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FAILURE AND THE AMIABLE LIE

by

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The performance piece detailed in this work is, at times, referred to as a “solo show.” It is hardly that. I am extremely indebted to my professors Robyn Hunt and Steven Pearson for their insight, ideas, and support throughout creating and executing my piece, *The Man and the Demon*. And I also cannot fully express my gratitude to my MFA acting classmates who sat in a completely darkened theatre over and over to help me hone this experiment into something worthy of an audience.

ABSTRACT

This document details the creation and execution of my solo theatrical piece *The Man and the Demon*. The first chapter serves as an exploration of how the show was conceived, created, rehearsed, and presented before an audience. In the second chapter, I detail why this piece resists traditional standardization for the purpose of repetition. Through both chapters I investigate the intimacy and immediacy of theatre, the benefits of risk, the essence of storytelling, and the usefulness of theatre's "amiable lie."

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CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTION AND PREPARATION

Very early in our solo show writing process, Professor Robyn Hunt asked my class of MFA acting candidates to make a list of threads that interested us. My list contained both narrative and aesthetic, or even meta-theatric, ideas. One of which, contained in the first few pages of my notebook, was, “What can happen in a room when a group assembles?” This very basic question became the guiding principle for my process. How theatrical experiences can take advantage of their most basic premise—a group of people assembled to witness an event that will be, in some way, unique and unrepeatable—always interests me. Over the course of our initial exploration and free writing, it was not specific stories that focused my energy and excited my imagination. Instead I always found myself focusing on ways that I might make the experience itself a manifestation of what I love most about theatre: that each event creates an ephemeral community that lasts for the duration of the performance. I allowed this to inform my narrative interests.

The earliest concrete narrative idea came from the group after I spoke about the current work in the world of virtual reality. Professor Hunt had assigned us the task of bringing in an interesting news story about any topic. I became aware of some of the work in virtual reality through the “More or Less Human” episode of the podcast *Radiolab*. On one episode the program’s reporters spoke to several people working in the

field of virtual reality in various capacities and interviewed another reporter, Joshua Rothman, who wrote a piece on virtual reality for *The New Yorker*. I found and read this piece, titled “Are We Already Living in Virtual Reality?” This is the news story I brought in for discussion.

After reading selections from the article we had a lengthy discussion as a group. During that discussion a narrative idea formed: a failed virtual reality experience that is replaced by the technician’s effort to still create the approximation of the virtual experience via simple storytelling. My classmate Sean Ardor was the first to suggest this idea. My classmates were already aware of my interest in creating a piece that broke the barrier between the performer and the audience. Sean in particular always seemed to grasp my interest in this, and his awareness of my desire and his own playful imagination coupled to reveal a possibility that I would pursue for several weeks. I imagined how to use this narrative situation to involve the audience, to create an experience that in some way relied upon their involvement and interest. The idea of juxtaposing virtual reality against an actual event that could only rely upon people and their imaginations became my beacon. But as I imagined various incarnations of this story, I questioned one crucial detail: The audience would always know that the virtual reality experience was never actually going to occur. It would glare as exactly what it was: a narrative device created to establish the rules for the experience I actually wanted to create. Would this negatively impact the audience’s willingness to engage in the journey?

I wrestled with this question for the greater portion of our in-studio creation time. I would end up going with a completely different fictional world for my solo piece, but a core idea of this original story would stay with me throughout the twists and turns:

failure. Part of my interest in theatre is the risk it brings: the risk of failure in the midst of the event. As creators, we strive to create a seamless event for the audience, one that allows for immersion to the point that an audience member forgets (to a degree) the reality of his or her situation and is entirely absorbed in the fictional narrative. I am interested in the necessity of this device. One of my persistent artistic questions is whether this kind of immersion, which seems to be accepted as an objectively necessary aspect in modern theatre, that sets as its goal the erasure of the reality of the theatrical situation—that a group is assembled together to experience other people creating a false narrative in real time—is truly the best option, or just one option among many interesting possibilities. This, as opposed to a singular narrative idea, is what motivated much of my process in creating my solo piece, *The Man and the Demon*.

To expose the artifice of a theatrical experience in a manner that also creates the opportunity for audience reliance is a way to confront failure. This is what led me to create a solo piece that served as both a narrative and practical exploration of my interest in the idea of risk. Instead of the virtual reality scenario, I decided to begin with an amiable lie. For this performance piece, the lie would be a staged lighting failure that would appear to disrupt the planned performance. I conceived of a piece that fit other theatrical interests of mine—such as myth structure, minimal technical support, and demanding physical work—that could feasibly be restructured in the event of this sort of technical difficulty. Before I could move forward, I had to enlist the help of my professor and our technician for the performance, Professor Steve Pearson. To be able to actualize my idea, I would need Professor Pearson's willingness to enact my amiable lie. He agreed and we discussed the logistics of creating the needed effect. This included the

point in the lighting hardware chain at which the issue would realistically occur, the way we would stage the artifice of attempting to solve the issue, and the way in which our actions would lead to me being able to address the audience directly as myself. The intent of all of this, beyond creating a believable artifice, was to create a sympathetic relationship with the audience. This was necessary to create a scenario in which the immersion and involvement of the audience would not be confrontational but instead be a request for assistance and generosity.

