

TEEN ACTORS:  
DEVELOPING  
EMPATHY FOR  
AMORAL  
CHARACTERS

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## AN INCITING INCIDENT

*Rehearsal one afternoon focused on character development for Free To Fly, students' original one-act play for young audiences that draws attention to the dangers of human sex trafficking of minors. I asked actors to invent a story to account for any guilt they felt toward the disappearance of the trafficked victim. Ethan, the actor portraying Vic the trafficker, delivered an intense monologue that justified his horrendous treatment of victims. To do this, Ethan had to dig deep into a space within himself to rationalize why anyone would ever traffic. As Vic, Ethan considered, "Why should I feel guilty? These girls don't have strong family support. I'm giving them a family; I'm helping their families. I only want what's best for these girls."*

*As Vic, Ethan considered, “Why should I feel guilty? These girls don’t have strong family support. I’m giving them a family; I’m helping their families. I only want what's best for these girls.”*

*At the close of the monologue, cast members interrogated “Vic,” posing questions to deepen the character’s dimension. Ethan-as-Vic calmly defended his actions. Listening intently, Ethan’s co-actors squeezed their knees to their chest, rolled onto the floor, hugged each other, shed a tear, or sat wide-mouthed (as did I) while his story unfolded. After responding to the last question, Ethan stood up from the hot seat stool. Then he contorted like a snake shedding its skin, barreled into a nearby wall as if to shake off every drop of Vic, and muttered with a laugh, “I hate Vic!”*

## QUESTIONS THIS INCIDENT PROMPTS

- ◆ How do teen actors exercise empathy when creating characters whose choices actors and audience feel is amoral?
- ◆ In what ways might this exercise contribute to adolescent brain development?
- ◆ What fired in Ethan's brain to produce the emotion(s) that caused the physical reaction?
- ◆ What dangers might guiding teens into territory that creates a physical, visceral reaction pose?
- ◆ What safety measures can theatre teachers take to protect and secure teens during exercises that require actors to develop empathy for characters they find amoral?

WHAT IS THE PLAY?

AND WHO IS THE  
AMORAL CHARACTER?



BG City Schools and the BGHS Drama Club  
invite parents and students to

# *free to fly*

An original play drawing awareness to the dangers of  
human sex trafficking of minors, with a talkback  
following the performance

Thursday, February 13th  
7:00-8:15 PM  
PAC

Appropriate for youth ages 11+ and parents





VIC, THE TRAFFICKER AND HIS VICTIM, RHONDA (TWO CASTS 2019, 2020)



Cognitively Understanding Vic: the actor performs three tiers of pretense:

Tier One – The acting as a form of lying that everyone is in on. For example, Lily climbs a ladder and actor and audience accept that the ladder is a tree.



Goldstein suggests that “acting is not lying, but neither is pretense, but both flirt with what is ‘true’ or real to varying degrees” (How Actors Create)

Tier Two - Vic's identity of self: the trafficker accountable to Chad, his boss. When he interacts with his boss Chad or is alone, the audience sees Vic as a character with a backstory establishing how and why he is a part of the sex trafficking industry. (Cast 2016)



Tier Three - the identity Vic projects to the girls. When he is with Rhonda, Avery and Lily, Vic dissembles as a technique to lure the girls into the system.



