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Ziggy the Clown

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Ziggy the Clown

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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University of South Carolina
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Laura Russell for all of her support, understanding and many sacrifices.
The contents included here consist of the research, editing, and rehearsal process for the written script, as well as the live performance. There is also a brief analysis of the process, and documentation of how to proceed with the piece in its current state, or if any additions will be made. The full script is included. The solo show itself was a culmination of what my Master’s Training provided, up until the point of performance.
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“Ziggy the Clown”
MFA Thesis Solo Show

Location: Atlantic City Boardwalk

Time: Present day, Mid-June, a Saturday, Twilight.

PLAY SOUND CUE 1 (Atmospheric Sounds)

(Lighting is ‘natural.’ Sounds of seagulls flying and people waking on the boardwalk.
The doors to the theatre space are heard slowly opening then closing. The squeak of a wheel on a rattling shopping cart can be heard approaching. Coming into view is a man in his mid to late thirties dressed in a dirty and worn woman’s silk robe, far too short for his stature, and old sneakers painted silver. He wears face make-up and an old red wig. He pushes a shopping cart filled with junk and spray-painted red and silver. An old tape-deck is strapped to the front of the cart next to a hand drawn sign made of cardboard which reads, “Ziggy the Clown.” The man stops his cart just stage right of center, walks around to the front of it and pulls out a brown paper bag. From the bag he pulls 3 pears and an orange, one at a time and setting them on the ground in front of his cart. He then starts the tape in the tape-deck strapped to the front of the cart. He pulls out an old microphone with a frayed cord.)
PLAY SOUND CUE 2 (Ziggy Stardust)

(The poor quality of an over-played dubbed cassette begins playing “Ziggy Stardust” by David Bowie out of the small speaker on the tape-deck. The man steps stage left of the cart and begins to perform to the music. During the intro of the song the music begins blasting through the theatre’s sound system and the lighting changes to red with hints of green and fog begins rolling out of the cart. It is as though we are at a Ziggy Stardust concert. When the music reaches the first chorus, “So where were the spiders, when the fly tried to break our balls,” Before the song returns to the verses, the music will fade but not completely out and the lights will become something between concert and natural.)

SLOWLY FADE OUT SOUND CUE 2

(Ziggy slowly fades out of his performance )

ZIGGY: Greco says Toledo is blue, green and grey.

Ziggy says Davie Jones is a big sharp Blade.

Nick Knack Patty Whack gimme my Bowie Back.

He’s got an edge like a daybreak, a gaybreak, a…hey…break?

And now this man who knows; he defines, and redefines…or do I undermine who he was, is, will be, him, me, him, me…(Ziggy looks to audience and mouths the word ‘you’)

PLAY SOUND CUE 3 UNDERSCORE (Ashes to Ashes)

ZIGGY: January 8, 1947. You’re too old to lose it, too young to choose it. Same age as my Aunt Donna…actually a month older. Ha! If they were siblings he’d be her older brother…a true role model. What do I know? Aunt Donna’s a cashier at a Piggly Wiggly in Macon, Georgia, Bowie’s a counter-culture pop icon…counter-culture pop…seems
like a contradiction. Well, if anybody can have dichotic existences living within them, the
Starman can.

Choices.

(Ziggy looks at the row of fruit, picks up the first pear and speaks to it.)

ZIGGY: Who are you, me, we three two?

And then one day you simply see it.

I’ll not be defined by…(Ziggy looks to the audience)

(Ziggy takes a bite of the 1st pear.)

SOUND CUE 3 TO FULL (100%)

(Ziggy begins miming like David Bowie in the footage from the original Ziggy Stardust
tour. When completing the pear he throws it into the cart decisively then points to the
audience and begins to sing along with the song.)

ZIGGY: (singing) One flash of light but no smoking pistol

I never done good things

I never done bad things

I never did anything out of the blue, woh-o-oh

Want an axe to break the ice

Wanna come down right now

SLOWLY FADE OUT SOUND CUE 3

(Ziggy stops singing and the music fades but not completely out while continuing to play.
Ziggy Speaks.)

ZIGGY: Fighter-pilots fly by, thoughts of the children there.

The rhythm of the waves, art and commerce, vice and verse never stops.
Why can’t I be an investment banker? My wife could love me. Why can’t I get excited about making money for the sake of making money? Live the dream. Everything I could want, need, be…all you can be.

What do you do?

I joined the army, did you go, no, why, I decided to serve in another way, what way, acting like an ass, you?

