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The role of Sylvester Brown in August Wilson's Ma' Rainey's Black Bottom: a production thesis in acting

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**THE ROLE OF SYLVESTER BROWN
IN AUGUST WILSON'S MA'RAINEY'S
BLACK BOTTOM:
A PRODUCTION THESIS IN ACTING**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Eric Jerard Little
B.S., Alabama A&M University, 2002
May 2005

IN MEMORY OF:

**MR. AND MRS EDD PINSON, SR.
(GRANDPARENTS)**

**REV. GREGORY KIRKSEY
TONY KIRKSEY
(COUSINS)**

IN HONOR OF:

**ANDRE D. WILLIAMS, U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES
ANTHONY L. WILLIAMS, U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES
(COUSINS)**

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ABSTRACT

The role of Sylvester in Ma'Rainey's Black Bottom by August Wilson was performed in the Fall of 2003, and selected as a thesis role in the Fall of 2004. This thesis is a written record of the actor's interpretation of the character. The thesis includes Preproduction Work/Interview, Character Analysis, Four- Column Score, Production Run, and Personal Notes on the Role.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a character study of Sylvester Brown in August Wilson's *Ma'Rainey's Black Bottom*. Sylvester, a young black man, was often treated as a child rather than a man. The many people around him, constantly called Sylvester "kid" and "boy." This treatment was attributed to his stutter and his quick temper. Also, the racist society of 1927 had very little respect for any black man, especially one that could not communicate effectively. Therefore, Sylvester constantly struggled in his transition from boy to man.

When John Dennis, the director of the Master of Fine Arts Program, first announced that Swine Palace would present another of August Wilson's plays, I was anxious to audition. The previous semester, Swine Palace produced *Fences*, another one of Wilson's pieces, which I enjoyed very much. Also, it afforded me the opportunity to meet and converse with the director, Joy Vandervort-Cobb, who was to return to direct *Ma'Rainey*. As a young black theater actor, to do one of Wilson's plays is not only fitting, but part of a great ambition. Here was my chance.

After my first read of *Ma'Rainey*, I wanted the role of Levee. However, I thought Sylvester's role was funny and quite interesting as well, so the decision was made to audition for both. At the audition I did a Levee monologue and a comedic monologue as well. I felt the audition went well, and left with the hope of being cast in one of the roles. Weeks later John Dennis informed me that I was cast as Sylvester. My first reaction was a mixture of excitement and nervousness. I was excited because I had gotten the role, but I was nervous about how I would approach the role.

Sylvester's stutter is what grabbed my attention first. I met with vocal coach, Jo Curtis Lester, who was there to help me make the stutter as authentic as possible. To establish a substantial foundation, she and I listened to a few CD ROMS of some speech students that stuttered. I also interviewed David Huber, a theater major, who stutters. I discussed both of these aspects in the Preproduction Work/Interview section of this thesis.

Joy told me to look at the times he stutters and the times he was successful, and that would help to produce the stutter. I reread the play, spoke with Joy further and I realized I had to reach beyond his stutter. She wanted me to find his other issues in addition to his stutter. This led me to ask the following questions: Why did he stutter? What did he like about himself? What did he dislike about himself? I delved back into his world and thought further about these questions as well as his drives, motives, and dreams in life.

My thesis documents the process that led to my characterization of Sylvester. It consists of Preproduction work/interview, a Character Analysis, a Four-Column Score of the role, Production Run, and Personal Notes on the Role. The Preproduction Work/Interview is the work done prior to the actual rehearsal process. It helped to create an introductory perspective about Sylvester. The Character Analysis explores beyond the surface of the character to obtain the intimate details that are not automatically revealed in the text. It consists of a brief autobiographical sketch of Sylvester, prior to the recording session, and a series of questions about him. Some answers can be found in the text, while the rest are pulled from the actor's imagination, based upon

interpretation. The Four-Column Score is an outline that the actor creates to aid in making various acting choices. It is made up of the following: objectives (which are the character's wants and needs), actions and tactics (which are ways to achieve those objectives), and obstacles (the things or people that block him from achieving those objectives). The score also has a column for focus and images. Focus and images, which can be visual or non-visual, are points of focus relevant to the actor at that particular moment. The Production Run expresses the actor's response to performing for different audiences. The Personal Notes on the Role are a comparison between Sylvester, Phillip from Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*, and myself.

