

Acting Exercise: Creating Layered Performances in *The Inseparables* by TJ Young



Introduction

In *The Inseparables* by TJ Young, a scrappy theatre company is scrambling to complete a run-through of their comeback production, an adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*, despite missing cast members and major production elements. At the point in the play where the excerpt begins, the collaborators are clashing. A moment where an argument goes too far helps a key scene in *The Three Musketeers* come to life.

This exercise will challenge actors to first craft a *Three Musketeers* performance, and then build on top of that to create the *Musketeers* performance their *Inseparables* character would give.

Goal

To explore creating a layered performance, using the play-within-a-play structure of *The Inseparables*.

Materials

The Inseparables script, Excerpts A and B.

Exercise

First Layer: Excerpt A, *The Three Musketeers*

In Excerpt A, the dialogue headings have been changed from the *Inseparables* character names to the *Musketeers* characters names, to resemble the script that the *Inseparables* characters would be working from.

- Split actors into pairs. In groups, have actors work through the scene as if they were working on a production of *The Three Musketeers*, disregarding the context of *The Inseparables*.
- Read through the scene aloud
- Discuss:
 - What choices would you, as actors, make playing Athos and Milady? Consider what they might want from one another, what the action of the scene is, how and when they might move, what words they might emphasize, how the scene might build to the end.
 - What examples can you find in the text that might support your interpretations?
- Rehearse and Share:
 - Have the actors practice their scenes, using their discussion as a jumping-off point. What new things can they find bouncing off of each other's energy, and moving on their feet?
 - Have volunteers share their scenes with the group.
 - Compare and contrast different versions of the scene, discussing their process and how they came to make their choices.

Monologue Variation:

If desired, instead of working through the whole scene, you might have actors choose either Milady or Athos' monologue to prepare ahead of time for class, and be ready to talk about their choices.

Second Layer: Excerpt B, *The Inseparables*

In Excerpt B, the scene from *The Three Musketeers* is placed back in the context of *The Inseparables* rehearsal. Now, you're considering the choices that the characters Kai and Brooklyn would make while portraying Athos and Milady in the *Three Musketeers* scene, especially in light of the clash between Kai and Alex immediately beforehand.

- Split actors into groups. Seven actors have speaking roles in the scene, but if needed, for the purposes of the exercise, you can have one actor read for Dakota, Taylor and Ezra.
- Read through the scene aloud.
- Discuss:
 - Consider what the characters might want from one another, what the action of the scene is, how and when they might move, what words they might emphasize, how the scene might build to the end.
 - What examples can you find in the text that might support your interpretations?
 - At the beginning of the excerpt, what are the dynamics between the characters? Use examples from the text. Who is feeling powerful and who is feeling powerless? How does that shift between the top of the excerpt and this stage direction?
(KAI starts to shake it off. They come back to it, focused and in a different mood. More serious.)
 - What do you think the shift is that happens for Kai in the moment of the stage direction
 - Considering Kai's arc above, what might Kai discover in the *Three Musketeers* text that they never noticed before? What might resonate with them in a different way? How do they normally do it that's different now? Is there something they are trying to communicate to someone else in the cast through their performance?

- How does what happened between Alex and Kai affect the other members of the cast? How would this affect Brooklyn's performance when she begins the scene as Milady? Would Kai's moments of discovery shift choices she makes in her own performance? If so, how?
- What would Kai's performance mean to Alex when they reenter the scene? How about Jordan? Is Kai aware of their entrance? Is Brooklyn?
- Rehearse and Share:
 - Have the actors practice their scenes, using their discussion as a jumping-off point. What new things can they find bouncing off of each other's energy, and moving on their feet?
 - Have volunteers share their scenes with the group.
 - Compare and contrast different versions of the scene, discussing their process and how they came to make their choices.

Monologue variation:

If desired, you might have the actors who prepared the Milady (Brooklyn) or Athos (Kai) monologues revisit the choices they made, this time in character as Brooklyn or Kai.

Have volunteers read the other roles (doubling up is fine) in the section from the top of the scene to the stage direction: "*(KAI starts to shake it off. They come back to it, focused and in a different mood. More serious.)*."

Then have the actors working on the monologue jump to that monologue.

