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The Golden Age, or Trials and Tribulations of a Working Man

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THE GOLDEN AGE, OR TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A WORKING MAN

by

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DEDICATION

To Howard Eugene Edley Jr. This is your story and I'm glad I got to share it. You always believed in me, and that belief has helped me get through a lot. I miss you. This one's for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I need to thank, Steve, Robyn and Stan. My growth would not have been possible without you three, and neither could this show. Steve, thank you for showing me my potential. For always pushing me to be the best and settling for nothing less. Thank you for all the technical work you did to help me realize this show. Robyn, thank you for all the after-class hours you put in. Thank you for helping me realize the physical aspect of not only my acting but also my show. From the obstacle course scene, to differentiating between characters. And Stan, thank you for helping me find my voice, and for giving a voice to my grandparents. For showing me there's range and depth within myself. And also, for showing me that maybe I can sing, a little. Without you three, none of this could have been possible. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

In my second year at the University of South Carolina, I was tasked with creating a solo show. When first presented with this I was a bit nervous. However, after coming up with my idea, writing my script and beginning to rehearse I found the value in it. It is a freeing experience. It provides the actor with a sense of exploration they wouldn't normally get with a regular ensemble play or performing someone else's work. It becomes deeply personal reveals things about you that you might not have known otherwise

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CHAPTER 1

THE IDEA

When I was told that I would have to create my own solo show my second year of grad school I was filled with a nervous excitement. I was nervous because this seemed like a daunting task. I had never tried to write a play before, let alone a solo show. Then there was that time, fifteen minutes. That seemed like an eternity. I was never going to be able to write something that long. I had seen a few, most of them being John Leguizamo's one man shows. The thought of being on stage alone was scary by itself. There would be no one to help me if I went up on a line. There was no other actor to take focus. All eyes would be on me for the entirety of the show. Then there's the fact that I would have to write it. So now not only would my acting be critiqued but also whatever story I decided to tell. It was not something I was looking forward too.

But then as I continued to think about it, I started to get more and more excited. I was excited to be able to tell my own story. Excited that I would have total creative control. It was an excitement I hadn't experienced in my acting life up to that point. And now it came time to figure out what story I wanted to tell.

When I first began thinking about my show, I didn't know whether I wanted to create a fictional play, or one that told a real-life story. I bounced around these ideas a lot. I'm not sure where the inspiration came from but one day, I just had this idea that I wanted it to be about my grandpa. I had spent every summer, from ages 4-13, on his farm. I would work the hay and straw fields with him, drive the tractors, bale the hay,

make deliveries, and everything in between. I began thinking about these summers and how hard he worked. Then I thought about what he was doing when he was my age. How did our lives compare? I had always known he was in the Vietnam War, but that's pretty much where my knowledge of his history ended. I had never heard the story of how he met my grandma, or what his childhood was like, and I was curious.

In my initial vision of the play, I wanted the research and storytelling to be done through letters. I wanted to write back and forth with him and ask my questions and get my answers through the mail. I was then going to use these letters in the actual production. Each letter was going to spark a scene or discussion point. I hadn't yet decided if the character of my grandpa was going to interact and talk to the audience, or if he would just be reading the letters and going from there. Eventually I decided that there would be no talking to the audience, and that the writing of the letters would transport him into the scene and his narration would be as if he was still writing the letter.

Then I called my grandpa and told him about this idea I had. I explained to him how I had to create a solo show, and that I had decided I wanted to tell his story and make mine about him. He was shocked to say the least. He kept asking me if I was sure I wanted to do my solo show on him and wasn't there someone else more interesting I would want to do it on. I think he was flattered and honored. I also think he didn't want to waste my time, but I assured him, he was plenty interesting, and that I was sure I wanted to do my show on him.

I then told him about the letter idea I had and that's when my plans had to change. He told me he wasn't much of a letter writer, and suddenly all those birthday cards from when I was younger made sense. My grandma would write long paragraphs in my cards,

and my grandpas would be short sweet and to the point. But I came up with an alternative. I would just interview him and create the show from that. The only problem was he lived in Ohio and I was in South Carolina, so I would have to find a way to record a phone call. Not the biggest of issues but one I would need to figure out. So, I set a date for the interview and we were ready to go.

