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## John Jasper: The Creation of a Character

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Blake Price

**John Jasper: The Creation of a Character**

Honors Thesis

November 22, 2015

## John Jasper: The Creation of a Character

On November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, I will be participating in my last mainstage performance at Western Michigan University. To say I'm excited to be finishing my college career as John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, would be an absolute understatement. Over the course of the past three and a half years, I have had the rare privilege to split my time evenly between performing plays and musicals, which does not always happen for Music Theatre Performance majors. The ability to work with new directors on a variety of different styles of plays and musicals has given me the opportunity to hone in on what builds a great performance from myself as an actor. That being said, when I say "great performance," I can only reflect on my own comfortability and understanding of a role and the show, as well as my own opinion of the way I execute said role for an audience. Within this thesis, I will be providing a detailed analysis which goes above and beyond in presenting the successes and challenges of putting together and performing a leading role for a professional caliber musical production. I will provide in-depth research and methodology in creating my own simplified version of one of the most complex characters I've ever had the opportunity to play.

When watching a performance, whether it's live theatre, or on film or television, what you are seeing is the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, you may see hundreds of artists putting in countless hours of grueling work in order to present an audience with a couple hours of professional entertainment. Whether the production took months to put together, or a matter of weeks (which is the way most summer stock theatres rehearse), an audience pays for the final product of what is extremely hard work from all aspects of the show. As an actor, my job is one of the most simple and most complex, as well as the least and most important in the theatre. You

cannot have theatre without actors. In theory, any actor can act by him/herself without any help from anyone. However, to put on groundbreaking theatre, the kind that changes the lives of millions, you must have a team of hard-working, creative individuals. Within these tumultuous rehearsal processes, the show itself is forever changing. As an actor, entire characters may change on a day to day basis. When it comes to a character like John Jasper, changing is inevitable as well as a pivotal part of the character.

John Jasper is the picture perfect example of a paranoid schizophrenic. Dictionary.com defines schizophrenia as “a severe mental disorder characterized by some, but not necessarily all, of the following features: emotional blunting, intellectual deterioration, social isolation, disorganized speech and behavior, delusions, and hallucinations.” It’s also defined as “a state characterized by the coexistence of contradictory or incompatible elements.” The latter definition is the most important part of putting together John Jasper as a character to be performed on stage. The coexistence of opposing personalities is the most recognized feature of a schizophrenic for most audiences. Therefore, making the clear distinction between two completely conflicting personalities within the same body was the epitome of my performance as John Jasper. Jasper is never emotionally blunt. Having an absence of emotion would contradict what makes Jasper so villainous and interesting to watch. The astounding Jekyll and Hyde extreme gives this character a constant battle between good and evil.

Making the dissimilarity large enough so that all audience members know when I am John Jasper and when I am the Monster of John Jasper, without losing theatrical integrity and control over the performance brought an interesting challenge. In order to paint the royal, light-hearted characteristics of John Jasper, I brought his posture and speech upward with smooth, flowing movements. This was the Jasper every other character saw when they shared the stage with me. It

was the high-class, intellectual and positive form of John Jasper. In complete contrast, the Monster of John Jasper moves sharply with an increasingly animalistic quality. The Monster speaks in a low, gravelly, biting part of the voice. When Jasper turns seamlessly into the Monster, his body goes sharply from tall and sophisticated to low and primal. Making it obvious that this man does not follow any normal or familiar state of mind is the first priority of the musical's plot, which is why the first song after the opening is "A Man Could Go Quite Mad." In Jasper's first solo, he slips in and out of the Monster to challenge the audience to own their primal instincts and thoughts and to defend them as acceptable. In the Opium Den sequence, there is originally a number entitled "Jasper's Ballet" which further exemplifies Jasper's schizophrenic delusion and hallucinations for an alternate life with Rosa Bud.

