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Persons: A one Woman Play

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PERSONS: A ONE WOMAN PLAY

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Carin Bendas, Candace Thomas, and Nicole Dietze.

ABSTRACT

The contents of this paper include the complete script of *Persons: A One Woman Show* and a description of the research, editing, rehearsal process and performance experience with analysis. I will expound on the ways in which the writing and producing of a solo show utilized the skills obtained by my Master of Fine Arts program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
SCRIPT.....	1
DESCRIPTION	7
ANALYSIS.....	12
REFERENCES	14

SCRIPT

Persons: A One Woman Play

MFA Thesis Solo Show

SCENE 1

[Preset--an L shaped platform with stairs leading US into the water, a bucket LQ1 Blue light center. She is surrounded by water, barefoot and dressed in light linen clothing.]

Dr. Howl: She says to me ‘You’ve been told you can’t breathe underwater, but have you ever tried? Then how do you know for sure?’ *[SQ1 (light moving water) GO]*

Lay back. Belly out. Arch your back just slightly. The water goes in your ears. Don’t panic. The water touches the corner of your eyes--just breathe. The water touches your lips.

The water washes over the bridge of your nose. Relax your neck. Relax your brow. Breathe deep.

She touches my spine, tilts my hips, opens my chest. Breathe. Float.

‘You can stay as long as you like,’ she says.

I’ve been here ever since.

[A beat] [LQ2 Pool look] [SQ2 (1 fades, ambient sounds begin)]

Dr. Howl: One...Two...Three. *[SQ3 (dolphin whistles 3) GO]*

Dr. Howl: One, Two, Three, Four, Five. *[SQ4 (dolphin whistles 5) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Good, Sandy, now again. One, two, three, four, five. *[SQ5 (dolphin whistles 5 again) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Once more for fish! One, two, three, four, five. *[SQ6 (dolphin whistles 5 again) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Yes! Yes! Fish! *[Feeds dolphin.]* Good. *[Writes in spiral notebook.]* Log: Day *[checks watch]* ...thirty-three. Five for a fish. *[SQ7 (begging) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Hello! Still hungry? *[Another fish]* Here Sandy. What do you say? *[Thank you!]* You're welcome.

Dr. Howl: Thirty-three days. *[Continues writing.]* *[SQ8 (burst of air) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Yes, what? Thirty-three days seem long to you, too? *[SQ9 (dolphin laugh) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Haha, very funny. *[Beat]* Thirty-three days. *[Beat.]* I dreamed about you again last night. It was another dream where my vision is blurred because I know I'm sleeping and when I sleep I don't have my contacts in, so... *[Looking at notebook.]* I guess I wasn't so aware, though, because I wrote a log in the middle of the night--see? *[Shows log to Sandy. Reads:]* Specimen B hit every benchmark, was able to count all the way to ten and even began imitating vowel sounds. Created vowel sounds for 'hello' and 'my name is Sandy.' Consonants are still a struggle, because of an inability to create an 'm' and 'n' sound with blowhole--God, I was so convinced this was really happening...
Thirty-three days. *[SQ9.5 (ambient out)]*

[Flashback. LQ3 shift to DSR, to the unseen host, a doctor.] You're turning your back on a real opportunity. With around the clock observation, we can see how she reacts to constant stimuli. If we're exploring language she needs full immersion, like a mother with a child. And she needs to trust me. I need to be the one to feed her, eat when she eats, sleep where she can still see me. Let me try it. We'll see if it makes a difference. Fifteen days. Let's try fifteen days. *[SQ9.7 (ambient in)]*

[LQ4 restore to pool] *[Returns center, looks to Sandy]* Thirty-three days.

[SQ10 (counting) GO]

SCENE 2

[SQ11 (ambient pool sounds fade out) GO, LQ 5 (in front of pool)]

Dr. Howl: *[DSR, to us, a tour of the lab]* Dolphins are believed to be the second most intelligent creatures in the world. From an evolutionary standpoint, intelligence is just one component of a species' survival--a spider's intelligence has evolved to the point their survival necessitates, for example. But dolphins are different. With dolphins, we can apply human standards of intelligence. MRI scans reflect that the dolphin brain is big relative to body size, just like us, with a neocortex as involved or even more so than our own. And a dolphin's brain is structured in a way that allows for self-awareness and

complex emotions. So what is the cognitive difference between humans and dolphins? There are a few, I'll give an example: the only real memory I have of my grandmother is the time she showed me her breast. I was young enough to need supervision in the bathtub, but old enough to feel ashamed. I remember I laughed. I remember her bra was pink. And I remember the scar was deep and about six inches long.