Ma'Rainey's Black Bottom was produced by Swine Palace Productions at Louisiana State University September 24-October 12, 2003 in the Reilly Theatre. The production was directed by Joy Vandervort-Cobb. The cast was the following, in alphabetical order: "Irvin"- Walter Brody, "Levee"- Samuel R. Gates, "Policeman"- Mike Graham, "Sylvester"- Eric J. Little, "Slow Drag"- Cortez Nance, Jr., "Cutler"- Ward Nixon, "Sturdyvant"- Stewart Steinberg, "Dussie Mae"- Kuniqua Stewart, "Ma'Rainey"- Gloria Suave, "Toledo"- Michael Anthony Williams.

PREPRODUCTION WORK

In order to make Sylvester's stutter authentic, my vocal coach, Jo Curtis Lester, and I spent time viewing CD ROMS from the Speech Department. I closely observed each person, and the patterns of their stutter. After viewing the CD ROMS, I had a vocabulary of various stutters, which also gave way to different behaviors. At times, I could see the embarrassment from their speech problems seeping out of them as they tried to speak. I felt badly for them especially in extreme cases. This was helpful in trying to create Sylvester externally (his stutter), and internally (his reactions and feelings about the stutter and life in general). I also had the privilege of interviewing David Huber, a nineteen year old theatre major, who has had a speech problem most of his life. I have included this interview in this documentation.

Interview

David Huber
19 years old
Theater Major
Stutters

1. How long have you stuttered? What reasons have you been given for your stutter?

All my life, I've stuttered. The main reasons that have been given consist of the following: My mother used to tell me that I stuttered because my mind was spitting out information faster than my mouth could communicate it. Some have suggested that my problem could be associated with a heightened level of intelligence. This was usually an explanation for why my mind was moving faster than my mouth. A lack of self-confidence is another reason. One of the different ways that I stutter was blocking. This is when I try to speak but I clench my throat, keeping air from passing my vocal chords in order to make the desired sound. Often times, I would block for so long that I would turn red from straining to get the word out or from lack of oxygen. This is especially apparent in specific words or consonants. For example, if I asked may I do something, the 'm' sound would always stick. The more power that I perceive someone to have, the more difficult it is to speak to them. People do not necessarily have to actually be powerful for me to perceive them as being so. Also, I was constantly being judged about my weight. This made me perceive myself as being "low in the ranks." For a time, I saw everyone as being better than me, a.k.a. - everyone seemed to have more power than me, which kept my self-confidence low.

2. How was it stuttering as a child?

Before I went to school, it wasn't so bad. I didn't stutter as much at all and when/if I did, adults did not chastise me for it. It was easier for my parents to understand what I was saying because they were used to my speech. Others had a more difficult time understanding me because of my speed and slurred speech, which was a result of speaking so quickly. Once I started school, I was teased much more for my weight than for the way I spoke. I believe that the teasing regarding my weight contributed greatly to my stutter. I always felt lower than everyone else around me because of my weight. It was as if I shouldn't be allowed to speak to others. I was afraid of being judged. My friends would tease me about my speech. It was less malicious because they were my friends, but it still had an impact.

3. Did you ever receive any speech help?

In the second grade, I began speech lessons. I took speech lessons through the fifth grade, which focused on getting me to slow down. Initially, when I spoke quickly, I wouldn't stutter, and then when I slowed down, I would. Overtime, slowing down greatly enhanced my ability to speak more clearly. Slowing down also helped me stutter less frequently.