CHAPTER 2

THE RESEARCH

Since my grandpa told me he wasn't much of a letter writer I decided that I would need to do an actual voice interview. He lived in Ohio and I was in South Carolina, so it was going to be an over the phone interview. The first problem I ran into was that there was no way for me to record a phone call. So, what I decided to do was have him on speaker phone and use a recording app on my iPad.

The interview consisted of me just letting him talk. I would lead him and get him started, but for the most part I just wanted to hear what he had to say. I asked him to start at the beginning, saying his name and date of birth and then asked him to start with his childhood. After I got through that, I asked him about Vietnam.

This was something that I knew was a big part of his life, but that I didn't know any details about. So, I wanted to get a lot of details about this because I knew it was going to be a big part of the story I was going to tell, as it was a big part of his life. This ended up being the bulk of the interview. And I found myself focusing most and asking the most questions about this part of his life.

He rounded out the interview with some random anecdotes and life after the war. Insights that I had never heard before, which was a reason I wanted to do this in the first place. I wanted to hear things I'd never heard. I wanted to get to know him on a level I hadn't before. It was also important to do this now, because I feel like I'm finally at an age where I could appreciate it. Hearing the stories of Vietnam at an age where I could

have been drafted, just put it all in perspective in a way I don't think it would have if I was younger.

During my interview he also told me of a radio interview he had done where he had told his life story and asked if I wanted him to send that to me. I thought the more information the better, so I asked for it. Listening to it there was a lot of the same details he had told me during our interview, but there was also some new stuff in there. He also sent me a tv interview he had done, so I had plenty of materials to pull stories from.

CHAPTER 3

THE WRITING

Initially when I began thinking about this piece, I was going to go through the entirety of my grandpa's life. Then when I heard that the limit was fifteen minutes, I started thinking I would have to do a speed through of his life. But, as I was gathering information through the interviews and tapes, I started to realize that Vietnam played a pretty important role in my grandfather's life. So, I decided this would be the focal point of the piece.

I find beginning to write to be the hardest part. I didn't know how I wanted the piece to start. In the beginning I was going to have it begin with his childhood and work my way through. But as I had decided to focus on the war, I needed to find a way to move the timeline up. That's when I came back to an idea I had toyed with in the beginning. When I was going with the letter idea, I was going to have my grandpa be transported to whatever time he was discussing in the moment. I took this idea and came up with starting with me calling him about the idea. This would cause him to gather some items I had asked him to send me, and these items would replace the letters in the "transportation" of my grandpa.

I began with an anecdote about Bigfoot he told me during our interview. I thought this would be a nice lead in to him gathering the items and beginning the show. My next question was whether I wanted him to acknowledge and talk to the audience or not. At first, I was convinced I was going to include the audience. At one point I thought about

not and keeping them separate, but this brought up the problem of who am I talking to then and what is keeping the story going. Why would he be talking? In the end, I decided the audience was his way in. This was due to the problems I had thought of and me being influenced by John Leguizamo's pieces.

I wanted to stay as faithful to what happened in real life as I could. The one thing I found that I changed, that didn't really matter in the end because that element was cut, was I changed the gender of my grandpa's cousin. He told me about how he met my grandma and how his cousin, who was a woman, invited him over to a party she was having. As I was writing and got to the war, I wanted another point of view. I wanted someone who was with him through the whole war, and that he was close to. And I also wanted the audience to care for this person, because my plan was to kill him off. There were a few reasons for this. I wanted to show the audience the ugly side of war. The loss of life. I wanted to show the emotional toll this would take on my grandpa, because he had told me when he got back, he had some PTSD. He didn't use those words but said he would wake up in the middle of the night screaming or taking cover under his bed. So, I wanted the audience to see him lose someone he's known for and loved all his life, so that the aftermath would be that much more powerful. In the end, I didn't have time to fully explore this element, so it was cut.