I not only can tell you this memory of my grandmother, but I can also see it in my mind's eye. And if I want to, I can change the color of her bra to blue. Or green. I can even change the color of the scar from pink to purple or orange or...I can heal the scar. I can heal her completely. And not only me, you can, too!

We're different because we have imagination and we can share our imagination with each other. Another difference.

Most animals have what is called a closed vocal system--different sounds can't be combined together to produce new symbols with different meaning. Humans have open vocal systems which allow for combinations of symbols to create new symbols with a totally new meaning, which allows for an infinite number of ideas to be expressed.

For example: if I could live anywhere, I would live in the moment when your body becomes accustomed to the temperature of a new room. The moment the ocean no longer feels freezing. I'd want to live in the moment between hearing a joke and laughing at it. Or the 5 seconds after your favorite moment of your favorite song.

I'd want this to be in the house from my childhood. But my sister's room. Safe, familiar but still a little strange. Mine, but not my own. And I'd want it to be lit by the candles on a birthday cake right before the wax meets the frosting. Chocolate frosting.

Because of our open vocal system, I can live in a moment, a room, a sound, a taste, a sensation. With language, we can express anything and by expressing it, experience it.

[LQ 5.5, lights shift, she steps back on platform]

And yet she meets me in my dreams. She says to me, "You've been told you can't breathe underwater, but have you ever tried?" *[LQ6 (center blue only) SQ12 (dream song) GO]*

Oh my god, you're talking to me again!

I can't breathe underwater, I don't have a blowhole.

I have tried. When I was little, I almost drowned. Drowning for a human person is like stranding for a dolphin, like a beached dolphin...except it's much faster.

A beached dolphin dies of dehydration over the course of three to four hours, but humans drown in a matter of three to four minutes. I guess you could say a beached dolphin suffers more. *[Catches herself, a tangent.]* Listen. What is it you want? You want me to swim with you, I've swam with you. I've breathed underwater with a snorkel. What is it you want?

You want me to trust you? Like a mother and a child? Well, you didn't know my mother and you're not my child. *[She reaches in front of her.]* I can't see you, I'm dreaming. Come here so I can touch you.

No? How can I trust you if you're not there when I need you.

Hello?

If a beached dolphin survives dehydration, then it'll collapse under its own weight. A new environment can make oneself unbearably heavy.

Hello? *[SQ 13 (12 dream song fade) GO]* You can't leave me alone. I'm tired of being lonely.

SCENE 3

[LQ7 pool restore] [With clipboard/notebook. A hint of melancholy.]

Dr. Howl: One...Two...Three. *[SQ 14 (dolphin whistles 3) GO]*

Dr. Howl: One...Two...Three... Four... Five *[SQ 15 (dolphin whistles 5) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Good, Sandy, now again. One, two, three, four, five. *[Produces fish from bucket] [SQ 16 (dolphin whistles 5) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Once more for fish! One, two, three, four, five. *[SQ 17 (dolphin whistles 5) GO]*

Dr. Howl: Yes! Yes! Fish! *[Feeds dolphin.]* Good. *[Writes in spiral notebook.]* Log: Day *[checks watch]* ...thirty-four. Five for a fish.

Dr. Howl: Sandy? Sandy. *[A beat.]* Thirty-four days. *[SQ 18.5 (ambient out) GO]*

SCENE 4

[LQ8 DL of pool] [Another tour, this time DSL] It's often the case that dolphins in captivity become depressed. They'll become lethargic, floating on one side, or become hyperactive--swimming in circles, pacing their enclosures. Other symptoms include self-mutilation, aggression, stress-induced ulcers, immunosuppression making them more susceptible to bacteria and diseases. She is a nine year old Atlantic spotted dolphin, born and raised in captivity and yet she's just as susceptible to depression as captured dolphins. In the wild, dolphins use a highly sophisticated sonar to hunt for fish. No use for that when you're hand-fed fish from a bucket. A wasted talent.

[LQ9 pool restore. SQ 18.7 (ambient in) GO]

Dr. Howl: *[To Sandy]* We've officially been taken off the lab tour. Apparently people find depression depressing.

Forty-one days. One week. No dreams. You've stopped speaking to me. Asking me to swim.

My mom was the one who taught me how to swim. She was always good with matters of life and death. Said I needed to be able to save myself. *[SQ 18.8 (ambient out) GO]*

When I was fourteen, my mom had a colleague, a twenty-eight year old graduate student of behavioral science. He would be at my mom's office when I was there after school and sometimes come over for dinner, he picked me up from a few swim meets when my mom would work late, things like that. We'd sit in his car outside my house and he'd tell me about his work, his students, silly stories from his day, and I would smile and laugh. Listen. He liked to talk about me. How pretty I was, how I must have all these boyfriends, because of how pretty I was. Which could not be further from the truth and was so odd to hear. He liked to tell me how sweet I was. Which was a claim severely lacking in empirical evidence. He started writing me love letters. My mom never knew, imagine if she had.