Discuss as a group: With the new context of the argument in rehearsal, what might Kai or Brooklyn discover in their *Three Musketeers* monologue that they never noticed before? What might resonate with them in a different way? How do they normally do it that's different now? Is there something they are trying to communicate to someone else in the cast through their performance?

EXCERPT A – *The Three Musketeers*

NOTE: This excerpt from *The Inseparables* by TJ Young depicts a scene from the play-within-a-play that the characters are rehearsing, *The Three Musketeers*. For the purposes of this exercise only, the character names of the *Inseparables* characters have been changed to the names of the characters they portray in *The Three Musketeers*.

Context: At this point in *The Three Musketeers*, Athos realizes his long-lost wife is the villainous Milady, who has been scheming against his friends.

MILADY: Athos...my love. I didn't expect to see you again. I thought you had died. Although I see you have been running around with the riffraff that are the Musketeers.

ATHOS: I thought you were dead, too.

MILADY: Well I'm not. I'm alive and well and doing better than you are. Your path has left your nails dirty and your eyes with a weary look. Although, if you wanted to...I have missed sharing a bed with you and—

ATHOS: Leave my friend alone.

MILADY: I beg your pardon.

(MILADY takes out a piece of paper. ATHOS snatches it.)

ATHOS: You will stop this crusade against d'Artagnan. You will give him his love, Constance, without continued trouble, and you will ensure that there is not a single threat of harm or ill-will that comes from your hand or heart.

(A laugh slips through MILADY's lips.)

MILADY: You think your friend is the only one I have in my sights? You have always been easy to pull one over on, my love. I shall kill your friend, I shall kill that pathetic Constance, I shall kill The Duke of Buckingham, and I shall do it all without a drop of blood on my own hands.

ATHOS: Why? For what reason do you hold such contempt for someone so kind and determined to help their fellow man?

MILADY: Because your “friend” stood in my way. Do you know how hard it was to steal those diamonds from that necklace that the Queen gave the Duke? No. You don’t. But it isn’t your fault that you don’t know the workings of treachery. You simply were not built for it. You only desired one thing, and that is love. I desire something far greater. And that is everything. After I thought you perished, I married into a family that had wealth. I thought by ending the life of my then-husband, I would have the de Winter estate all to myself. But as long as my brother-in-law, that pompous Lord de Winter still draws breath, I will only see a portion of what could be mine. He is the single thing standing between me and the entire estate. With a man that powerful, not just anyone can deal the death blow without causing attention. But the Cardinal can. His holy cloth covers more than just his skin. It covers blood stains as well. He requires one thing in return—the death of the Duke and the proof that the Queen has been untrue. And I shall give him that, even if your “friend” must be eliminated in the process. The Cardinal has given me a pardon for the act. Even the Lord God has seen fit to make my hands as clean as the first snow.

ATHOS: If I didn’t love you once, I would destroy you right here and now. Know that I mean that, without question. Your need for “more” is disgusting to me and I should have known that an evil so pure wouldn’t die easily. All I wanted for us was to have a good life together. I chastised myself for giving up on you once I saw that mark emblazoned on your shoulder. But now I see that the monster I feared you were is the monster that you are. I made a vow to those people who have been by my side since then...the ones who have shown up and have been my second regardless of situation or circumstance. You mock them, you spit on their names, you call them riffraff. If they are that low to you, then so am I. We are cut from the same bolt of hardy fabric. To you, we are mistakes to be unwritten. But what you fail to realize is that together, we are more than you could ever hope or wish for. We are inseparable. And if I find out that one of the most daring and courageous people I have ever met, a person you have actively tried to harm and maim, is killed by anyone who has a hint that it might bring so much as an upward turn to those venomous lips...well, I swear right here and now that I will run you through with every sharp object I can find within

arm's reach. I hope that the person I fell for is in there somewhere. But if you prove to me they aren't, I will end you. And I mean that in no uncertain terms. You no longer have my love. What you have is my bile and contempt. Now you leave here without your pardon and with this promise. Hurt him, and know that any street you walk on may be stained with your blood. I will see to it personally. Is that clear? IS THAT CLEAR?

EXCERPT B – *The Inseparables*

Context: Director Alex is straining to make everything work; stage manager Ezra is doing their best to keep everyone on track; Kai, who plays Athos, has been vocally criticizing Alex's adaptation; Unhappily cast as Porthos Jordan has been lashing out at their longtime friend Alex, because the insecure Reese was cast as D'Artagnan. Powerhouse actress Brooklyn plays Milady, diehard theatre believer Taylor plays Aramis, and enthusiastic newbie Dakota plays Constance.