I like to think that, I'm a funny person and I wanted to include some of that in my solo show. I didn't want to force a joke in however, because then it wouldn't be funny. I also didn't want there to be too many jokes, because the section of his life I was working on was a pretty serious time. As I was looking for music, I found my joke. I thought about the Vietnam War and how whenever it's depicted, it's always paired with the same

songs, so I poked a little fun at this. This also served the purpose of softening the audience as in the next scene Howard was going to be in the war, and inevitably lose his cousin. The death was cut like I mentioned before, but the joke remained.

I also knew at the end of the war section I wanted to honor some of the men who had died fighting. I had this idea for the names to be projected and scrolling. I wasn't sure if this was going to be possible or not, but I wrote as if I could make anything I wanted to happen. In my head Howard, was reliving these events as he gathered stuff to send to the play version of me, so I wanted him to actually see the names and be affected by them. When I finalized the script and cut it to the right length this ended up being the last thing that happened. And I'm glad it was able to be done in reality.

CHAPTER 4

THE REHEARSAL

I had finalized my script. It was down to the time constraints and I was ready to begin rehearsing. From the beginning, I knew I didn't want a big space. I wanted the story to be contained in a smaller area. The first thing I did was set up the room. In keeping with my small area all I ended up using was a table and chair. I would use the trunk with the items in it to create the rest of the world and get everything I needed from that.

There were three parts of the story that I turned to my professors to get help with. The first was portraying my grandma. I naturally have a pretty deep voice. I didn't want to do a fake falsetto for my grandma just because she was a woman. I thought this would come off as comedic or just silly. I told Stan Brown, my voice professor, about my concerns and what I was trying to do and asked for some help with that. He told me not to think about going into a falsetto, but to try making my voice a little breathier. He also told me where to place the voice so that it was pitched higher but wasn't an unrealistic falsetto. I also worked on the posture of my grandma to separate her more from Howard. All of this was helpful in creating a complete representation that was easily differentiated from my grandpa.

The next thing I needed help with was an obstacle course. I had written in a basic training scene. It was going to be more of a movement piece and a representation of an obstacle course since I couldn't and didn't want to bring a whole obstacle course on

stage. Robyn Hunt, my movement professor, offered help with this element. I went through and showed her the basic outline of what I had and told her how long I wanted it to be and what I was trying to accomplish. Robyn helped me with spacing things more so that it looked like an actual obstacle course and not just random movements in place. She also suggested some elements to add, like jumping jacks, and explosions going off that Howard would have to take cover from. This helped create a different feel for the basic training, which is what I wanted since it was something different for Howard. I didn't want it to feel like the previous scenes. These bled into the movement piece of his time in the actual war feeling different as well. It should feel different because it was different. He wasn't in his element.

The last thing I needed help with was a floating gun. Since Howard was relieving all this as he was telling the story I wanted to have some more fantastical, or dreamy elements to the play. This was scene in a horn motif that played throughout, and during the basic training scene, I wanted the gun to come from the sky and land in his hand. Steve Pearson was the one who helped me solve this problem. He showed me how to rig a fly, so that during the show he could fly it in to me. It was a nice slow descend like I pictured, and I could stand right underneath it and it landed perfectly in my hand. I also wanted to show target practice. I had the idea for a light to kind of flash and go out, as if it were shot, and Steve was able to make this happen for me.

All of these elements helped show the world I was trying to create. Whenever I'm in a play, I create a playlist for my character. These usually include, songs from the show, songs that get me in a certain mindset, or songs I just think the character would like. For this show, I not only go to create a playlist, but the soundtrack as well. I found the album

The Golden Age, and the whole thing just fit so perfectly with this fantastical, dreamy world I was trying to create, and I ended up only using songs from that album, besides the two clips of the joke songs I put in. This not only influenced the playlist and soundtrack, but also the title of the show. From the beginning I knew it was going to be called *Trials and Tribulations of a Working Man*. This was something my grandpa sang constantly. It was perfect I had heard him sing it since I was a kid. But when I found this album, I began having second thoughts. I voiced these thoughts to Robyn, and she asked, “Why can’t it be both?” That’s when I decided on the final title, *The Golden Age, or Trials and Tribulations of a Working Man*.

CHAPTER 5

THE SCRIPT

ACT I

Scene 1 Intro and Setup

Enter Howard, continuing a conversation from before.