He was my first kiss. I thought I was going to marry him. I was fourteen.

[A beat.]

I was fourteen and already all my questions had answers.

I was pretty. I was sweet. I was nice. I was quiet. I was shy. *[SQ18.9 (ambient in) GO]*

[To Sandy.] Is that what I'm doing to you? *[SQ 19 GO]* Do I just hear what I want to hear, see what I want to see? Is that what you've been trying to tell me?

You're never going to learn English. But that doesn't mean we can't speak the same language.

Animal rights activists have been pushing for years for dolphins to be recognized as 'non-human persons.' The movement was recently legitimized--in May of this last year, the Ministry of Environment and Forests of India issued an order to all Indian states banning dolphin amusement parks. They said "as 'non-human persons,' dolphins have their own specific rights as entitled to persons." *[LQ10 [softer pool look] SQ 20 (music) GO]*

She says to me 'You've been told you can't breathe underwater, but have you ever tried? Then how do you know for sure?'

Lay back. Belly out. Arch your back just slightly. The water goes in your ears. Don't panic. *[Removes her shirt]* The water touches the corner of your eyes--just breathe. *[Begins undoing her pants]* The water touches your lips.

The water washes over the bridge of your nose. Relax your neck. Relax your brow. Breathe deep. *[She is undressed.]*

She touches my spine, tilts my hips, opens my chest. Breathe. Float.

'You can stay as long as you like,' she says.

I say. 'It's time to go.'

[She turns her back to us and uses the US stairs to enter the pool. She prepares to dive. Sound builds. As she dives, lights abruptly go out, music continues.]

DESCRIPTION

Persons was inspired by the true story of Margaret Howe Lovatt, an assistant to neuroscientist Dr. John Lilly. In 1965, 23 year old Lovatt, as part of a study partially funded by NASA, spent 10 weeks in the Virgin Islands living in a dolphin-house flooded with water called the “Dolphinarium” teaching English to a bottle-nosed dolphin named Peter. Further inspiration was drawn from the work of dolphin researcher Dr. Denise Herzing and the Wild Dolphin Project.

I was introduced to the story of Margaret Howe Lovatt by the WNYC radio program RadioLab episode “Hello,” produced by Lynn Levy. What interested me about Lovatt’s story was the assignment of living and bonding with an animal to teach the animal to speak. I imagined what Lovatt must have dreamed of while sleeping in the Dolphinarium and wrote this down as a possible thread.

At the beginning of the process, before I even knew what I wanted to write about, I thought a lot about the medium of a one person show and set goals for myself. I decided I didn’t want to be alone onstage. I didn’t want to talk to the audience. I decided I didn’t want my character to speak unless it was completely believable that she would. I wanted to only play one character and I wanted a clear narrative. Often one person shows feel fractured to me. We meet a lot of different characters but spend little time with any of them individually. They often jump forward and backward in time. Sometimes, they are

completely without plot and are more of a series of short vignettes. In this way, I often think of one person shows as being more of a performance piece than a play. I decided early on that I wanted to write a play

The actual writing process began the first week of October. I titled the original document “Hello” after the RadioLab episode. Fall semester of 2015, my cohorts and I took a solo show writing course with our professor Robyn Hunt in which we did many guided free-writes. I remember Robyn telling me it was time to start, and with that nudge I wrote the first two pages of the script. The first piece I typed was from a free-write written weeks earlier. “She says, ‘You’ve been told you can’t breathe under water, but have you ever tried?’” I have no memory of the prompt for this short piece of writing, but word for word it became the dream sequence that begins (and eventually ends) the play. I wrote through the first paragraph beginning with “Dolphins are believed to be the second most intelligent creatures in the world” based on research I found through the Wild Dolphin Project. I shared it with Robyn and my husband Josiah. They encouraged me to keep going.

Once I wrote the initial couple pages, I stopped pursuing other threads. By the next week, October 14th, I had a rough draft completed—about 5 pages long. I wrote more of the first lecture including the “grandmother” monologue and the second dream sequence. The “grandmother” monologue was also a free-write, though the prompt is lost to me. The only clue I have is a line written above it: “We never thought about the moment we might mind the coffee stains.”

It was about this time that I was inspired by a show my friend Trey Hobbs did in Chicago with Theatre Unspeakable in which the entire cast remained on a platform two feet off the ground sharing only 21 square feet of space for the entire 50 minute performance. This made me think of the Dolphinarium and I decided I wanted my character to spent the entire play on the perimeter of the pool until the final moment of the play in which she'd enter the pool. I decided I'd end the way I began, by repeating the initial dream speech.