4. Did the speech work help or hurt you?

It did help me slow down, but it also was bad because it made me more aware in a negative way. I was always more self-conscious of what I was saying. It also goes back to self-confidence. If I have a little self-confidence, I don't feel so helpless. For example, I had to teach a class, and my stutter all but vanished. It was more direct, and I had more confidence. I was more knowledgeable; therefore I was more confident and felt powerful.

5. How does your stutter affect you now?

Now it's not as bad. I'm more aware of it, than anybody else is. If I stutter badly now, I get very frustrated and I lose a certain amount of self-respect. Frequently this will result in an unwillingness to speak further.

6. What is your biggest dream in life?

I want to be happy. I never want to work in any situation where it's not fulfilling. Basically, I want to work in art. I want to act and direct. When I act, I don't stutter, because I have the words, and I know what's going on. I know where I'm headed. Having the information makes me have the power that I need. The only time I did stutter in acting was during a cold reading, because I wasn't as familiar with the words.

7. Is power key then?

Power plays a large part in my ability to control my stutter. However, I believe that self-confidence is the most prevalent factor influencing my stutter at any point in time, granting that self-confidence is a form of power. The more self-confident I am, the more powerful I feel. My level of self-confidence is directly proportional to the amount of respect that I feel may or may not have from someone can also be a manifestation of my own mind. Because of these factors, my ability to speak clearly and free of stuttering literally varies from person to person, day to day, hour to hour, and minute to minute. This is the best way to sum it up: The respect that I feel I have is directly related to my level of self-confidence.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

I. Character Autobiography

I was born May 18, 1909 in a small town outside of Memphis, TN. My father died when I was younger, so I was raised by my mother and my auntie, who I affectionately call Ma'. I grew up around women. I did not have a formal education because of the racial tension at the time. I could not read, write, or speak my own name until my mother and Ma' taught me. They taught me to speak my name and gave me enough information to survive in the white-dominated society of 1927. When I was eight years old, I suddenly had problems putting words together and making my sentences coherent without tripping over my tongue. I began to stutter. This problem could have been rectified had it been handled early, but it was enhanced by the two strong black women that raised me. In one breath they would encourage me and tell me that it was okay that I stuttered. According to them, "God just made me different." Then in the next breath they would yell at me and frighten me which made my stutter worse.

As a child who stuttered, I had a difficult time getting along with other kids because they would ridicule me. Everyone would laugh at me, which created my very, very bad temper. Even though people tried to aid me in my speech problems, I really was unable to receive proper assistance. Therefore, I was insecure, lacked confidence, and had no influential male figures in my life. I struggled to find my place in the world.

Music was very important in my life. Ma' was always singing, and I was always around her trying to learn how to play music. I thought if I could learn how to play music then I would not have to speak, and people would listen to my music and respect me. They would no longer laugh at me, and they would respect my worth. Ma' noticed my love for music and noted that I was not being productive at home, so she decided to take me with her to help record one of her albums. She told me at the recording session "And when you get your money you gonna send some of it home to your mama. Let her know you doing alright. Make her feel good to know you doing alright in the world." This was huge for me. I could finally start to make my dreams come true and people would see me as a big, musical man, instead of a small, stuttering boy.

II. Analysis of the Entire Role

A. What your character says about himself.

1. "I was watching...what you mean?"
2. "I ain't done nothing ...ask Ma."
3. "I d-d-did not! The m-m-man ran into me!"
4. "...I just told him what I'd do with it. But I ain't done nothing cause he didn't get the b-b-bat."
5. "I ain't d-doing nothing to the p-p-piano. I'm just l-l-looking at it."
6. "...I'm gonna do it."
7. "I remember it pretty g-g-good."