HOWARD

I'll tell you this story too. I don't know what year this was, but I was delivering a load of hay up to North Lewisburg to a guy named Doc Nichols. I'm driving down 559 and it'd been raining, but it wasn't raining at the time and I looked off, well the Holy Spirit said "Son look off to your left." Did I tell you this story? Well the Lord said "Look to your left my son." and when I looked to the left, I seen this big creature. About 9 foot tall. Eyes red as coal. And he don't have no neck. His hair looked like porcupine quills, real straight. And when I looked, when we made eye contact, he gave me the Black Power sign from back in the 60's. He stuck his right arm in the air and had his fist clenched. And soon as he did this he went walking off in the woods up there. So when I got up to Doc Nicols, I told him about it and he said, "Oh I believe you. My daughter and I were back in the woods here last spring and the cotton pickin' horses were going crazy and it had this ba-" I never smelled him, but I guess he's got this real bad smell about him. Anyway, he smelt this real bad smell and looked up and there was one big one and two little ones. That's what he said. I just seen the one. But I've seen Big-they call him Big Foot-I've seen Big Foot three times in my lifetime. And every time I've seen him somebody else vindicates it. Like the time I saw him in North Lewisburg and it was raining, he left his footprint. He's got a foot that's about 13 inches long and he's only got three toes. When I first saw him, I didn't know if I was seeing something in the spirit or something physical, but I found his footprints, spirits don't leave footprints. So, it's real. I don't understand it and I don't know why God made him but-and there might be more than one, I don't know.

I'm gonna try and dig them DVDs up. Text me the address of where you want me to send them. I'll get that stuff out and I'll start looking for some pictures in my spare time. I got a lot of pictures. Alright I love you and I'll talk to you later. Yup. Bye Bye.

Howard hangs up the cell phone and places it on the table. He looks at it for a moment and then up at the audience.

HOWARD

That was my grandson.

During the rest of the dialogue Howard grabs a box or two or however many are needed from off stage and brings them into the space.

He's doing some project at school, making a movie or something and he wants it to be about my life. Now I asked him twice, wasn't there someone more interesting he could do this on, but he told me he was sure I was plenty interesting.

"The Golden Age" begins as Howard opens the first box. While the song plays the room is set from items inside the box. Hats, scarves, or whatever is needed to become other characters are taken out acknowledged and placed wherever they need to go. Some definite items are a picture of young Martha or young Martha and Howard and this is placed on the desk. Also needed is an army helmet. This is for the section of song with the snare drums. The following dialogue is spoken over the last musical interlude.

Scene 2 Martha

Howard pulls out an old picture of Martha. He looks at it, smiles, then looks to the audience holding the picture for them to see.

HOWARD

Martha Mae Scott. She'd eventually become Martha Mae Edley, but I'm getting ahead of myself with that. My cousin Stanley was having a cookout at his house and wanted me to come.

STANLEY

Come on Howard. There will be tons of pretty girls there. And I got this one that's perfect for you. You should come by and meet her. I've already told her all about you

HOWARD

I don't know Stan. I'm not really into the whole blind date thing. You sure she's interested

STANLEY

Yeah, yea.

HOWARD

(to the audience)

She wasn't. We got to the house and I went over to the girl. I tried being nice and introducing myself, but it seemed like she didn't like me very much. She was treating me pretty bad. Worse than you should treat someone you didn't even know, but it was fine, I realized I didn't want to

have anything to do with her. Then I saw her. That dark hair, the soft skin, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I walked over to her, real cool like.

Howard does a "cool" walk over to Martha. He goes to lean on the table in a "cool" way, misses and falls
Smooth. But she's laughing. That's a good sign.

We started dating and it was going great. I was the happiest I had ever been. Then I checked the mail. A draft notice.

Scene 3 Basic Training Farewell to Martha

"Run Boy Run" begins to play. Movement piece, "montage of basic training and getting to Vietnam with dialogue interjected with the music

HOWARD

The war was not something I wanted to get involved in. I left my fingernails on the porch as they dragged me off. Got my draft notice on a Wednesday, my layoff notice from International Harvester on Thursday, next stop Basic.