Once all of this was in place, I outlined and drafted a script quickly. This was a two-part process of imagining the never-to-be-performed “perfect” version of the story and then adapting that script for what I was actually to perform: a piece that was to appear interrupted and adapted in the moment of performance. I decided to leave ample room for improvisation so that there would be a level of spontaneity that would not need to be fabricated. This mostly applied to the beginning, which was, in essence, a monologue in which I spoke to the audience. I created a structure for this improvisation by determining the information that would need to be communicated, the order in which events would occur, and choosing a story that I would tell every night—though the way I told the story would change. This structure allowed me to learn from each performance, reorganizing how I went about creating the necessary atmosphere and relationship with the audience.

My rehearsal process began with mapping out the basic action of the piece and repeating it until I could perform it without any doubt or physical stuttering. I then relied heavily on my classmates for in-situ rehearsal. Because of the nature of my piece and its reliance on the audience, I needed to rehearse with audience stand-ins as much as

possible. My classmates were gracious enough to volunteer their time repeatedly, providing me with a similar interaction I would have during the actual performance and giving feedback to questions I needed answering as I continued to hone the piece. Their and my instructors' feedback and assistance were crucial in shaping the final product.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REPETITION

There is no life for *The Man and the Demon* beyond its performance at the Center for Performance Experiment, at least not in its current form. The specific demands of my particular exploration in this show were reliant on several factors inherent in and unique to the setting in which it was performed. For example, the artificial lighting failure's construction was reliant on my collaborators and the allowances of the theater space. A willing participant handling the technical responsibilities of the performance is necessary. Professor Pearson's willingness, and his skills as an actor, were invaluable in creating the artifice. The fact that we lacked a stage crew made it feasible that I would be the one to interact with the audience in the event of such a failure. Even the option to carry on with the performance amidst the technical failure was made possible by the setting: in many theaters there would be regulations that would bar such action based on safety, regulations that audience members might have in their awareness. There is no doubt that the slightest change in any of these factors could have introduced a level of tension that the precariousness of the constructed events could not withstand.

Though I was not aware of it at the time, in reflection I see an audience relationship on which I relied that would not be the case universally. On any given night, the audience was dominated by members of the department (including faculty and

students), close friends or relations of the former, and university students required to see the shows for a particular class. Overall, this made for a very sympathetic audience, an important element for the piece. I was able to assume a willingness to participate that might not be the norm across various audiences. If I were to face an audience that did not have this built in sympathy for me as a performer, I would have to greatly restructure my approach to building the relationship that allows for the necessary assistance.

Another glaring issue for this piece is its resistance to the necessity for most theatrical performances: the ability to be repeated in a single location for a considerable duration. It is hard to imagine the artifice of this show being able to last through the revelations that come with any success—details of the show's events spread by word of mouth, a critical review that reveals the conceit. The show crumbles under too much publicity. Without the reality created by the amiable lie, the show in its current iteration crosses the line to cheap gimmick. The lie no longer feels amiable.

If I were to revive this show in any way, I would most likely take core elements of the theatrical questions it is exploring rather than copying the actual piece. Creating a piece that relies on the audience for its success can take many forms. Shows that focus on the relationships between the performer and the audience and amongst the audience members themselves can be constructed in a variety of ways. Performances that strip away technical elements to focus on the heart of storytelling can still have widely varying aesthetics. Creating this piece taught me the value of using limitations to create opportunities in performance. Instead of remounting this particular piece, I believe there

is greater value in using the discoveries of the experiment as a blueprint to craft a new performance that continues to explore these elements.

In terms of my personal artistic growth, the discoveries made in creating *The Man and the Demon* are more valuable than the final product. Working in a manner that was largely self-guided allowed the opportunity to continue developing a personal aesthetic through responses to particular artistic questions. So while I do not foresee *The Man and the Demon* having a life beyond its short run at the Center for Performance Experiment, the questions that prompted its creation will live in my work and guide my explorations for years to come.

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APPENDIX A

THE MAN AND THE DEMON SCRIPT

About this script: This script is constructed to be used loosely. The nature of this show demands room for improvisation and adjustments to the audience. This piece was also constructed with the specific setting of the Center for Performance Experiment at the University of South Carolina in mind. It is unlikely that it could be reproduced in this exact form in another venue.

