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Rising Third-Year Arts Award 2015: Outcome Report
A Summer at Michael Howard Studios

Last summer, I attended the Michael Howard Studios Summer Acting Conservatory in New York City. This program is designed to strengthen its students' skills in performance and interpretation of text, and introduce them to new techniques that they can use as they progress in their theatrical education. I felt that attending this program would be an essential part of my training as an actor. As I stated in my project proposal, I purposefully chose to attend a university instead of a conservatory so I could obtain a well-rounded liberal arts education. However, this choice has led to a stagnation in my experience in the world of theater. I worried that I was falling behind, because of my lack of consistent performance practice. Supplementing my education at UVA with outside courses proved to be an important step forward and remains a priority for me.

In the summer of 2014, after my first year, I attended the CAP21 Summer Professional Musical Theater Training program, also in New York City. This 6-week conservatory introduced me to the basics of musical theater (primarily dance and musical scene study) while also reinforcing basic acting techniques and providing tools for audition preparation. This program was such a rewarding experience that I sought to attend another acting program the following summer. During my second year I decided to apply for the Michael Howard Studios Summer Acting Conservatory. A friend in the UVA drama department attended the program the previous summer and sang its praises, convincing me I should attend. Fortunately, I was granted a rising third-year Arts Award in the amount of \$1200, all of which went toward paying the program's tuition. This award did not cover all of my expenses, but it provided invaluable encouragement because it meant that the Arts Scholars and its supporters were willing to help me pursue my dream of becoming an actor. This support is one of the most valuable parts of the Arts Scholars experience, and what makes the program such an important aspect of my university career.

During my time at Michael Howard Studios, I was introduced to a wide range of new techniques and styles of acting. These included classes in (among others) voice, movement, Shakespeare, Meisner Technique, scene study, animal and clown. To be honest, I initially viewed the latter two with skepticism, which proved completely unwarranted. When Polina Klimovitskaya – a Russian actress and Yale Drama professor – introduced us to her technique, she explained that when she found her progress blocked as an actor-in-training, she began observing animals. She was fascinated by the way they moved and interacted with each other, completely open, instinct-driven and hyperaware of their surroundings. By incorporating these ideas into her acting she found a much more open and accessible way of performing. She tried to impart as much of this knowledge as she could in just a few short weeks with us. While I sense that there was much left undiscovered, what she did convey was an awareness of our own rigidity – the fact that our personal human experience so often gets in the way of portraying a separate character, a problem which often manifests as physical or emotional stiffness. The clowning class revealed similar obstacles, however instead of incorporating animalistic behaviors, we were meant to search for the purest human behaviors – joy, grief, love, anger, etc. This class left many of us feeling very vulnerable – a feeling that we humans actively avoid in our daily lives. Yet vulnerability is possibly the most important state of being for an actor.

Perhaps the two most important classes I took while at Michael Howard were Alexander Technique and On-Camera Technique. Alexander Technique is a system of movement and awareness that allows a person to learn how to move with the least physical strain possible. It requires a physical awareness of your body and how you move, and the ability to mentally direct efficient movement. I was introduced to only the most basic principles during my six-week stay at the studio, but I immediately recognized the potential this technique had to help me overcome some of the physical difficulties I've encountered during my training. I'm very conscious of my physical movement when I act, and this hyperawareness often keeps me from fully engaging in a scene – I can appear stiff and disconnected. At the very core of the Alexander technique is this psychophysical connection, and because I feel this is such an integral part of my training as an actor, I've pursued further study in the Technique while studying abroad at the University of Birmingham in the UK this year. After taking a semester-long class, I still have only learned the basics of a technique that takes years to master. But it has reaffirmed my belief in the importance of Alexander Technique to anyone who wants to make a career in theater.

Finally, I was introduced to the world of acting for the camera. I had never before considered pursuing training in this medium, preferring instead to focus on acting for the stage. There are many things I thought I preferred about acting for the stage, primarily the immediacy and intimacy of the experience – everything hinges on being able to connect with your audience and fellow actors in the moment. I'd always considered camera acting to be more disconnected – scenes are generally shot one at a time (with long breaks during and in-between) and often out of chronological order. But in my brief introduction to on-camera technique I found that this style, too, had its own kind of immediacy and intimacy. There is a much more lifelike feel to the interactions as they are happening at a conversational level, instead of needing to be projected into a theater. The camera can also be very close to your face, and this proximity is intimidating as well as intimate. When the six weeks were up, I came away from the program determined to pursue further training in acting for the camera. This decision has opened up many new doors in terms of workshops, training programs, and of course possible future auditions. The world of film and TV is constantly growing. My first step in this process will be to take Professor Richard Warner's acting for film class this coming fall. Afterwards, during winter break, I plan to attend the New York Film Academy's one-week intensive acting for film workshop. Then, in March, I will return to New York City to work with Showreels NYC to film a short scene so I can start compiling an acting reel. Fortunately, I have just been awarded a rising fourth-year Arts Award in the amount of \$3000 to cover the expenses of this endeavor.

I am extremely grateful to be part of a program that is willing to support me in my pursuit of a career that many would consider a pipe dream. The encouragement that the Arts Scholars community has given me is invaluable, and I can't imagine how my university career would have gone without these amazing opportunities provided by the Arts Scholars. Thank you to all of the supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller and Evie and Stephen Colbert.