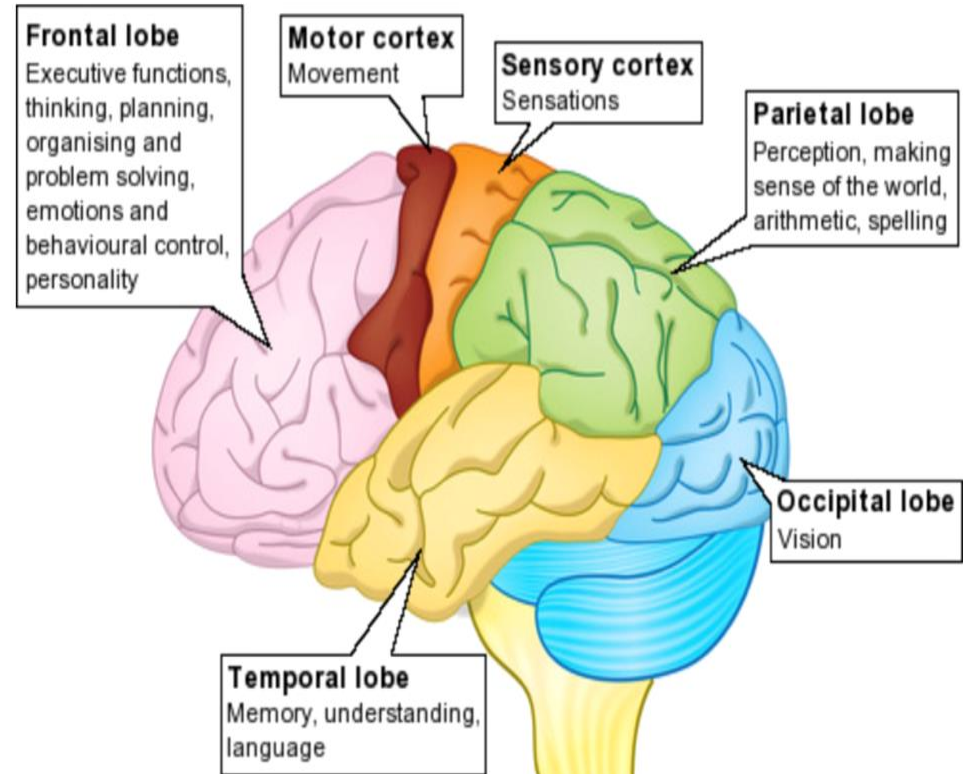
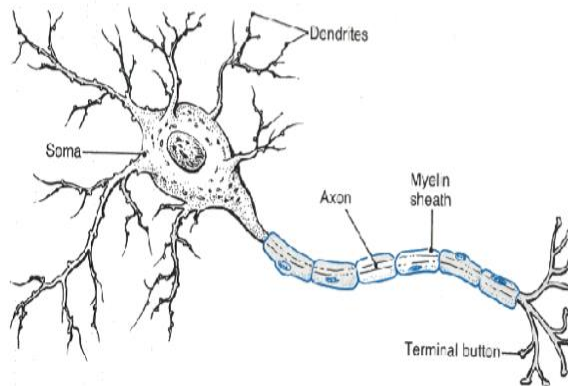
**Ethan rationalized his portrayal by distancing his imagination from his creative spirit to more comfortably engage with the task of developing a fully-dimensional human sex trafficker:**

*“...it wasn’t necessarily a part that I had created, it was a part that I had been handed. Of course a script certainly helps with a lot of that, but it was good to know that Vic wasn’t something that I made. That I was representing the character authentically and I was representing the facts of something that is actually happening. Remembering that it isn’t so much an act of creativity as it is an act of mimicry, to show the reality of real-life situations.”*

How might the activity of  
developing characters  
who commit acts we  
consider heinous  
influence the developing  
adolescent brain?

# Anatomy of the Brain

- Lobes- areas of specialization
- Neurons- send electrical impulses
- Gray/White matter- body and tract