A note on formatting: There are several moments where the words “on track” and “off track” occur. These are to demarcate the moments at which the actor is to appear to be using the prewritten script (on track) versus the moments when he is “improvising” to walk the audience through the story (off track).

The beginning of the show is improvised within a structure. The light board operator acknowledges a staged ‘light failure’ and asks the actor to check the lighting hardware in CPE. After discovering that the lighting hardware is not to blame, the light board operator admits that finding a solution may take time. The actor makes an entrance to talk to the audience. After apologizing and making the attempt to ensure the audience feels safe in the dark, the actor tells a story about a previous failure he’s experienced while teaching. Eventually, the light board operator interjects to say that he has not resolved the issue, and it may take considerable time. With this new information, the actor decides to proceed with the performance, adapting it as needed to the new environment. The actor walks the audience through lighting instructions, using cell phone lights as general light. He enlists the help of one “follow spot” operator who uses a flashlight the actor provides. With this determined, the actor and the audience practice lighting commands using both verbal and physical cues. Once this is done, the show proceeds. All of the following lines are spoken by the actor.

Okay, so. We’ll begin in the dark.

(In dark:) There once was a man who lived enslaved to a demon. By most appearances he lived an ordinary life in his village, but at any moment the demon might appear and demand some errand of the man.

(Flashlight.) “Slave! Bring me the blood of a fairy for my supper!” *(Flashlight off.)*

(Flashlight.) “Slave! Forge me a sword to smite my enemies!” *(Flashlight off.)*

(Flashlight.) “Slave! Fetch me my bedroom slippers!” *(Flashlight off.)*

Spotlight on.

(Off Track:) Okay, jumping forward... This goes on for many years, blah, blah, blah. The errands became more and more difficult. He even almost dies on some of them.

(On Track:) But, this proud, enslaved man was fiercely independent. His friends tried to offer advice and help on how he might rid himself of this curse. But instead of trying their proposed solutions the man poked holes in every idea. Spotlight out! *(with signal)*

“You could disguise yourself and run away to a new village,” one said.

“The demon would hunt me down. He is a demon, after all.”

“You should kill him!”

“How would I do that?”

“I don’t know. Just...catch him when’s off guard and...stab him.”

“I see you’ve really thought this through.”

Spotlight on!

The man refused every single proposal, until, finally, the friends stopped offering any help at all, seeing how it soured the man’s mood. He seemed to want only the perfect solution and refused to try anything that might fail. Eventually, plagued by the demon and his own stubborn pride, the man’s prickliness spread to his general mood and his friends stopped spending time with him altogether, leaving him alone and angry.

(Tim signals for spotlight out.)

One day, the demon issued a command that changed the man's life forever.

(Flashlight.) "Slave! Bring me the head of the Forest Witch. For she thwarts my every evil device and I am barred from entering her enchanted forest." *(Flashlight off.)*

Spotlight!

The man has had to do many things for the demon. But murder? This is a new low. Begrudgingly, the man set off for the forest. Cell phones on!

(As Tim moves through the space and the audience:) He trudges through the enchanted forest—over hills, under briars, through brush and spider webs, until he finds the witch's house. It's a simple house, with thatched roof and pale smoke rising from the chimney. The man unsheathes his dagger and moves slowly towards the house. Terror grips him as he considers this murder, but he knows no way to escape the demon's command. Suddenly, in the midst of his sneaking, his whole body goes rigid, freezing him in his tracks.

(Tim signals for lights down.)

(Flashlight.) "Fool! What do you think you're doing sneaking up on an old witch? I should curse you to the end of your days."

"No!" he cries. "I am already cursed, bound to serve a demon all my life. It was he commanded me to kill you and bring him your head, for he hates you fiercely."

"Ah..." Said the witch. "I know a way to free you from this curse, but it is a dangerous path. If you are brave you may stand a chance at reclaiming your life."

"People have tried to offer their solutions all my life, I don't need yours."

"Every attempt has failed?"

"Well..."

"You haven't even tried to remedy your situation, have you?"

The man said nothing.

“You can try to kill me if you wish. Bring the demon my head and satisfy him until his next command. Or you can listen to me and seek a true end to your predicament.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I’m a Forest Witch and this is a fairytale and that’s how these things work!” *(Flashlight off.)*

Spotlight!

The witch tells the man that there is a cave a short distance from her home. The man must enter the cave and search for a magical sword. With a single cut, she says, this sword can slay the demon that enslaves him.

(Off track:) Let’s get all the lights up! *(Tim moves upstage.)* Can you sort of see the whole space? *(Wait for response, observe space, adjust if needed.)*

(The following is spoken during the journey to the cave.)