Not an easy start. But you give me any task and I'll work my butt off till I've got it right.

Howard aces target practice with bullseye projections

And that was that. I was a certified killing machine according to the army, off on furlough, so of course I had to go see Martha Mae.

Martha, I don't know what to say. Does anyone know what they want their last words to the woman they love to be?

Then she said it.

MARTHA

These aren't going to be your last words to me. You're going to go over there, serve your time, and then you'll come back to me. I'll write you everyday, and you'll write back. But you will come back to me. That's a promise, do you understand?

HOWARD

Yes ma'am

And then it hit me. I knew what I was fighting for. I wasn't fighting for Lyndon Johnson, or because I hated the Vietcong. I was fighting for her. I was fighting to get back to this woman. I was fighting for our future. For the three boys we would have. For the farm we would work. For our lives together. I was determined now, and nothing was going to stop me from coming back to her. Nothing.

Scene 4 The War

HOWARD

I got on that plane with a new spark inside of me. Something I had never felt before. We landed and there it was, Vietnam.

Fortunate Son begins to play. Howard gestures to cut the music.

Why is it, whenever the Vietnam war is depicted it's always paired with "Fortunate Son" or..

"All Along the Watchtower" begins to play
Yup.

Howard shakes his head no. The music changes "Iron" begins to play. Movement piece with dialogue interjected

Loc Ninh. This is the place I almost got killed. The place I almost broke my promise to Martha. They were shooting at us, and we weren't allowed to shoot back because they were across the border in Cambodia, but of course sometimes we did. They had the cotton pickin' latrine zeroed in so you didn't dare go to it during the daytime. And sniper fire. You'd be sittin there on the pot and somebody cut loose with an AK-47. Yea it was bad news up there bud.

We used to flip coins for lead track, and all that, and my track never got blowed up. Always at the right place at the right time. But of course I had my mom and a lot of other people praying for me.

"Boat Song" from 2:49ish to the end

I could still never shake that it could have been me. It all came down to that coin flip. I'll never forget those men. I would wake up crying in the night thinking it could have been me.

Howard turns around. Lights fade. Projection shows the names of soldiers who died. Howard turns around and speaks the last line as it is sung in the song.

Fade to black.

CHAPTER 6

THE FUTURE

I've already stated that I didn't get to do the full show that I initially set out to do. This was only because of time. I definitely want to come back to this piece, finish it, and perform the entire story of my grandpa. I do want to take a little bit of time away before I do this.

I lost my grandpa this past Summer. I now have his whole life to work with, which is a weird thought to be. There wouldn't be a to be continued at the end of the show or anything like that. I now have the beginning to the end. It feels so finite, and I think I just need to reflect on it some more before I write the full version of the show. I do know that I want to break it up into two acts, with two major parts each act. The first act would be childhood and the war. Act two would be immediately after the war and how he adjusted to life back in the states and then later life when he was back on the farm and had kids. I know how I want to proceed with writing it and know I can rehearse anywhere. The only problem I can foresee, is I don't know where I would perform it or how to go about finding venues.

There are also other solo shows I want to write. I have an idea for a show about the Kennedy's. I saw a docuseries about them and was really inspired by the story. I've also been fascinated with the assassinations and the conspiracy theories behind them. In my mind this solo show would be presented like teaching a class. There would be

interaction with the audience and as we go to different points in history, I would act out conversations or things that happened throughout history.

That's just one idea for a solo show I have. There are many more floating around in my head that I'd like to get out on paper. I enjoyed the whole process of creating this show. I find the value in it and think every actor should do one. You really find your strengths and weaknesses. You're the only one on stage, you're fully exposed, and I feel like you learn a lot that way. Not only as an actor. You also learn about your writing strengths and weaknesses as well. I found words or phrases that I used over and over. It was helpful to see it written down so I could point it out and tell myself I use something too much.

Overall, I found this to be an enjoyable and informative experience. I've found value in it. I've learned how to be a better storyteller. I've learned how to be comfortable completely alone on stage for fifteen minutes. And I've learned how to create my own art and my own ideas and bring them to life. These are lessons that I will use throughout my whole career.