# Teen Brain Development

Size, weight and folds = to an adult

5 → 15 years old- massive pruning

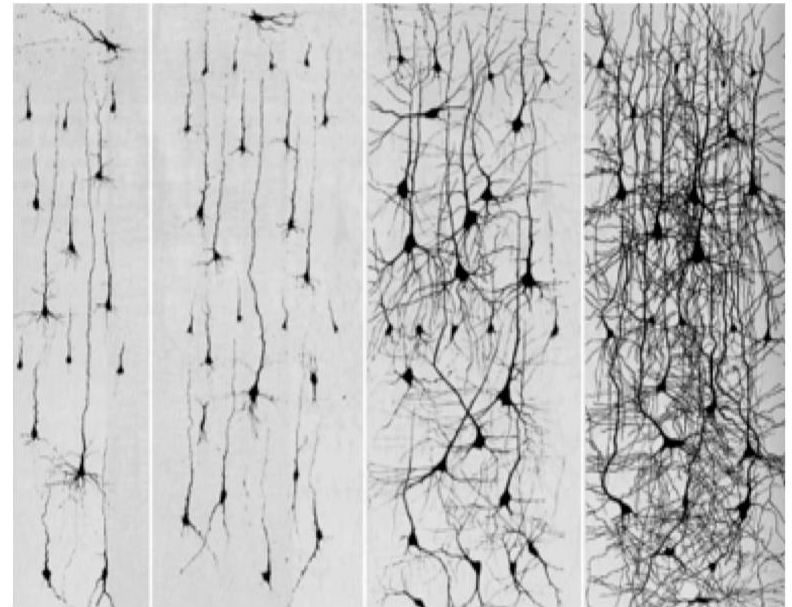
23 → 30 years old- maturation complete

In Teens

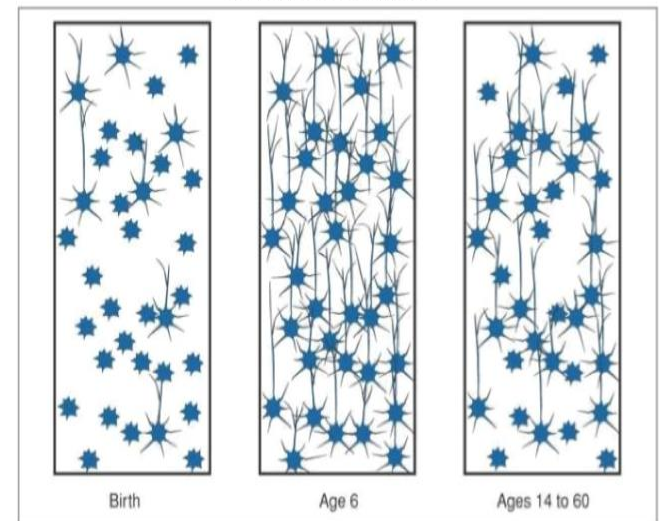
The Prefrontal cortex is the last to mature.

Connections still being pruned, reinforced

**Experience is the only way to  
enhance neural networks-  
Use it or Lose it- Brain Plasticity**



Competitive Elimination of synapses in adolescence





**Neuropsychological research finds that  
EMOTIONS precede  
FEELINGS.**

Cognitive and Physiological processes involve the body and the mind.

Emotions utilize brain systems for body regulation such as

- Blood Pressure
- Heart Rate
- Respiration
- Digestion
- Physical Pain and Pleasure

We have less control over some biological responses – burps, sneezes, and blushing, for example – than others (crying, for instance).

If blood flow is not under their conscious control, then it is outside the actor's toolbox.

The brain systems for regulating heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration were in operation as Ethan exorcised Vic from his body.

A study conducted by Harvard social psychologist Amy Cuddy states that psychological/emotional energy expended to portray characters with dark intentions might actually change hormonal levels in the body, with stress cortisol decreasing and testosterone

How might teen actors safely regulate their emotions when developing and portraying a character whose qualities are profoundly unlikeable?

## **TIP #1: TALK IT OUT**

The connection between the lived experiences of one actor portraying Vic and a) Rhonda, who like him comes of age under the custody of a grandparent, and b) Vic, a trafficker whose backstory could realistically include family sexual abuse, wobbled his center.

During rehearsals one week, the actor stepped out of rehearsal a couple of times. The next week, he asked if he could share the reason, and explained to me and the cast the sexual abuse that he had experienced from a family member as a young child. For protection, his grandfather became his guardian.

Deborah Margolin cautions actors to resist the urge to romanticize traumatic experiences for the sake of their art, commenting, “I’ve gone to dark spaces in terms of the roles I’ve played, and I’ve also gone to dark places just living.”

## TIP #2: CONSIDER ACCESS TO EXPERTS

Given the sometimes serendipitous arrival of “aha” moments and the atmosphere of trust required for those deep dives during rehearsal, inviting an external expert such as a counselor who hasn’t gained the trust of students - for the sole purpose of shielding teen actors from psychological distress - could lend a false, self-conscious tone to the process.

When Ethan experience the Hot Seat activity, my student teacher whom he had gotten to know was present; she worked with domestic abuse victims.

Ethan reflected on the value of her insights:

*I think information is a really important tool for this. I was thankful to have Ms. Fullenkamp present as a source who had more information on sex traffickers. Because there is a lot of weight in creating the backstory of Vic, and in trying to find the right way to do it – to create that framework in your mind to create such a part – can be weighty. So it was definitely encouraging for me to have Ms. Fullenkamp who worked with the Cocoon Shelter and had the experience [working with abused women] to tell me that I was doing it right or to give suggestions.*

### TIP #3 SELF-EDUCATE

Elaine, the only female who played Vic {as a male. We considered keeping her gendered female, but much of the play would have required adjusting) advised actors to self-educate.