Although the exact causes of schizophrenia are unknown, according to the National Health Service (NHS) of England, a combination of physical, genetic, psychological and environmental factors can increase the likelihood of a person developing the condition. ("Schizophrenia - Causes") That being said, nothing in the text explicitly explains how John Jasper developed the disease. However, it is more important to note that Jasper's schizophrenia may have "forced him to seek treatment" in an opium den. He has an addiction to laudanum, containing approximately 10% powdered opium by weight (1% morphine). "A potent narcotic by virtue of its high morphine concentration, laudanum was historically used to treat a variety of ailments." ("Laudanum") In this specific case, Jasper combines laudanum with wine to dilute the taste and further intoxicate himself away from his illness. According to Opium Abuse Treatment, schizophrenics may turn to opium because of its pleasurable effects such as euphoria, relaxation, numbness from pain, and alleviation of anxieties. However, people who build a tolerance to these effects seek to maintain them, which leads to addiction. ("Schizophrenia and Opium Use")

Throughout the opium den sequence it becomes very clear that Jasper's need for the drug involves the positive effects, without consideration for the negative effects such as impaired mental abilities, vision impairment, and abnormal mood swings. Many of Jasper's lyrics and lines speak about "changes." He speaks to Princess Puffer, pressing that the laudanum helps him find the "changes of color." In the very next scene, he speaks to Mayor Sapsea agreeing with his observation about the suspicious Neville Landless before the Monster sharply cuts, "But for now, I must – CHANGE." The more John Jasper drinks the laudanum wine, the more intoxicated he becomes, and the less control he has over his schizophrenic symptoms. Each side effect becomes inherently clear in the scene for the song "No Good Can Come From Bad," when Jasper drinks a toast of the wine with Edwin Drood and Neville Landless. Throughout the number, Jasper becomes increasingly more crazed and bloodthirsty for Edwin's death. The contrast between the Monster and Jasper becomes much broader, with specific instances when Jasper himself twitches and growls, overflowing with the Monster's ferocity.

Over the course of the past month of rehearsals, I have been struggling more often than I have been succeeding. The style of show and my own character analysis of Jasper often conflict with one another, because the show is essentially a play within a play, with a strong emphasis on audience involvement. Many of my moments as Clive on stage are played almost exclusively to the audience. Oftentimes, the way the story is told as a comedy is much more important than the realistic choice for any given character. Our director, Jay Berkow, has had previous success with this show and understands what will create comedic twists and turns for the audience, which often leads to playing into the irony of the entire musical. The show is based around a rather dark, classical, and melodramatic theme but by adding the artifice of the Music Hall Royale and all of the members within, there's a general sense of not taking anything too seriously. Jasper is set up

to be the most obvious murderer from the beginning so that the audience is discouraged to vote for him. This leads every applause Clive Paget earns to be filled with a resounding wall of boos and gripes from the audience and company. Paget takes the boos as a sign that he is doing his job as the show's villain and as an opportunity to prove to any suspecting women that he is the perfect "bad boy" of the Music Hall Royale.

While others achieved a foothold on their characters early in the rehearsal process, my path has been much more gradual. I originally approached Jasper from a realistic standpoint: as if we were putting on the entire mystery as written by Charles Dickens. However, it was expertly crafted by Rupert Holmes as a send up to melodrama to give the audience a chance to laugh at the ridiculousness of taking life too seriously. Although this is not my favorite musical genre, it's important to be able to find the honesty in doing a piece that may have more to do with having fun on stage than it is to make riveting dramatic performances. I've had Jay laugh and say to me on numerous occasions, "You're thinking way too deeply about this character." His point was that I was trying too hard to make every move honest and appeal to an objective that was inaccurate. I had made it so John Jasper wanted and needed various items and actions from the other performers, when in reality, it should be Clive Paget who wants overall approval and attention from the audience. The underlying subtext throughout a musical farce such as *Drood* is that everything is done for the audience's benefit, even if it means throwing away historical inaccuracies, or literary integrity for an extra gram of laughter. Obviously we must stay as accurate as we possibly can to the text and direction we were provided. Whether you are on screen in Hollywood, on stage in New York City – or dancing for your friends because you had a little too much to drink and Beyoncé came on – you perform for an audience. Any time we're in public or there is an audience, it should be vastly understood that the audience is the most crucial part, arguably.

