

Theater 20 Reflection Paper by Haoji Wang

Professor Windham | Spring 2025

Authenticity

I want to tell two stories from this class that demonstrated “authenticity” to me.

Story 1: “I Am Enough”

At the end of the first class, Mr. Tobie asked us to walk to the front, open our arms, make eye contact with everyone in the room, and say: “I am enough.” Afterward, we shared how it felt. A lot of people found it powerful. The open-arm gesture puts you in a vulnerable position. You open yourself up to be seen, and you also see others fully. Connection happens when we’re willing to be both.

But right before I went up, I had an impulse to say “I am great” instead. For a split second it seemed more powerful, a stronger self-affirmation. I pushed it aside and said the words we were asked to say, and I felt good about it.

A couple of days later I kept thinking about that impulse. Why did I want to say “I am great”? Is wanting to be great just another pressure I’m imposing on myself? Instead of a genuine affirmation, isn’t it a confession that I feel I need to be great just to justify existing? Isn’t that another fixation wearing the mask of self-belief?

That reflection reframed “I am enough” for me. To be enough is not to settle, is to realize I am already whole. I am not what I’ve achieved or what I’m reaching for, I simply am. If I grow, it’s because I want to branch outward. If I stay still, it’s because this is where I belong right now. There is no external pressure for either.

Story 2: World-Building

The second story came from our world-building exercise. We were imagining a shared space, say, a restaurant; and everyone had to inhabit a role. Almost immediately, students started creating drama, like starting a fake argument, “breaking” a glass, getting into an accident.

Mr. Tobie stopped the practice and told us, “do not try to make a scene.” While the impulse to generate drama might look like good acting, the real lesson was simpler and harder: learn to just exist in the world.

I asked myself: what does it feel like to simply be? Instead of having to perform something, maybe we can just learn to “be”. If my character in that restaurant was just sitting, talking to a friend, maintaining eye contact, then that is the performance. Nothing more is needed.

The best performances are not performances at all. They are just living. I think of Timothée Chalamet in Marty Supreme, those moments of passionate, almost delusional confidence. I don’t believe he was picturing what the character would do. He was tapping into his own obsession with his craft, his own hunger, and channeling that into the character. He was living through Marty.

Self-Devised Work

Self-devised work was when I felt most alive in this class. When I first told my story to the class, it felt a lot like the “I am enough” exercise: to open myself up and be received. To show a vulnerable self and trust that it’s enough.

I told my story of what home means to me, and my journey away from home since 15. What I told the class was quite different from what I practiced on my own, and it was better. When I was communicating to an audience, there was no time to hide and craft a likable, toned-down version of the story. The only truthful thing I could do is to present my feelings and memories truthfully, and let it exist in the room.

Two weeks later, we moved into the 3-5 minute theatrical presentations. Watching how everybody’s stories evolved was one of the most beautiful experiences I had all quarter. Not every story was perfectly delivered, but everyone treated their material with complete seriousness and passion. They constructed specific settings, planned movements, shaped expressions. You could see them actually living inside the moment. These were some of the best pieces of theater I’ve witnessed, which is crazy because we are full amateurs, but it was truly powerful because everyone’s real self was up there.

For my own piece, I abstracted my personal story into a fictional world to explore themes of good and evil, real and fake, and what we pursue in life. The story involved The Devil, The Boy, God, and a chess board. The funny part is in the actual performance, I played The Devil which is my antagonist, and Jeff was playing as me (The Boy). Creating this meant a lot to me, especially considering it would be very unlikely for me to make this whole thing if I was not in this class. I realized once again that I really like writing stories and exploring philosophical themes through characters.

Scene and Ensemble Work

Going into the scene work, I thought I had a pretty clear picture of what I was good at. My favorite actor is Leo DiCaprio; I admire his charisma, this cool, magnetic presence. And I just delivered a good performance as “The Devil” where I was acting borderline maniacal. I figured I’d do best in a scene that called for outward expressiveness, confidence, something explosive. I wanted to be the cool guy.

Then I was assigned a role who was quite the opposite, the stoic, contained detective. A lot of the work was in the subtext, in what the character was holding back. This is where the world-building lesson came back. I had just finished a piece that felt emotionally big and expressive. Now I had to step into something that looked, on first read, pretty boring. But good acting, as Mr. Tobie kept showing us, isn’t about making a scene. It’s about being fully present. It’s about understanding what your character is carrying.

So Allison and I got to work. Instead of relying on instinct or a flash of inspiration, we had to sit with the material, dig into the context, and work through the emotional logic methodically. That kind of down-to-earth, deliberate work is something I learned a lot from. Then each practice got better. Interestingly we never needed to plan “at that moment make this face” etc, it just started happening at the right moments. That’s the lesson from world-building: exist in it, and the performance follows.

Authenticity and Performance

I want to write an extra section regarding “authenticity and performance”, or more specifically, the tension and unity of these two. I consider this to be a core theme both in this class as well as in my personal life, so I thought it’d be interesting to write about.

Authenticity sounds liberating, but we have to be honest: the raw, unfiltered self is not always likable. On the other hand, performance is crafted to achieve some external purpose: to be respected, admired, liked. And yet, the moment we sense that a performance is constructed, we are repelled, and it fails at its own goal.

I want to be authentic and always true to myself. But I also want external things. I want to be liked, respected, successful. So sometimes I will have to perform, and I dislike myself if I sense the inauthenticity in my performance.

But this class showed me that the two will ultimately converge, which is a great relief. Think of the greatest actors, the greatest athletes, or someone like Bruce Lee. When the pursuit of craft has been absorbed so deeply into who you are that the practice is no longer something you do but something you are, then on stage, you are not performing a character. You are the character. And the character is you. In that moment, there is no gap between authenticity and performance. Absolute authenticity and peak performance are one and the same.

I recently watched a Bruce Lee interview where he said:

“It is easy for me to put on a show and be flooded with a cocky feeling. Or I can make all kinds of phony things and be blinded by it. But to express oneself honestly, not lying to oneself — that, my friend, is very hard to do. You have to train. You have to keep your reflexes, so that when you want it, it’s there.”

I took this class because 1. I genuinely enjoy being on stage; 2. I read that acting class is great for entrepreneurs, and that’s the path I’m on. I picture myself standing in front of an audience, telling a story that makes them believe in something. But I’ve also seen a lot of tech people get successful, then they become cocky and self-absorbed. To sell dreams you no longer believe in, is like to perform in theatre without practicing your lines. It will be received with contempt, because the audience always knows.

So we have to stay real — that, my friend, is very hard to do. To get there I need to train, and this class is a great starting point. To my pleasant surprise, I learned so much about becoming the person I want to be from this theater class. For that and for a quarter of wonderful teaching, thank you Mr. Tobie.