She considered:

*I know that as a group we did a lot of research on sex trafficking. But, I think that what is really helpful is just to continue to educate, educate, educate yourself. Do your own research.*

## TIP #4 REMEMBER THE PURPOSE

Elaine suggests that following through with additional activism can buoy an actor:

*And from there. . .yes, you're doing this play which is activism in itself because you're raising awareness, but what other activism can you do? I feel like if you're really out there helping the cause or informing other people or raising more awareness in your free time or on a personal level, that kind of helps you feel like you're making a difference. It's a good thing.*

## TIP #5 Balance Imaginative Flight with Grounded Perspective

*Remembering that it isn't so much an act of creativity as it is an act of mimicry can show the reality of real-life situations.*

As Ethan explains, psychological distancing from the traits of the character can maintain balance.

His strategy was to think of the character as a form of mimicry of real life rather than stemming from creative intuition.



## **TIP #6 Find Strategies for Transitioning Out of Character**

Kareman warns that “if [actors] can’t step out of character, they will be ‘wounded every second’” (Kareman in How Actors Create).

The concentration required to portray psychologically complex characters demands a sustained, heightened presence. Actors must practice disengaging from that elevated level of focus with as much attention as they give to playing the role.

Strategies for Helping Teens Disengage:

- Post-performance Yoga
- Hang out with friends and family

An actor who played Vic’s boss, Chad reflected: “I was two different people. I thought after the play, Chad stays in the room, and I’m going to class, or to the bus, or to hang out with the cast and crew at Dairy Queen.”

## Tip #6, continued

- Participate in Talk-Backs Ethan explained:

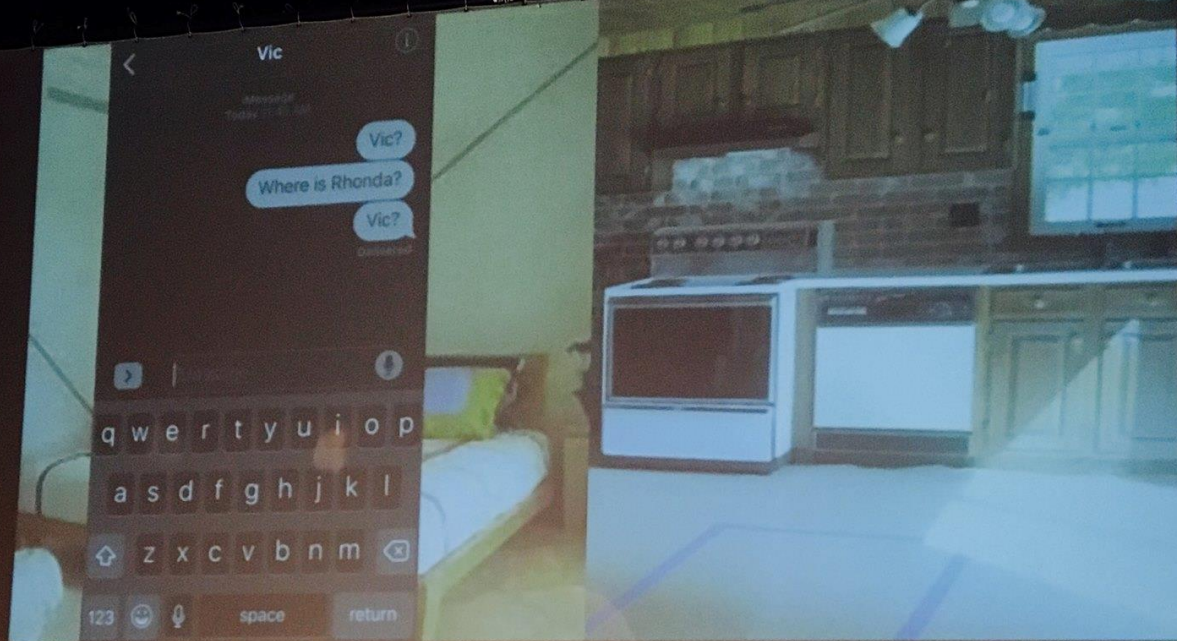
*...it was good to have the talk-backs not only for them to learn about the show. . . but also as a good cool-down for us, where we're kind of in the part but we're also talking about it without being in it.. . it's as good for the audience to see us break that character as it is for us to break the character. It's helpful for everyone all around to transition out of the play together.*



## Further Research

Further research might explore which brain cells fire and multiply in teens' brains as their empathy for unsavory characters increases and capacity to regulate emotions strengthens.

New findings can influence the methods we use when guiding teen actors as they sculpt disreputable characters with realism.



*FREE TO FLY*