Jay has sat down with me to remind me that John Jasper is not being portrayed by Blake Price; he is being portrayed by Clive Paget, who is being portrayed by Blake Price. This, of course, further distances me from John Jasper by having to account for three separate characters and their own mannerisms, movement and speech patterns. John Jasper has two very distinct sides that play in opposition throughout the entire musical, with Clive popping in and out to remind the audience he's still fighting for their approval (or hatred, more literally). This presents a new challenge that touches on physical habits that I have been working to break since I first began acting at Western Michigan. I have a natural tendency to slump while standing on stage which is ineffective when playing an upper-class British baritone. This same tendency allows me to take on the character of the Monster more easily, who can be found bursting out of Jasper's subconscious to deliver a roar to one of the other characters on stage. My tendency to slump is both a blessing and a curse, and this show allows me to work through stabilizing all movements between a hunch and standing tall and upright.

Another struggle I am having has to do with the inception of three separate characters within two separate settings. My brain has always been drawn to clarity and with having three characters, I've been given the, "You're thinking too much" speech all too often. Jumping from the womanizing, leading male in Clive Paget into the high-class, flowingly suave John Jasper who then jumps into the demonic, perverted, drug addicted Monster, can be a tough balancing act for someone who doesn't necessarily connect to performing farce. So far, the only thing that has helped has been memorization and creating a sense of timing during the scenes. I love being told what to do and where to go and I often need help to free myself from these parameters. Having creative freedom allows me to discover stronger, more natural choices which not only would help the audience believe my performance, but would also lead to me having more fun on stage.



At the end of Week 5, I began finding a rhythm for the character and the show. Now that memorization is much less of a problem, I've begun letting myself experiment and play with all other characters in the show. After keeping track of my performances, notes, and personal failures and achievements in rehearsals, I began to settle into a strong sense of who John Jasper/Clive Paget is in the context of WMU's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. My take on John Jasper is only effective if it works well with the entire ensemble which it hadn't been doing for the previous four weeks. This week I was effectively able to loosen my hold on creating an honest, dramatic interpretation of Jasper. I was able to be Blake, wreaking farcical havoc with a large group of friends playing a handful of over-the-top characters in one joyous production of *Drood*.

When starting a new role in a new show, or one you have never participated in, it's important to research both the show and the character you're portraying. There are an infinite number of methods that actors use in order to achieve the pinnacle of their performance on any project. Most professional actors have fine-tuned their process for character development to fit their own style and mindset. Some actors prefer to live the entire life of the character they're portraying, often called "Method" acting. Although this is a highly prized technique (i.e. Heath Ledger, Marlon Brando, Daniel Day-Lewis, etc.), it can be dangerous and often counterproductive for creating a work that is honest and true. The Oscar-winning Method actors often carried with them a characteristic that made them Oscar-worthy: talent. There's no proof that one method works better than another, but the dangerous effects of true Method acting have proven deadly on more than one occasion. This is a widely debated topic among artists in the theatre and film community, and without any real proof, it's entirely up to the actor to decide what process will work best for him/her. (Thomson, "The Death of Method Acting")

Constantin Stanislavski was the founder of this technique on acting, and it has since been adapted for American actors by teachers such as Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg. Stanislavski's "system" involves drawing on internal emotions and memories through the practice of exercises such as sense memory and affective memory. Sense memory refers to the recalling of physical sensations surrounding emotional events. Affective memory recalls detailed past events that are similar or closely related to an event in which the character he/she is playing experiences. (Carnicke 221) Although this approach would make accessing emotionally extreme moments easier, a musical like *Drood* includes little to no vulnerability. Much of the work done is through the personality of the actor portraying the role. Being a musical farce, there is a strong emphasis on physical, prop, and situational humor with many of the more dramatic instances written to mock a given genre of theatre.