B. What other characters say about your character.

1. Ma'Rainey:

- a. "Now that's Sylvester. That's my nephew. He was driving my car..."
- b. "You leave the boy out of it. He ain't done nothing. What's he supposed to have done?"
- c. "Sylvester I'm buy you some new clothes, too. Sylvester tuck your clothes in. Straighten them up and look nice. Look like a gentleman."
- d. "Sylvester take your hat off inside. Act like your moma taught you something. I know she taught you better than that. Come over here and leave that piano alone."
- e. "He's gonna take you down there and introduce you in a minute...have Cutler show you how your part go. And when you get your money you gonna send some of it home to your moma. Let her know you doing alright in the world. MAKE HER FEEL GOOD TO KNOW YOU DOING ALRIGHT IN THE WORLD."
- f. "I promised my sister I'd look out for him and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song my way."
- g. "...He don't stutter all the time."
- h. "Don't worry about messing up. If you mess up we'll do it again."
- i. "Don't you think I know he stutters. This is what's going to help him."
- j. "Sylvester hold your hands like I told you and just relax. Just relax and

concentrate.”

k. “I knew you could do it. You just have to put your mind to it. Didn’t he do good Cutler? Sound real good.”

2. Dussie Mae:

- a. “If you was watching where you was going...”
- b. “It’s all your fault!”
- c. “Sylvester wrecked Ma’s car.”
- d. “Look at Sylvester with that hat on.”

3. Policeman:

- a. “The guy said the kid ran a stoplight.”
- b. “...and the kid with threatening the cabbie.”

4. Levee:

- a. “How in the hell the boy gone do the part and he can’t even talk!”
- b. “B-B-Boy ain’t nobody studying you!”
- c. “He can’t do the part. Everybody see that. I don’t know why you want the boy to the part nowadays.”
- d. “He can sing the whole goddamned song for all I care.”

5. Cutler:

- a. “...but the boy he can’t do the part. He stutters. He can’t get it right. He stutters right through it every time.”
- b. “...He did better than I thought he was gonna do.”

c. "...The boy is liable to kill you."

6. Irvin:

a. "Hell, even Sylvester will be a star."

b. "...take twenty-five dollars of your money and give it to Sylvester."

C. How does the actor resemble the character?

1. Outside

a. wears suits

b. both from the South

2. Inside

a. loves music

b. in certain situations, I

fumble over words.

c. temper when pushed to the limit

d. defensive about people challenging my size

e. very Active Physically

f. feel like a kid, striving to be a man

g. confidence is sometimes low

D. How does the actor differ from the character?

1. Outside

- a. don't have an extreme stuttering problem
- b. six years older than he is
- c. don't have a bisexual auntie who is a singer

2. Inside

- a. more mature
- b. don't have people constantly ridiculing me
- c. have better control over my temper
- d. more educated
- e. don't experience as much racism as he did

E. List the physical objects the character generally uses:

- 1. bag with Ma's items: slippers, coke, fan, etc.
- 2. hat and coat
- 3. string

F. Adjectives describing the character:

1. Outside

- a. small
- b. clumsy
- c. distracted
- d. playful
- e. anxious

f. jovial

g. violent

2. Inside

a. insecure

b. scared

c. determined

d. fiery

e. excited

f. attentive

g. passionate

G. List verbs for your character

a. projects

b. struggles

c. distracts

d. hides

e. pokes

f. rises

g. points

h. emphasizes

i. rushes

j. defends

k. jumps

H. Major Drive or goal in life.

What does your character need to accomplish, to get what he wants and needs most?

Sylvester needs to enhance his communication skills. His stutter is a hindrance as is his temperament. These two significant issues prohibit him from effectively communicating. This causes him to lack what he needs the most - acceptance. He is accepted by his mother and Ma', but not by the society of 1927. Blacks were already regarded as inferior, so there was definitely no respect for a young black man that could not speak. Also, it was hurtful to him when other blacks ridiculed him, so he really needed acceptance from society as a whole.

