language, you haven't really learned to speak it. It isn't until you are able to come up with sentences on your own that you truly understand and own that

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[34] Sarah Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater,* New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2014, 66.
[35] Maria Knebel, "Active Analysis," *A Director's Guide to Active Analysis*, Trans. James Thomas, MS 2009, 122.

language. Similarly, etudes take actors' imaginations beyond the words written on the page and into the world implied by those pages. This process, though a bit time-consuming and demanding of the actors, is a call to engage their creativity on a daily basis in a way that we don't always take time to do in our rush toward tech week. There is a level of ownership for the world and the end product that is turned over to the actors, and it provides an invaluable learning atmosphere for student actors who are too used to being told what to do rather than taught how to create.

**Dwight kisses Jean in the closet of the stationery store as paper snow falls
– Wayne State University (Photo: Jennifer Goff)**

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