In creating the role of John Jasper, taking a Method approach wasn't an option. Jasper was constructed to be a good-looking, suave gentleman with an extreme addiction to opium wine as well as being a definite schizophrenic. Not only will I refuse to try any opiates, but frankly, I don't drink wine. Using the Method technique, it's clear to see how it can be dangerous when it comes to roles that push the limits of physical, emotional, and mental health. That being said, *Drood* is a musical comedy in every sense of the word, therefore John Jasper isn't a character that requires an enormous amount of theatrical honesty, arguably. Clive Paget, however, plays John Jasper within the setting of a genuine music hall in London during the Victorian era. This character is much simpler than the diseased Jasper, but his dramatic authenticity is much more crucial in being able to communicate to the audience members that they are, in fact, sitting in the Music Hall Royale surrounded by a rambunctious cast each stringing along the audience in their own absurd objective. For example, my incarnation of Clive Paget fulfills the womanizing, baritone, leading man

archetype of the company with one objective: find a woman to take home each night. Obviously, this isn't an objective I'm actually looking to accomplish, but making this intention clear before the show paints a clear, misogynistic Clive that the audience can always rely on to be flirty and offensive towards its female population.

My technique for acting changes depending on many different variables including role, show, rehearsal period, and just what seems to work and feel comfortable. I think it's important to be open to learning new styles and to keep your instrument (mind & body) susceptible to being pushed in new directions so that you can be familiar with unfamiliarity. It's can be a confusing and frustrating paradox, however, there are a remarkable amount of variables when you are acting. Whether it be on stage or on camera, at any point, something can offset your "ideal" acting environment, which may throw you off completely. Being able to slip in and out of techniques comfortably can give an actor the chance to recover, respond, and react with a technique that works more appropriately, rather than causing a halt in productivity. Many of those nightmare production stories involve the interruption of a high-profile actor's process, which causes some sort of tirade or other unsettling shift in dynamic that ultimately affects the final product or vision. Being a performer that other artists can work well with can be the most important part about being an actor working in the entertainment industry. At least starting out, you want to be malleable and able to take direction from all sorts of people, especially those with whom you may not like or agree. Once you've obtained success, there is more freedom to do things your way. As of right now, I don't have one proven technique, but I'm open to exploring almost all versions of process that can get me where I need to be for any given role.

For Clive Paget, I utilized Stanislavski's system for any interaction I have with the audience and members of the company, when playing their given *Drood* company member. Sanford

Meisner's technique was influential in my connection with my cast mates and the audience. Meisner's method requires the actor to focus on the other actor, which in the case of *Drood* is most often the audience. This technique is purely reactive upon the other person's words and actions, which allows an easy way to reach authenticity when putting on a show that thrives on being over-the-top. When working on John Jasper, I found Michael Chekhov's approach much more suitable. The Chekhov technique focuses on transformation, working with impulse, imagination and gestures. His work derives from working outside-in, or letting your movement affect your emotional state. When jumping back and forth between Jasper and the Monster, my movement and gesture informed every emotional state of my presence on stage. While playing either character, my movement was impulsive and physically energetic constantly. The attachment to movement was crucial when doing such a physically and vocally demanding role. The Chekhov technique gave me a remarkable foundation that allowed me to focus on the movement and impulses, rather than how substantially exhausted I was in certain scenes and songs.