I. Nouns listing values and hates.

1. Values

- a. praise
- b. affection
- c. friendship
- d. music
- e. dancing
- f. quietness/alone time

2. Hates

- a. jokes

- b. words
- c. confrontation
- d. verbal communication
- e. racism
- f. criticism

J. How does your character move?

At first, I fought not to make him a little kid. I talked with Joy and I kept playing around with the notion at rehearsal, and it made sense. He was a child. Everyone treated him like a kid, and he responded to them in that manner. With this in mind, I had to make his movement and gestures childlike.

L. Movements/Gestures

- a. arms folded
- b. Chest out
- c. staying on the balls of feet
- d. chin up
- e. quick movements with my feet
- f. pacing back and forth
- g. dancing

SCORE

Objective: To stay free Essential Action: To knock down			
Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 33</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Irvin...you better tell this man who I am! You better get him straight.</p> <p>Irvin: Ma, do you know what time it is? Do you have any idea? We've been waiting...</p> <p>Dussie Mae (to Sylv.): If you was watching where you was going...</p> <p>Sylvester: I was watching... what you mean?</p> <p>Irvin: Look, Ma...give me a chance, okay ? Here...sit down. I'll take care of it. Officer what's the problem?</p> <p>Dussie Mae: Sylvester wrecked Ma's car.</p>	<p>To counter</p>	<p>Dussie Mae</p>	<p>I shouldn't drove!</p>
<p>Sylvester: I d-d-did not! (to Policeman) The m-m-man ran into me!</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Wait a minute! I'll tell you if you want to know what happened. Now, thath's Sylvester. That's my nephew. He was driving my car...</p> <p>Policeman: Lady, we don't know who's car he was driving.</p> <p>Ma Rainey: That's my car.</p>	<p>To confirm</p>	<p>White Policeman</p>	<p>Policeman's club</p>

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p><u>Dussie Mae/Sylvester:</u> That's Ma's car.</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> What you mean you don't know who's car it is? I bought and paid for that car. Registered to me, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey!</p> <p><u>Policeman:</u> That's what you say, lad...we still gotta check. They hit a car on Market Street. The guy said the kid ran a stoplight.</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> What you mean? The man c-c-come around the corner and hit m-m-me!</p> <p><u>Policeman:</u> While I was calling the paddy wagon to haul them in to the station...they try to hop into a parked cab. The cabby said he was waiting on a fare.</p>	<p>To defend</p>	<p>White Policeman's word</p>	

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 35</p> <p><u>Policeman:</u> Like I say... she tries to get into this cab. The cabbie's waiting on a fare. She starts creating a disturbance. The cabbie gets out to try to explain the situation to her, and she knocks him down.</p> <p><u>Dussie Mae:</u> She ain't hit him! He just fell!</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> He just slipped!</p> <p><u>Dussie Mae:</u> Ma was just trying to open the door.</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> He j-j-just got in t-t-the way.</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> Said he wasn't gonna haul no colored folks if you want to know the truth of it.</p>	<p>To defend (continued)</p>		<p>On Irvin</p>

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 36</p> <p><u>Policeman:</u> Like I say...we got her charged with assault and battery...and the kid with threatening a cabbie.</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> I ain't done n-n-nothing!</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> You leave the boy out of it. He ain't done nothing. What's he supposed to have done?</p> <p><u>Policeman:</u> He threatened a cabbie lady! You just can't go around threatening people.</p>	<p>To plead</p>		<p>Jail</p>
<p><u>Sylvester:</u> I ain't done nothing to him. He's the one talking about he g-g-gonna get a b-baseball bat on me! I just told what I'd do with it. But I ain't done nothing cause he didn't get the b-bat.</p>	<p>To stomp</p>		<p>Cabbie</p>