I’m a teacher, oh, that’s interesting, what do you teach? Awwww, swizzle-sticks…

(Ziggy remembers something.)

PLAY SOUND CUE 4 UNDERSCORE (Life On Mars?)

ZIGGY: I wait tables, but I’m really a graphic designer.

I’m a valet but I’m really a writer.

I work at a bank but I’m really a musician.

I manage a grocery store but I’m really a quantum physicist.

I’m a dreamer, a beamer, a seven starred vomit screamer!

Who are you? No, I mean what do you do? No, I mean what are you? No, I mean die a slow painful death as your soul slowly evaporates from your pores while you’re too busy paying the rent to live.

(Ziggy looks at the remaining fruit and picks up the second pear.)

The wall to wall’s calling, it lingers, then you forget.

(Ziggy takes a bite of the 2nd pear then puts it in his cart.)

SOUND CUE 4 AT FULL (100%)

(Ziggy begins miming [My Job/My Identity.] Ziggy begins to sing.)
ZIGGY: (singing) It's on America's tortured brow
That Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow
Now the workers have struck for fame
'Cause Lennon's on sale again
See the mice in their million hordes
From Ibiza to the Norfolk Broads
Rule Britannia is out of bounds
To my mother, my dog, and clowns
But the film is a saddening bore
'Cause I wrote it ten times or more
It's about to be writ again
As I ask you to focus on
Sailors fighting in the dance hall
Oh man! Look at those cavemen go
It's the freakiest show
Take a look at the Lawman
Beating up the wrong guy
Oh man! Wonder if he'll ever know
He's in the best selling show
Is there life on Mars?

(Ziggy stops singing and the music fades out while continuing to play. Ziggy Speaks.)

ZIGGY: Walking out on the street and the sun erodes your soul.
Can I, should I, would I… A force so aligned and akin to mine that I… his, your, my…

Piggly Wiggly stalking the subby wubby, so focused, so near…so much fear. Pray the
crazies don’t talk to you…melt away.

How can she do it? Has she no passion? Oh, God, I have to get out!! I will not succumb
to…(looks at the audience as in accusation)

FADE OUT SOUND CUE 4

ZIGGY: (sudden intake of air)

Snapshots of a past life.

Ziggy…you…me.

Don’t let the sun blast your shadow

Don’t let the milk floats ride your mind

(Ziggy picks up the last pear.)

PLAY SOUND CUE 5 (Rock ‘N’ Roll Suicide)

Never will this be, never me no more.

(Ziggy does not eat the 3rd pear. Ziggy gently places the pear in the cart. Ziggy mimes.

Time takes a cigarette and puts in Ziggy’s mouth, he pulls a finger, then another finger,
then the cigarette. Ziggy picks up the orange but you don’t eat when you’ve lived too
long. Ziggy holds up the orange as the day breaks. Ziggy rips open the orange revealing
a green apple. Oh no Love, you’re not alone! Ziggy dances [What Trumps All?]. Ziggy
pulls chop sticks from his belt and stabs the apple. Ziggy grabs a plastic bowler hat from
his cart and continues to dance ending upstage center, facing upstage. He places the hat
on his head and holds the apple in his teeth by the chop sticks. Ziggy slowly turns toward the audience.)

FADE OUT SOUND CUE 5

PLAY SOUND CUE 6  (Atmospheric Sounds)

(On the last sustained note of the music, the lights fade to ‘natural’ the sounds of the boardwalk fade back in and Ziggy pushes his cart off stage. The sound of the squeaky rattling cart goes off and the sound of a door can be heard as Ziggy leaves the theatre space.)
Chapter 1

DESCRIPTION

Ziggy the Clown
The Process of Creating the Solo Show

The long journey to this thesis performance started with a song, “Rock ‘N’ Roll Suicide,” by David Bowie. There was something about the imagery that Bowie used in the lyrics that struck a chord somewhere deep inside. Though I was not sure how this would generate a script for a solo show, I let the song live in my mind and spun some concepts around it, most of which focused on a David Bowie type of character. I soon found myself thinking in terms of identity; what is identity, how does one create or alter one’s identity. The idea that Bowie created an alter-ego named Ziggy Stardust fascinated me and I wanted to somehow link that to the theme of my show. I had thoughts of creating a character that impersonated Ziggy Stardust at a local club, the show would take place in his dressing room as he removed the ‘character’ of Ziggy only to find that this person believed he is David Bowie in real life. There was an inherent danger with this concept, a fear that the transition would be confusing and that the audience might think that the character actually was David Bowie.