Throughout the show, there are a number of instances where John Jasper is dropped and Clive Paget reasserts himself as the alluring leading man. Because the setting and characters are so archetypal, there is a freedom within the form that allows for a well-trained actor to embellish and create nuances that allow for more specificity and ownership. For example, during the show's Vaudevillian patter "Both Sides of the Coin," the Chairman (played by Mike Perlongo) and I made quick-witted statements about the fact that everyone had more than one side to their personalities. Jay blocked us to stand still during all but one patter, which gave Mike and me free reign to color words, phrases and movement as we saw fit. The first two are very still as to contrast the fast-moving pace of the words. However, during the last two verses, Vaudeville took over in the form of the Chairman floating around stage singing a large, open "Ahhhh!" while I sang the patter below

him, with a shimmy, shake, and step-kick that may or may not have resembled a much more contemporary theatrical style. After the breakdown, the orchestra picked up the tempo considerably as to “challenge” the two of us to a lightning round of the patter, which we both eagerly accepted. At this point, the main focus was to impress the audience and give them a rousing number to nod along to in awe of our speed. During one night of tech rehearsal, an ensemble member did a back handspring which left his hat directly in my path before the lightning patter. I picked it up, and as the chorus approached, I put it on my head, reversed, and when the chorus began, so did my hip-hop music video complete with very recently popularized dance moves. If I made it into an every night occurrence, I’m certain I would get a note from Jay telling me to cut it. However, because it was so spontaneous, it didn’t detract from the story or point of the song, and achieved the ideal performance quality that excited the audience. I feel it was a creative performance choice and I’m certain Jay would agree. Clive Paget doesn’t know any of these dances, but at the end of the day, theatre is playing. It’s intended to be enjoyable for both the audience and the actor. As long as I did not take away the dramatic integrity of the show, there is room for playing and finding things that made John Jasper fit to who I am.

Opening night was a remarkable turning point for the entire cast and gave the entire company the confidence we needed to perform to the best of our ability. The energy we received from having bodies in the seats was astonishingly necessary to fill in the final aspects of our characters. For me, being able to see new faces, hear their voices, and feel their resounding laughter and applause was precisely the lift I needed to feel at home in the role of John Jasper. Something happened on stage that night that seemed to shift my entire mindset from questioning myself in the role to knowing full-well that I was an astounding fit. I was reminded that no one could perform the John Jasper that I had created that way that I did. When the house opened, I was no longer

Blake Price, I was Clive Paget. By becoming Clive Paget, I dropped all modern American ties and strained everything I said through a filter of high-class, British intelligence complete with crude quips and outspoken admiration for all female audience members. The audience bought into everything that Clive would say or do, and for most of the performance, I felt like a different person. John Jasper was tremendously significant for the context of the show but the most important character was Clive Paget. Paget was the man the audience connected to and the man they ultimately saw when watching Jasper.

Over the course of the entire rehearsal process, I had many moments when I didn't feel as though I was going to do very well in the show. There are always new discoveries to be made and explorations to be had. The important thing is how the audience reacts to Clive and how I feel while I am Clive. At the start of dress rehearsals, it's vital to develop a pre-show and post-show process as an actor. A pre-show process is anything the actor feels is necessary to be sufficiently prepared to perform before going on stage. This ultimately changes depending on the day, however I prefer to keep certain parts very constant. I prefer to take care of any preparations that include other company members as soon as absolutely possible. This includes notes, hair, costuming, and mic check. In both my pre-show and post-show, I prefer being one of the first in and out throughout the entire process so that I can get out of everyone's way and I can focus on doing whatever I need to do in order to warm-up and cool down. In a physical comedy, it's crucial for me to warm-up my body by doing various calisthenics that engage my core, loosen my spine, and connect my movement with my breath. Some days I need more than others, but no matter what, I am moving on the stage, or in whatever space in which I will be performing. Every performance space is different and they can even change from day to day. The energy you bring to a performance space

is always different than the energy that that space carries. Performance spaces, much like people, have energies that forever shift and change by the minute.