<p>Objective: I want to play. Essential Action: To sneak.</p>			
Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 44</p> <p>Dussie Mae: I just want to get a pair of them yellow shoes. About a half size bigger.</p> <p>Ma Rainey: We'll get you whatever you need. Sylvester, too...I'm gonna get him some more clothes. Sylvester, tuck your clothes in . Straighten them up and look nice. Look like a gentleman.</p> <p>Dussie Mae: Look at Sylvester with that hat on.</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Sylvester, take your hat off inside. Act like your mama taught you something. I know she taught you better than that. (Sylvester sits at piano). Come over here and leave that piano alone.</p>			
<p>Sylvester: I ain't d-d-doing nothing to the piano. I'm just l-l-looking at it.</p>	To tug	Ma Rainey	The piano
<p>Ma Rainey: Well. Come over here and sit down. As soon as Mr. Irvin comes back, I'll have him take you down there and introduce you to the band. He's gonna take you down there and introduce you in a minute, have Cutler show you how your part go. And when you get your money you gonna send some of it home to your mama. Let her know you doing alright.</p>			

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Ma Rainey: Make her feel good to know you doing alright in the world. (Irvin comes in.) I'm gonna tell you something, Irvin and you go up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listen to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma. Now you carry my nephew on down there tell Cutler he's gonna do the voice intro on that Black Bottom song and that Levee ain't messing up my song with none of his muic shit.</p> <p>Irvin: Okay, Ma I don't care. I just thought...</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Damn what you thought. Sylvester go on down there and introduce yourself to the band.</p> <p>Sylvester: (after running out and back in) Which way you go? Where they at?</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Here I'll carry you down there myself.</p>	<p>To jump</p>		<p>The bandroom</p>

<p>Objective: I want to participate in the band Essential Action: To drive</p>			
Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 48</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Levee, I ain't studying you or Mr. Irvin. Cutler get him straightened out how to do his part. I ain't thinking about Levee. These folks done messed with the wrong person this day. Sylvester, Cutler gonna teach you your part. You go on ahead and get it straight. Don't worry about what nobody else say. (she exits)</p> <p>Cutler: Well come on in boy. I'm Cutler. You got Slow Drag. Levee. And that's Toledo over there. Sylvester, huh?</p> <p>Sylvester: Sylvester Brown.</p> <p>Levee: I done wrote a version of that song what picks it up and sets it down in the people's lap! Now she come talking this! You don't need that old circus bullshit! I know what I'm talking about. You gonna mess up that song, Cutler and you know it.</p> <p>Cutler: I ain't gonna mess up nothing. Ma say...</p> <p>Levee: I don't care what Ma say! I'm talking about what the intro gonna do to that song.</p>	<p>To open up</p>		

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 48 (Continued)</p> <p>Cutler: Nigger, I done told you time and again, you just in the band. You plays the piece whatever they want.</p> <p>Levee: I might not play nothing! I might quit!</p> <p>Cutler: Nigger, don't nobody care if you quit. Sylvester here's how your part go. The band plays the intro, I'll tell you where to come in. The band plays the intro and then you say, Alright boys, you done seen the rest Now I'm gonna show you the best, Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom. You got that? Let me hear you say it one time.</p>			
<p>Sylvester: Alright boys, you d-d-done seen the rest, n-now I'm gonna show you the best. M-M-M-M-Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom.</p> <p>Levee: What kind of, alright Cutler! Let me see you fix that! You straighten that out! You hear that shit Slow Drag? How in the hell the boy gonna do the part and he can't even talk?</p>	To push	Nerves	The words
<p>Sylvester: W-W-Who's you to tell me what to do, nigger? This ain't yo' band. Ma tell me to d-d-do it and I'm gonna do it. You can go to hell, n-n-nigger!</p> <p>Levee: B-B-Boy ain't nobody studying you. You go on and fix that one, Cutler.</p>	To rise	Levee	