REESE: Well, it isn't an ambush, so I have to give her credit. It is Milady. She is out to kill me at all costs. And Athos...I have some information you might find troubling. Milady carries the same brand as your ex-wife. I believe they are one and the same.

KAI: You mean...

REESE: She is not only alive, but also working with the Cardinal and working diligently to end my life.

KAI: Gasp!

ALEX: No, you don't say the word. You do it.

KAI: (Breaking:) But in the script it was on a dialogue line. Not a stage direction line.

ALEX: Formatting typo.

KAI: Oh. Okay. I thought you were being Brechtian and actually showing some style.

(This gets a collective "ooooo" from the entire cast.

ALEX is hurt.)

ALEX: That one um... Okay, I'm gonna step out. Ezra? Do you mind?

EZRA: But you're in the next scene!

ALEX: Just skip to the Athos and Milady scene, okay? Does that one have enough style for you, Kai? (Under their breath:) I can't do this anymore. I just...

(ALEX leaves.)

Everyone is still. KAI is actually stunned. First signs of real emotion?)

JORDAN: (Sincere:) Look what you did.

KAI: It was a joke.

(BROOKLYN enters, preparing for Milady.)

BROOKLYN: That was harsh, my dude.

JORDAN: I'm going after them.

EZRA: Are you sure you should be the one?

JORDAN: ...Yeah.

TAYLOR: I'll come too. Help them breathe through it.

JORDAN: No. I got it. Really.

KAI: Tell them I'm—

(JORDAN exits.)

KAI: —sorry.

DAKOTA: Should we wait?

(EZRA looking at their clock.)

EZRA: We gotta keep moving. Don't have much time left in the space.

BROOKLYN: You good to go, Kai?

KAI: Umm...yeah. Let's get it done, I guess.

EZRA: Whenever you're ready.

(KAI starts to shake it off. They come back to it, focused and in a different mood. More serious.)

BROOKLYN: *(In character:)* Athos...my love. I didn't expect to see you again. I thought you had died. Although I see you have been running around with the riffraff that are the Musketeers.

KAI: I thought you were dead, too.

BROOKLYN: Well I'm not. I'm alive and well and doing better than you are. Your path has left your nails dirty and your eyes with a weary look. Although, if you wanted to...I have missed sharing a bed with you and—

KAI: Leave my friend alone.

BROOKLYN: I beg your pardon.

(BROOKLYN takes out a piece of paper. KAI snatches it.

ALEX enters again, JORDAN by their side. They watch this next part as KAI becomes completely engrossed.)

KAI: You will stop this crusade against d'Artagnan. You will give him his love, Constance, without continued trouble, and you will ensure that there is not a single threat of harm or ill-will that comes from your hand or heart.

(A laugh slips through BROOKLYN's lips.)

BROOKLYN: You think your friend is the only one I have in my sights? You have always been easy to pull one over on, my love. I shall kill your friend, I shall kill that pathetic Constance, I shall kill The Duke of Buckingham, and I shall do it all without a drop of blood on my own hands.

KAI: Why? For what reason do you hold such contempt for someone so kind and determined to help their fellow man?

BROOKLYN: Because your "friend" stood in my way. Do you know how hard it was to steal those diamonds from that necklace that the Queen gave the Duke? No. You don't. But it isn't your fault that you don't know the workings of treachery. You simply were not built for it. You only desired one thing, and that is love. I desire something far greater. And that is everything. After I thought you perished, I married into a family that had wealth. I thought by ending the life of my then-husband, I would have

the de Winter estate all to myself. But as long as my brother-in-law, that pompous Lord de Winter still draws breath, I will only see a portion of what could be mine. He is the single thing standing between me and the entire estate. With a man that powerful, not just anyone can deal the death blow without causing attention. But the Cardinal can. His holy cloth covers more than just his skin. It covers blood stains as well. He requires one thing in return—the death of the Duke and the proof that the Queen has been untrue. And I shall give him that, even if your “friend” must be eliminated in the process. The Cardinal has given me a pardon for the act. Even the Lord God has seen fit to make my hands as clean as the first snow.

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