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HISTORICAL EVENTS IN FICTIONAL PLAYWRITING

by

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ABSTRACT

This Masters thesis explores the use of historical events and legends within the form of fictional playwriting.

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CHAPTER 1

USING HISTORICAL EVENTS IN FICTIONAL PLAYWRITING

In my first interview with Robyn Hunt, Steve Pearson, and Stan Brown for entry into the MFA program at The University of South Carolina I asked about the possibility of integrating another one of my interests, American History. I am particularly interested in the American Presidency, especially as a tool to see what the country was like as a whole at that time. Hunt, Pearson, and Brown suggested I utilize that interest in my solo show in the second half of my second year. I took them up on that opportunity and started brainstorming. Initially I had imaged staging or recreating an obscure historical event. That seemed to lack a certain artistic flare. I also found myself compelled to make an autobiographical piece, which I resisted. What stuck was a series of short historical vignettes that connected to each other through folklore and music. Using historical events in a piece of fiction lends the writer a concrete platform to launch. A clear example is in the character of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

“...We can turn our attention to the past. The lives of the character begin long before they appear on stage, and their pasts are indispensable for understanding their present lives. Every drama story has a past, but the conventional time and space feature of the theatre require special writing skill to illustrate all of it through dialogue in action.” (Thomas 73)

Stanley is around thirty years old at the start of “Streetcar Named Desire”. He had

served in the army corps of engineers during WWII and now works as a factory parts salesman in the year 1947. Harry Truman is president after FDR died in 1945. FDR brought an end to prohibition and the New Deal passed in 1933, bringing with him a slew of socialist programs that forever changed the role of Government. Stanley Kowalski is a fossil in the midst of social, economic, cultural and political change. The background story of Stanley Kowalski is as complicated as his relationship with the playwright.

Stanley enters the play with a cheery “Stella! Hey Stella baby!” (SND Act 1 Scene 1) He walks with the heavy footed steps of a soldier and with the lightness of a man in love. His sub-conscience philosophy is to treat women with respect, forthrightness, and gentility but as we see, he is frequently misguided both in intention and execution. He carries the scars of WWII and the burden of being unable to show weakness due to societal expectations. Much like the artist who is expected to be appreciative of the “exposure” a project may generate, Stanley left the army with the pride and honor of serving his country and is still under the thumb of poverty. Partially due to geographic location, the great-depression, and self imposed pressures to provide the standard of living that Stella grew up with. Stanley is burdened by a number of outside influences that I will look into with a historic and academic lens as suggested by James Thomas.

Thomas says that the *events* in the background story of a character must be “a significant incident that happened in the past, something vital to the play and involving conflict of some kind.” (Thomas 80) In regards to Stanley, the significant event is his becoming a Master Sergeant in the Army.

STELLA: A Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps. Those are decorations!

BLANCHE: He had those on when you met him?

STELLA: I assure you I wasn't just blinded by all the brass.

Here we see the event that led Stella and Stanley to meet and also what very well could have been the reason for their attraction. His time in the Army also explains his brutish and macho behavior. I cannot speak to the specific psychological issues that may have plagued Stanley after his time in WWII, but depending on where he was based he may have seen many horrific and violent acts. The Corps of Engineers was active on D-day as well as many other theaters of action during WWII. Their jobs were usually to construct bridges, roads, and infrastructure both for civilian and military use. On occasion they were also responsible for destroying bridges, roads, and infrastructure. Had Stanley been active on D-day with the Corps of Engineers he may have experienced:

“By nightfall of D-day the brigade engineers had opened Sugar Red, and had made the road leading inland from it (Exit T — 5) passable for vehicles. They had cleared beaches of wrecked vehicles and mines, had improved the existing lateral beach road with chespaling (wood and wire matting), and had set up markers. The brigade's military police were helping traffic move inland. The engineers had also established dumps for ammunition and medical supplies and had found sites for other dumps behind the beaches.” (Coll 338 & 339)

The Corps served in Europe, Japan, Germany, and many other fronts during war time and they were frequently the target of gunfire, danger, and potential PTSD inducing experiences. “In forward areas engineers braved the same fire as the infantry to build

narrow-gauge rail nets for supply and troop movement, to dig complex trench systems, to string wire, to install bridging, and even to engage the enemy.” (Coll 3)

“Background story takes on several forms: events, character description, and feelings. Which is most important depends on the nature of the play, the characters, and the situations in the play.” (Thomas 80)