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Pg. 49</p> <p>Toledo: You say you Ma nephew, huh?</p> <p>Sylvester: Yeah, So w-w-what that mean?</p> <p>Toledo: Oh ain't mean nothing, I was just asking.</p> <p>Slow Drag: Well come on and let's rehearse so the boy can get it right.</p> <p>Levee: I ain't rehearsing nothing! You just wait until I get my band. I'm gonna record that song and show you how it suppose to go.</p> <p>Cutler: We can do it without Levee. Sylvester you remember your part?</p>	<p>To confirm</p>		
<p>Sylvester: I remember it pretty g-good.</p> <p>Cutler: Well come on let's do it then. One. Two. You know what to do.</p>	<p>To insist</p>	<p>Laughter, nerves</p>	<p>Past mistakes</p>

<p><u>Objective:</u> I want to climb higher. <u>Essential Action:</u> To energize</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Text</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Tactic</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Obstacle</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Focus/Image</p>
<p>Pg. 56</p> <p><u>Sturdyvant:</u> Alright, Ma we'll get him a microphone. But if he messes up, he's only getting one chance, the cost...</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Damn the cost. You always talking about the cost. I make more money for this outfit than anybody else you got put together. If he messes up he'll just do it till he gets it right. Levee I know you had something to do with this. You better watch yourself.</p> <p><u>Levee:</u> It was Cutler!</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> It was you! You the only one m-m-mad about it!</p> <p><u>Levee:</u> The boy stutter. He can't do the part. Everybody see that. I don't know why you want the boy to do the part noways.</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> Well can or can't he's gonna do it. You ain't got nothing to do with it.</p> <p><u>Levee:</u> I don't care what you do! He can sing the whole goddamned song for all I care!</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> Well alright. Thank you. Come on Sylvester.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">To point</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Levee</p>

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> Just remember the words and say them that's all there is to it. Don't worry about messing up. If you mess up we'll do it again. Now, let me hear you say it. Play it for him Cutler.</p> <p><u>Cutler:</u> One. Two. You know what to do.</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> Alright, boys, you d-d-done s-s-seen the best, now I'm gonna show you the rest, Ma Rainey's gonna show you her b-b-black b-b-bottom.</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> That's alright. That's real good. You take your time, you'll get it right.</p>	<p>To tiptoe</p>	<p>Confidence (lack of)</p>	

<p>Objective: I want to win Essential Action: To concentrate</p>			
Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p>Ma Rainey: Sylvester, you just remember your part and you say it. That’s all there is to it. Yeah, we ready.</p> <p>Irvin: Okay, boys, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” take one.</p> <p>Cutler: A-One. A-Two. You know what to do.</p>			
<p>Sylvester: Alright, boys, you d-d-done seen...</p> <p>Irvin: Hold it! Take Two.</p> <p>Cutler: A-One. A-Two. You know what to do.</p>	To tiptoe	The band	
<p>Sylvester: Alright boys, you done seen the rest, now I’m gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey’s g-g-gonna show you her black bottom!</p> <p>Irvin: Hold it! Hold it! Take three. Ma let’s do it without the intro huh? No voice intro just come in singing.</p> <p>Ma Rainey: Irvin, I done told you the boy’s gonna do the part. He don’t stutter all the time, just give him a chance. Sylvester hold your hands like I told you and just relax. Just relax and concentrate.</p> <p>Irvin: Alright. Take Three.</p>	To fly		Microphone

Text	Tactic	Obstacle	Focus/Image
<p><u>Cutler:</u> A-One. A-Two. You know what to do.</p> <p><u>Sylvester:</u> Alright boys, you done seen the rest, now I'm gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom. (he celebrates)</p> <p>(After song)</p> <p><u>Irvin:</u> Okay, that's good, Ma. That sounded great.</p> <p><u>Ma Rainey:</u> See! I told you. I knew you could do it. You just have to put your mind to it. Didn't he do good Cutler? Sound real good. I told him he could do it.</p>	<p>To arise</p>	<p>Ma Rainey</p>	<p>The words</p>

PRODUCTION RUN

Ma' Rainey opened on September 24, 2003 with a Pay What You Can Performance. It was the best house I had ever seen at a PWYC performance, therefore I was very excited, anxious, and nervous. The play was well received and Sylvester was popular with the audience. The audiences continued to really like our show. Even the student matinee performances were well received despite the serious content in the play.