While wrestling with this problem of how to utilize a Ziggy Stardust/David Bowie character, without confusion, in a piece about identity, there was an image that was persistently invading my mind; three pears and an orange. I had no idea why three pears
and an orange kept showing up in my mind, so I tried some experiments with the character unpacking a lunch that had them in it, and then I experimented with other fruit; peaches, plums and apples. It was at this point in the process that my professor, Robyn Hunt, suggested that rather than resisting or trying to figure out this pear/orange image, I should simply go with it and see where it leads. I took her advice and as the project evolved, the story that I was beginning to construct centered on how people in the United States tend to identify each other with what they do for a living, their jobs. It is one of the first questions people ask when meeting someone for the first time, “So, what do you do?” So I decided to have the pears and orange represent the different jobs that this character had held in his lifetime. Each pear would have a short anecdote about a job that this character left on his journey to finding his identity, the orange.

It was around this point in the concept stage that I had the realization that simply saying that this character’s identity was not just another pear, but rather an orange was rather superficial, when truly digging into what identity is in a human. The image of duel identities or conflicting identities within someone started becoming more and more necessary to the story, so I wanted a way to show that what someone might see as someone else’s identity, may just be skin deep. To accomplish this I decided that the piece should end with the character pealing the orange only to find that it was the exact opposite of what everyone thought. Since a common expression for showing how things cannot be compared is, “comparing apples to oranges,” I chose to place an apple inside the orange.

Some of the images were now coming into focus, but the show lacked a clear story or even a clear concept. Identity was such a broad idea that it became evident that I
needed to decide what this work was saying about identity and why. So I turned the critical lens on myself in order to figure out why it was that I wanted to write about identity, what was it I was searching for in this work?

I began writing my solo show in my first year in the MFA Acting program at the University of South Carolina. Looking back, the three years I spent in South Carolina were the most transitory and transformative of my life, it was a time of tremendous upheaval and reevaluation of who I was and would become as an artist and a person. The creation of a character that was seeking identity was an artistic expression of the choices I was being faced with on a daily basis. I had just left a life that I had spent 8 years building with my wife in Los Angeles to chase a dream of being a working actor in theatre, a life that my wife also left to support me. The program I had embarked on was consuming and I was changing from the man that was to the man that I would ultimately become. This was creating tensions and conflicts in all aspects of my life, and what it came down to was a simple question, what trumps all? What are you willing to sacrifice in the pursuit of your dreams? So, if we are what we do, if our jobs are our identity, what are we willing sacrifice to retain our identity, what are we willing to do to secure who we are at our very core? That is what this project ultimately was striving to be about.

Once I knew what I was writing about and why, the script began taking shape very quickly. I knew that I wanted to create a multi-layered piece of art incorporating everything I had learned in nearly two decades of theatre, rather than a traditional linear theatre piece. This meant that I wanted to add elements of stylized movement (Eastern and Western), singing and speaking. For the movement I studied David Bowie’s performances from his Ziggy Stardust tour, then added elements of mime (since Bowie
had performed as a professional mime prior to becoming a rock star), some movements that I modeled after traditional Japanese Noh and Kabuki actors as well as some self-generated movement.

During moments of spoken text, to create a piece that would be less about preaching ideals and more about identifying with a common struggle with one’s identity, I wanted to keep the spoken text vague and somewhat poetic. The character would speak in a form of beat poetry leaving room for the audience’s interpretation. I decided to scrap the transformation from one Bowie character to another from my earlier ideas and created a clown character that had sacrificed everything he had to become a Ziggy Stardust impersonator. His performance would consist of singing along with David Bowie songs, slipping in and out of reflections of the struggle that the character went through to take back his identity. The true irony, and ultimately the tragedy, of the character is that he sacrifices everything to claim someone else’s false identity. And in the end, what does this person have to show for it all? A dirty spray painted wig, a shopping cart full of junk and the quiet reality that no one is interested.