Feelings on the surface don't seem to effect Stanley. He deals mostly in what he preserves to be facts and figures. “You ever hear of the Napoleonic code?” (SND Act 1 Scene 2), “there was an army camp near Laurel” (SND Act 1 Scene 7), “She'll go! Period! P.S. She'll go Tuesday.” (SND Act 3 Scene 1). Similar as in the Army Corps, feelings are not something a man of that time spoke openly about. In order for a man to deal with feelings, he would show strength through action. Stanley looks for ways to burry his feelings through action in a number of ways throughout the script. We have repeated poker games, drinking, throwing out of a radio, and his raping of Blanche. Blanch in a moment of lucidity remarks that, “You must have had lots of banging around in the army and now that you're out, you make up for it by treating inanimate object with such fury!” (SND Act 1 Scene 5)

FDR ended Prohibition in 1933 making Stanley about the age of 16 at the time Prohibition ended. Studies have shown that the levels of drinking did not change that dramatically after Prohibition. “The level of consumption was virtually the same immediately after Prohibition as during the latter part of prohibition, although

consumption increased to approximately its pre-Prohibition levels during the subsequent decade.” (Alcohol Consumption During Prohibition. Abstract.) Despite the fact that Stanley Kowalski would have been near the impressionable age of 16 at the time of the alcohol ban, there is little evidence that points to it being directly related to his drinking habits later in life. FDR’s other legislation, The New Deal, did effect Stanley’s economic demographic as it targeted low income families that were struggling through the Great Depression. As he was coming from a history of working with the Army Corps of Engineers, it is likely that he would have sought out a job in the area of public works post war. Those kinds of jobs were very common with the New Deal legislation and the economic boom that followed WWII.

“...We can turn our attention to the past. The lives of the character begin long before they appear on stage, and their pasts are indispensable for understanding their present lives. Every drama story has a past, but the conventional time and space feature of the theatre require special writing skill to illustrate all of it through dialogue in action.”
(Thomas 73)

CHAPTER 2

THE BRIDGE, A SOLO PERFORMANCE

Tabla Music is heard. Lights come up. A rolled rug is stage right, a chair sits stage left, and a rope runs the length of the stage from upstage rights to down stage left. The speaker enter from up stage right.

Speaker:

2016. Rishikesh, India. The Lakmanjula bridge crosses over the Ganges River. There is no rhyme or reason to the walking patters and scooter traffic. Walk forward- avoid scooters and cows- watch your step. The bridge sways, buckles, and sometimes catches my feet as the next step may be an inch higher or lower from where I think the ground should be. We're all trying to make our way to one side of the Ganges.

Through the crowd a little girl comes up to me. She has a brown beaded top that flashes and sparkles in the sun and striking, piercing brown eyes.

“You buy my fish food?” she asks.

“No thank you.”

“Why you no buy?” I know better than to whip money out on the bridge. A crowd gathers quickly.

“I have no money but thank you!”

“You no buy my fish food?”

“No thank you. Your English is very good!”

“You bad man.”

“I’m bad?”

“Yes- you very bad man. I can see you. I curse you. You evil man!” As I quicken my pace I hear her shout “You bad man! I see you! I curse you in sin! You’re in sin!”

This rattles me. I had been cursed at before- we had just moved from NYC so the cursing wasn’t anything. It was the fact that part of me believed her. If there was a place for someone to see the “bad man” in me it would be India. My lineage is paved with great, honorable people, but one man has a questionable past. He’s partly the reason I find myself on this bridge.

Rishikesh, the yoga Mecca and where the Beatles went to write the White Album. An Iowa boy fits right in.

Music Fades out

Unfolds a mat/red rug

Does sun salutation as this is said

His name was Pierre Bernard. The news papers called him the ‘Great Om’. On occasion they called him a rapist, a swindler, or a dangerous mystic from the Orient. Spies, movie stars, and the well-to-do paid visits at his upstate New York Estate to sit at his feet and stand on their heads. Pierre Bernard had a mustache similar to mine, a nose similar to mine, and he is responsible for popularizing yoga in America at the turn of the

century. He had a herd of elephants in his upstate “Country Club” one of which *Baby*, would become the mascot of the Republican Party. My great uncle, a staunch democrat has the elephant’s pelt in a cardboard box under his pool table despite the pleadings of the Smithsonian and Republican historians. Pierre Bernard is my first cousin three times removed (meaning three generations separated). We were born in the same town, and knew the same relatives.

They tell me stories of him. I can see the family resemblance in grainy photos.