During the run of the show, I continued to explore different aspects of my character. Every night I would try to find different approaches to Sylvester. I created a container for Sylvester, so that as an actor I was able to move freely within a boundary while maintaining fresh performances. I also added to the container. For example, although I had created a very active physical life prior to opening, as the show progressed, I found new physical characteristics.

Every night, no matter how I was feeling, I enjoyed playing this role. I loved the way the audiences responded to him, which made it easier for me to continue to stay in the moment and create. Sylvester is clearly a comedic character, but as stated before, he does not feel that his circumstances are humorous. One night in particular I distinctly remember where I truly felt this. I started to truly embody his feelings. On the one hand, as an actor I enjoyed the laughter because it meant I was doing my job. On the other hand, when I tapped into the true inner parts of Sylvester, I really did not want them

laughing at me. I wanted acceptance, not laughter. The many performances helped me to realize even more that not only was he funny, but he was also truly struggling. Every night I tried to create life within that struggle.

PERSONAL NOTES ON THE ROLE (CONCLUSION)

I thoroughly enjoyed playing Sylvester and creating his life on-stage every night. Thinking back on the role, I often wondered why it was easier to connect with this character as opposed to others. It was a true connection on various levels. I connected to him in the same way that I connected with Phillip from Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*, a role that I played in the fall of my first semester in the program. In the following, I will compare Sylvester, Phillip, and myself to reveal this connection.

Although Sylvester and Phillip are from two different time periods, they still are similar in many ways. First of all, their unstable environment greatly affects them. Sylvester has no father, and travels around with his lesbian aunt who constantly yells at him and runs his life. Phillip lost his parents, is confined to his apartment all day waiting for his big brother, Treat, who runs his life. Both of them are educated by their daily experiences. Neither one of them has a formal education. They both are curious. Sylvester always tries to play the piano, Phillip underlines words and looks them up. They are both young men, but are treated as children. With all of these elements in mind, they struggle to transition from boy to man. Sylvester is hindered by a racist society and his stuttering. Phillip is hindered by Treat and by society.

I am a couple of years older than Sylvester and Phillip but I can relate to them. My most significant relationship to them is in their transition from boy to man. Different elements play within that issue. Like them, sometimes I have a lack of self-confidence

that is prompted by internal and external struggles. Also, I can still feel like a child, inside and out. I am always curious about things, which leads me like them to never give up. I am always reading magazines and books, and looking at things on the internet to gain inspiration. I share Sylvester's love of music as well.

With those key elements, I was able to connect with these two characters easily. As stated before, I understand their fight. I have no one running my life, but I thought about the times when people confronted me and I did not speak up like I should have. Sylvester naturally stutters, but he stutters more when he is nervous. I realize that at times I can stumble over words when I am nervous.

The last time Sylvester speaks in the play, he does not stutter. He made a step towards being a man. When we first see Sylvester, he runs on-stage very flustered and childlike. I made the choice that he exits at the end of the play, walking like a gentleman, and tipping his hat to the two white men that he had been scared of the entire play. Phillip, on the other hand, changes completely. At the beginning of the play, he is immature physically and mentally. At the end, he dresses and acts more like a man. He takes care of his bigger brother because Treat really needs him now. The story is not over for me. The struggle is still there, but so are the steps. These characters have inspired me. They did not give up. Neither will I.

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VITA

Eric Jerard Little was born January 12, 1979, in Detroit, Michigan, and raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He received his primary education at Skyland Elementary School, and his secondary education at Westlawn Middle, Tuscaloosa Middle, Eastwood Middle, and Central High Schools. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education (language arts) from Alabama A&M University in May 2002 and will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University in May 2005.