The script was divided into three sections of text separated by David Bowie songs (“Ziggy Stardust,” “Ashes to Ashes,” “Life on Mars?” and “Rock ‘N’ Roll Suicide”). Each section had a theme; Self-Invention as Identity, My Job/My Identity and What Trumps All? In my first draft the first two sections came easily, it was the third that gave me trouble. The format was a struggle. I found that I wanted to write this section in more of a logical narrative rather than the beat poetry of the first two. Looking back, I think this was because I was writing about something that I was dealing with personally at the same time, so for the second draft I had to distance myself from the piece so that I could
write for the character, rather than for what I was trying to figure out in my own life. Luckily, the character was on the far side of the choices that I was going through, so I was able to take the perspective away from my future point of view to Ziggy’s reflective view and the third section came together in a much more cohesive manner.

The rehearsal process for the performance was during a very strenuous time, so I was incredibly grateful for having finished writing the script early. This allowed me to trust the piece I had written and focus on the other work that was required for the program. As an MFA Acting candidate, the last part of the second semester of the second year operates similar to working in repertory. Within four weeks we would open and close two full length plays and perform our solo shows. So, finding time to rehearse without neglecting other obligations was difficult. I was basically memorizing when I could, staging as best I could in my apartment and living with the four songs that I had selected for the piece. Once we were able to close the other two shows all of my attention was then focused on solo show, allowing me to lock down the timing and movement in the space where I would perform. The space held several limitations and obstacles to overcome for the piece I had written, but minor changes and choices were able to be made and assimilated before presenting to audiences. And once I was able to work the piece in costume, the character really came to life for me for the first time.
Ziggy the Clown
Analysis of the Performance

The performances went fairly well in my opinion. There were some changes that had to be made based on the limitations of the space. For instance, the entrance had to be changed due to the configuration of the audience and the type of floor in the performance space. Rather than entering from outside of the performance space, the entrance was made from within the space. Also, the space had large windows so controlling the light was difficult and limited equipment prevented a more ‘rock concert’ feel that I had hoped for at some moments in the piece. The script was written with those possible limitations in mind, so it was easily altered and I do not believe it took away from the performance.

Once there was an audience I was able to adjust timing on certain moments of the show to affect the audience more efficiently. Also, after the first performance, the videographer that was documenting the performances, pulled me aside to discuss the Eastern elements of my show. She was studying Japanese language and culture and was interested in a moment at the end of my piece when I stabbed an apple with a pair of chopsticks. In truth, I wanted to end the piece with an image based on the René Magritte painting, The Son of Man, but I needed a means to hold the apple in front of my face, so I stuck the chopsticks in the apple and held them in my teeth. The videographer was
commenting on how sticking one’s chopsticks in one’s food was insulting in Japanese culture and that when I stabbed the apple with chopsticks, while wearing a costume that was very reminiscent of Kabuki costumes, it seemed as though, since the apple is an American identifier (i.e. the Big Apple, as American as Apple Pie), stabbing the apple with the chopsticks was like stabbing the heart of Western ideals (capitalism) with Eastern tradition (artistic beauty). I really liked the image, so I decided to allow that concept to have a conscious life in my mind during that moment in future performances.

There was a definite concern that audiences would not understand or be able to relate to the piece, especially since the script was seemingly non-linear and the spoken text was in a form of poetry. I was elated when, after one of the performances, and audience member came up to me and commented on how much he identified with the character’s choices and how he had given up his dreams of being a musician to get a good job and start a family. It was at that moment that I was grateful for the long process of creating this work and not compromising my vision for fear of producing something that people would not be able to understand or want to watch. Several months later I was speaking to a friend of mine on the phone who had seen the show and he commented on how it seemed to him that the character was in the middle of going through a divorce. He went on to say that he thought he might have just been projecting his situation (he was in the middle of a divorce at the time) onto the character. He seemed relieved to find out that he was not projecting, that the character had indeed just gone through a divorce. It was a minor element of the piece I had written, but it was striking to me that he had picked up on it and that it stuck with him all that time.
My friend’s observations were particularly important to me. As an artist one wishes to be able to communicate something that may not otherwise be communicable. Observations like the ones from my friend and the other audience member who spoke to me about wanting to be a musician encourage me to continue to create work that is meaningful to me (and hopefully to others). This was my first experience creating an original work for solo performance. I am grateful for the opportunity to create this piece in a safe and supportive environment which allowed me to take risks that I might not otherwise have taken. Though I like this piece a lot, (recognizing that it has a few minor issues) I do not plan to expand the script beyond its current length. Instead, I would like to create two companion pieces dealing with similar themes of identity centered on musical artists. The new pieces would be of similar length, but maybe a slightly different format and would ideally be performed as a night of theatre with little musical interludes between them, but I would also want them to be able to stand alone.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