Sits in Vajrasana

It is 1915, upstate New York, and the United States is in the budding stages before exponential growth in the sciences, arts, and population. The Great Om’s eyes are closed. He has slight grey in his temples. He sits in vajrasana. Someone speaks.

They ask, “Master, What is the secret to love?”

Candles burn all around the mahogany library. Every available inch of rug and hardwood is taken up by eager listeners. He takes a deep yogic breath and says:

When we’re in love, we overflow. Not just to the loved one. We’ve all seen so many situations where a friend or a co-worker or a colleague comes into the office or into school one day and we automatically know, “Ah! she’s in love” “he’s in love.” Even if the beloved isn’t there with them, it oozes out of them. We fall in love, we become very good tippers in the restaurant. We fall in love and we help people across the street. We fall in love and we forgive anyone who wrongs us in any way. Because that love, although sparked by one person, has actually connected us to a place in ourselves, which is love. But what’s happened is we’ve hooked our experience of love with that person. So when

that person does something that no longer makes us feel full, the pain we experience is because we've attached our experience of love to that person's action. They told us we were beautiful, we felt complete, we felt full and now they no longer tell us that. What that makes us know is, it wasn't full love to begin with. All it was is that through that person we were able to access that place within ourselves. It doesn't mean it's wrong. Whether we get there through a sunset, a baby's eyes, a puppy dog, or a human beloved. They're all taking us to that same place within ourselves. The only problem comes when I've attached my experience of love to what you do or say or don't do or don't say. Then I've lost the love. I've deprived myself of this incredible experience that I'm able to generate from within. What we have to remember is that the source of love is within us.

First cousins 100 years apart.

Music Fades into "Sun Sun Sun"

Gets guitar

Plays, Company of Friends

When I die, let them judge me by my company of friends

Let them know me as the footprints that I left upon the sand

Let them laugh for all the laughter

Let them cry for laughter's end

But when I die, let them judge me by my company of friends

When I die, let them toast to all the things that I believe

Let them raise a glass to consciousness
And not spill a drop for grief
Let the bubbles rise at midnight
Let their tongues get light as thieves
And when I die, let them toast to all the things that I believe
I believe in restless hunger
I believe in red balloons
I believe in private thunder
In the end I do believe
I believe in inspiration
I believe in lightning bugs
I believe in slow creation
In the end I do believe
I believe in ink on paper
I believe in lips on ears
I believe what's shared is savored
In the end I do believe
I believe in work on Sundays
I believe in raising barns
I believe in wasting Mondays
In the end I do believe

I believe in intuition

I believe in being wrong

I believe in contradiction

In the end I do believe

I believe in living smitten

I believe all hearts will mend

I believe our book is written

By our company of friends

Copyright 2007. Words and music by Danny Schmidt.

Song ends. Places guitar back on rack.

"Say a little prayer for you" starts and lights fade

In 1880 Chester Arther had the highest paying government job in the country as the head of the port of NY when he took the position of VP under James Garfield.

Say a little Prayer for You

When Garfield was shot and finally died, Chester Arthur took the office and is now famous as the most unrecognized president of all.

Say a Little Prayer for you

He is hated by both parties and alone in the highest office. A letter lands on his presidential desk from a 32 year old woman from NYC. Her name is Julia Sand. She reads every political piece she can get her hands on.

She writes a letter to the president. He reads it. It said, "The hours of Garfield's life

are numbered. The people are bowed in grief; not so much because he is dying, as because you are his successor.”

Say a little prayer for you

She wrote, “Your kindest opponents say 'Arthur will try to do right' – adding gloomily – 'He won't succeed’”

Say a little prayer for you

While bedridden with spinal trouble she writes, “If there is a spark of true nobility in you, now is the occasion to let it shine. Reform! It is not proof of highest goodness never to have done wrong, but it is proof of it, to recognize the evil, to turn resolutely against it.”

Hers was the only encouraging voice he had in the White House. She kept writing from her hospital bed unsure if her letters met their audience.

Say a little prayer for you

She said, “Disappoint our fears. Force the nation to have faith in you. Show from the first that you have none but the purest of aims.”

Say a little prayer for you

“You cannot slink back into obscurity. A hundred years hence, school children will recite your name in the list of presidents & tell of your administration. And what shall posterity say? It is for you to choose....”