This first full draft saw the beginning and end of a few threads. For example, I'd been experimenting with a name for my marine biologist—Molly. I even had Sandy calling her name. Ultimately, no name felt right so I left her nameless. There was also a “motherhood” thread lingering from another play. Robyn read this first draft and shared that my “motherhood” thread was accidentally casting an anti-feminist shadow over the play. By accident, the message of my play was suddenly “Women don't belong in science” which was the opposite of what I was hoping for. I cut the motherhood thread completely and sought to replace it.

The next full draft came the very next day, October 15th, after meeting with Robyn and deciding what to cut. After two hours of little progress, I came upon a free-write that said “Other symptoms include self-mutilation.” This one line inspired the whole final quarter of the play. I researched symptoms typical of dolphins in captivity which led me to animal rights webpages. I found the term “non-human persons.” I had my ending, final image and a title—the skeleton was complete.

Over the next two weeks, I toyed with the final quarter. I replaced the story about the graduate student with a mother related storyline where the marine biologist had issues with her mother. Perhaps it was because the story about the graduate student felt too personal, or I was concerned that it might seem forced and alienate people. I didn't want my character to be the victim of something. Or maybe I simply embarrassed. I read the story to Robyn, Ben and Carin who all encouraged me to include the story and that it highlighted the ways she was *not* a victim but stronger for the experience. The speech about vocal systems and the poem "If I could live anywhere..." were the last pieces I wrote.

The script was solidified by November 2nd and I did little editing after that point. Around this time I did a paper tech and wrote out all my light and sound cues. I found the song "An Ending (Ascent)" by Brian Eno for the final image and my Sandy vocal cues from iTunes. For the second dream sequence, I found a sound cue of dolphins singing underwater. It sounds like people.

I was memorized by November 15th and began rehearsals. The rehearsal process, much like the tech process, was very intuitive. Most of my original planning had occurred while I was writing and envisioning the play. I went without a Thanksgiving break and rehearsed without any significant resistance. I performed the show publicly three times December 2nd, 3rd, and 4th with my classmates in a night of one person shows entitled *Light Through a Pinhole*.

Part of what was wonderful about this experience was there never really was a *hard part*.

The free-writes had a lot to do with that. Whenever I was stuck, I flipped through my

notebook and found something I could put to use. In that way, the whole experience felt very intuitive, as if the play was writing itself. I imagine it's how the Greeks felt when they evoked the muses. As if a complete story already exists somewhere and by writing it down, you reveal it.

The final change I made to the script was long after the final performance. As I reread the script in order to submit my thesis, I finally named my heroine Dr. Howl. It's never spoken. She needs a name and a title. She's a person, she deserves it.

ANALYSIS

Perhaps my favorite thing about my solo show experience was how my piece never felt precious. I wasn't self-conscious about sharing it with others. Even in the early stages, I felt removed enough from the material that I felt very free. Almost as if it wasn't coming from me. The play was what it was. I'd set specific goals for myself and I knew what I wanted to see in my final product, and that was that.

Maybe that's why I have no intention of expanding my solo piece. I've performed it once since as part of a festival in South Carolina and I submitted it to a ten minute play festival. I would enjoy performing it again and, even better, seeing someone else perform it. But it feels complete. I'm not sure I can explain it any more than that. My hope is that anyone who reads the script would know what I mean.

I'm more interested in writing something new and the process I found working on my solo show is the reason I feel that's possible. To write successfully, I need to be writing regularly. I've since purchased a book of writing prompts. It was a revelation to me how often a free-write I'd written previously was perfect for a moment I was struggling with. The free-writes were a huge part of what made the experience feel fluid, free, open and intuitive.

I also need deadlines and a community of artists. Having a performance date to write to made a huge difference in prioritizing my time. And knowing that my show was

going to be performed back to back with those of my peers was a great motivator—I wanted to make sure my work measured up to that of my peers. Writing and sharing with each other made the writing process lively and inspiring rather than solitary.

My experience in graduate school and specifically the time I spent writing my solo show changed the way I see myself as a theatre artist and has opened up whole new opportunities for me. In the past, I'd viewed dramatic writing in a very mainstream way. You write to be published. You follow a very typical structure. Writing my own show and also devising movement pieces as part of our physical discipline opened up new possibilities for what dramatic writing can be. Now I'm living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where there is a huge theatre scene full of living playwrights and fringe theatres that wholly devise their own works. We are no longer in the age of the repertory theatre. To be a theatre artist in American in the 21st Century you must be an originator of new works.

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