The idea of energy isn't a new one, but it has been the center of some of the greatest theatrical performances in all of history. Much like the air we breathe, energy surrounds us, bouncing and feeding off of everything it touches. This energy can both help and hinder you when performing. Much like an electrical current, our bodies give off energy at varying rates depending on factors such as mood, physical wellbeing, and human interaction. Having a large, active audience means that their energy is collectively strong enough to affect the actors' energy on stage. When an audience laughs, applauds, or boos collectively, it is cyclical reverberation of the energy we, as an ensemble, have given to them. The audience members then take in, collect, process, and then respond however their body and mind feel would be proper. When I warm-up, I am ensuring that I am aware of my own energy and how much I use to fill the entire performance space. In order to do this, I have to warm up my voice significantly. John Jasper can be as vocally demanding as any role in a full-length opera. The range and quality of the voice must be grand and ostentatious in order to fulfill what's needed for the character.

Another important pre-show ritual involves going over my character track's trouble areas by possibly listening to calming music, going over the script, or marking through blocking on stage. I've created a rule for myself that once the house opens at 7:00pm, I must speak with Clive's Received Pronunciation (RP) dialect. This is simply a high-class, London British dialect, most notably given to characters of royalty in period pieces. My RP is not perfect, but by forcing myself to speak this way at all points from 7:00pm to the end of the show, I am practicing what can be a very tricky dialect to master and use when improvising with an American audience before the show begins. Once the curtain opens, I do not speak any more than I must when I am backstage.

As I stated before, Jasper's music involves an extreme amount of vocal energy and support which cannot be wasted backstage. I carry my own personal water bottle, going through about one and half bottles – about 40 oz – a night. With the athleticism and core strength this role involves, by the time I finish my first song, "A Man Could Go Quite Mad," I am already sweating profusely. Being John Jasper has proven to be one of the most difficult workouts I've ever done and the perspiration does not truly cease until I am in my car, on the way home.

Once the final curtain is pulled, I remain as quiet as possible and allow myself to reflect, recover, and re-center myself. In my opinion, an actor should leave all parts of a given character in the performance space. Bringing home any extra characteristics other than those of myself can interrupt my mindset and throw off my "real world" self. Being silent also forces me to calm my brain and body after a remarkably high-energy show, which helps me recover and rest much quicker when I do go home. If, by chance, I decide to then go out with a group of friends or family, I am completely myself and I can focus on the time I spend with them. Bringing my character with me post-show has proven to be uncomfortable and exhausting for those that aren't involved in the show.

I have spent three and a half years soaking in knowledge and challenging myself to become an all-around better performer only to come to one realization: the learning will never stop. I will never stop learning how to be better and my process will always change depending on the show, venue, company, etc. That's not to say I didn't grow immensely. A close friend of mine saw the show on opening and came up to me afterward and said, "You're ready. Every time I see you, you just get better and better. You're ready to go out and make things happen." When I bowed as John Jasper for the first time, I felt what she saw. The feelings that I had been having about being ready to leave West Michigan to pursue acting were confirmed when I stood in front of a crowd of what



was likely no more than one hundred people. They not only clapped and cheered, but sharply booed. I knew that I had done something special, regardless of giving a flawless performance or not. I had affected an audience and the audience had affected me. When I think about why I do this, I get reminders in the best ways possible. That same night, a younger gentleman came up to me that I did not know, and he looked at me in my eyes, shook my hand and stated, “Because of your performance, I decided that I want to start auditioning for shows again. Thank you.” To be so well connected to my art – inviting an audience to share in my connection that they also want to be on stage with me, or even as me – that is why I perform. I may be overstating, but when I looked at him in his eyes we connected and I felt the warmth of a fire. The same fire that you can only get when you have a passion – one that he seemed to have put away long ago – and I had an immense part in reigniting his flame. My fire has never been stronger. I have never been more ready to blaze a trail of greatness toward my goals of making an impact on the world. People in today’s world need inspiration: they need that fire. No wonder I’ve been sweating profusely as Clive Paget – my fire has never been bigger, stronger, or hotter than it is right now. Here I come.

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