He never wrote back. He kept all 32 letters in his presidential desk. He slunk back into obscurity. We don't remember his name.

music gets louder before fading into tabla music

When I was a kid, my dad would tell me to listen to my conscience. My parents always knew when I had done something wrong because my conscious forced me to confess every little detail. In Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, the word for conscience is: *hompsa*. A literal translation of Hompsa is *swan*. If I give a swan a bowl mixed with water and milk, the swan will only drink the milk and leave the water. Hompsa in Sanskrit also means, *that which separates*. When we breathe, what separates the nitrogen from the oxygen from the carbon dioxide, and pollutants? The good from the bad? What discerns right from wrong? Our conscience, our hompsa, our swan.

Rolls up rug. Packs guitar in case

Scooters honk. Cows moo

The bridge sways

The way is not easy

Long ago, people lived high -up in what is now called heaven. They had a great and illustrious chief. It so happened that this chief's daughter was taken very ill with a strange affliction. All the people were very anxious as to the outcome of her illness. Every known remedy was tried in an attempt to cure her, but none had any effect. There stood a great tree, which every year bore fruit. One of the friends of the chief had a dream and said, "in order to cure your daughter you must lay her beside this tree, and you must have the tree dug up."

This advice was carried out to the letter. While the people were at work and the young woman lay there, a young man came along. He was very angry and said, "It is not at all right to destroy this tree. It's fruit is all that we have to live on." With this remark he gave the young woman who lay there a shove with his foot, causing her to fall into the hole that had been dug. She fell from the clouds to the earth below.

That hole opened into this world, which was then all water. On which floated waterfowl of many kinds. There was no land at that time. As these waterfowl saw this young woman falling they shouted, "Let's catch her." Whereupon they joined their bodies together and the young woman fell on this platform of ducks. When the water fowl were wearied from carrying her they asked, "Who will volunteer to care for this woman?" The great turtle then took her, and when he got tired of holding her, he in turn asked who would take his place. At last the question arose as to what they should do to provide her with a permanent resting place in this world. Finally it was decided to prepare the earth on which she would live in the future. To do this it was determined that soil from the bottom of the primordial sea should be brought up and placed on the broad, firm shell of the turtle, where it would increase in size to such an extent that it would accommodate all the creatures that should be produced thereafter.

After the young woman recovered from the illness from which she suffered, she built herself a shelter, in which she lived quite contentedly. One day she took a walk heading West, which was not her custom. During that walk the breathe of the West wind entered her, causing her to become pregnant. When the first days of her delivery were at hand, she overheard twins in her body in a hot debate as to which should be born first and

where was the proper place to exit. One declared that he was going to emerge through the armpit of his mother, the other said that she would exit through her mother's feet. The twins emerged and began the work of making the rivers, land animals, plants, and birds of the world.

Speaker exits up stage right

Music fades out

Bird calls start and fade to silence

CHAPTER 3

MOVING FORWARD

The Bridge is a conglomeration of my favorite elements of theatre; music, humor, and history. Moving forward I will unpack the historical elements and focus on what they contributed to *The Bridge*. Writing historical elements into a work of fiction allows me to think more abstractly and opens doors to a more nuanced theatrical work. So much of our writing exercises with Robyn Hunt were about taking a prompt and elaborating with it in a way that resonated with ourselves. For instance, the prompt *food* had a variety of responses. Mine became about the best fish sandwich I ate the summer of 2017. By following a prompt and writing truthfully, the listener added layers of nuance. My fish sandwich story became about childhood, fear, and rock-climbing. By writing a musical number about Chester Arthur to the tune of *Say A Little Prayer For You* allowed the audience to hear a new story with a nostalgic tune. Whatever associations they had with the song they were likely applying to Chester Arthur.

This project has inspired me to continue writing for the stage with elements I enjoy reading about. The most clear way forward is to write about actual events in the context of music. I would like to increase the role of music in this show and weave in more plot points from the various artists. The show now seems to be a series of related vignettes whereas I'd like it to become a collage of historical events to create a fictional plot line.

I foresee writing about musicians with similar pasts interacting with each other from across time. While keeping the folklore and historical events, the greater plot will center around a fictional guitar store. The plot of the play will have a clearer beginning and ending than that in *The Bridge*. I also see the play moving from a solo performance to a three person production. The actors on stage will play the music live as I did with *Company of Friends* in this solo adaptation.

Upon securing the performance rights to specific songs I will know what realistic expectations I can have regarding the script. Some songs may be too expensive despite how well they may uphold the text. My next step is to write the script including the song I would most like to use. I will research costs after my script is set and will make changes accordingly.

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