(On track:) His way pointed by the witch, the man sets off to find the cave. The journey, though short, is difficult. The man climbs, crawls, slides, rolls, and vaults, until he arrives at the mouth of the cave, which, the witch failed to mention is actually a bottomless hole. A new terror grips the man, but he steels himself. And with a deep breath *(Tim signals for cell phone lights down.)* he steps to the edge (when I jump, spotlight out) crouches and *(Tim jumps off of the edge of the stool.)* Spotlight back!

“AAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!” Spoooooiiiiiiight ooooouuut!

The man falls further than he would have imagined possible. Spotlight! *(Tim is discovered, falling down the hole.)* He falls until it feels as though he is floating through space. He falls so long that he forgets the falling and begins to think about the mess he’s in. He has no idea what awaits him in the cave. “I should have asked the witch more questions,” he thinks. “Are there monsters in the cave? Where will the sword be? What

challenges must I face to obtain it? Surely a magical sword this powerful won't be sitting on some pedestal with a sign: 'Demon-slaying sword here! Come and get it!'" Why had it come to this? What if there **was** another solution? Why had he been so dismissive of his friends' suggestions to end this curse? Why had he been so proud? *(Tim signals for spotlight out.)*

And then... *(BANG.)* "Oh!" *(BONK.)* "Ah!" *(THUD.)* "...Ow."

With a few bumps he reaches the bottom of the cave. Darkness envelops him.

(Flashlight on, illuminating behind Tim and creating a shadow.)

He stands slowly, testing for anything broken. Surprisingly, he feels fine. Moving carefully, he finds the cave wall and begins to inch along, praying it will lead him in the right direction. *(Tim exits, creeping sideways, into the wings.)*

Tracing along the wall, he navigates a maze of tunnels. *(Off track:)(Offstage:)* I don't have time for all of this.

(Tim comes back onstage.) Lights up!

I need to finish, so I'm not gonna go through everything. I don't think I even could. I'll tell you that he meets a goblin who demands he solve a riddle before he lets him pass. You know, I'll tell you the riddle, because I think it's good: If I have it, I don't share it. If I share it, I don't have it. Anyone? *(A moment for the audience to guess.)* A secret. The man gets it right. And it's a sort of leading riddle, because the goblin knows a secret path to the sword and tells the man the way.

He goes through more tunnels and eventually finds himself in a cavernous, shimmering room... Oh! Let's try something. Let's get all the lights up. Now...move them around. Try... [spinning them/waving them/hiding and revealing the light with your free hand/etc.]

(This direction may be different each night depending on audience size and how that corresponds to the effect the lights create.)

Yes! Perfect.

(On track:) So he finds himself in this huge sparkling room. A giant lake occupies almost the entirety of the space. Light inexplicably bounces off the surface of the water and reflects off of crystal-like walls. And THERE! There it is! In the middle of the lake, driven into a great boulder on a small island, is the demon-slaying sword for which he has searched.

Tentatively, the man lowers himself into the lake, its water freezing cold. Spurred by the frigid water and nearness of his goal, the man swims rapidly towards the island. He crawls ashore and inches carefully towards the boulder. As he places his hand on its handle he feels a strange power emanating from the sword. With one swift pull the sword slides easily its earthen sheath, glittering in the light of the room.

Suddenly he hears a huge splash and, turning, finds a towering serpent emerging from the water. Its scales glisten and its huge yellow eyes fix on the man. With a snarl it dives at him. He rolls to the side, narrowly evading its open jaws, and the creature slams into the boulder. The man coils, prepared to fight or evade on the creature's next strike. But the creature doesn't rise. It emits a pained, pathetic whimper. In spite of himself, the man feels a wave of pity for the injured beast. To his surprise, as though his mouth belonged to another person, he hears himself ask the creature, "Are you alright?"

"Noooo!" wails the beast, its voice shockingly small. "You hurt me."

"I did no such thing!" says the man. "You injured yourself."

The beast pulls itself from the rock and eyes the man angrily.

"I'm sorry! But it's true... Is there...anything I can do to help?"

"Hmph!" the creature snorts. Then it seems to soften. "No... What does it matter? I never wanted any of this. Now the sword is stolen and even if you don't kill me my master will. And find a new slave."

“Your master?” The man asks. The creature goes on to tell him that he too is enslaved to a demon, bound to protect the sword the man has taken. The man presses the creature for more information and discovers that they share the same master.

“If you let me escape this cave and return to my village,” the man says, “I swear to you that I will kill the demon and free us both.” The creature promises to do even better and use its magic powers to transport the man back to his village. After a brief, kind goodbye the creature’s eyes glow fiercely and suddenly the man finds himself back in his village, on a street not far from his home.

Before he even has a moment to get his bearings the demon appears, demanding to hear the outcome of the man’s errand. Knowing he has not a moment to lose, the man lunges with the sword aimed directly at the demon’s chest. But the demon nimbly evades the strike and the man falls to the ground, the sword slipping from his grip and sailing out of sight. Incensed, the demon stalks towards the man, spewing curses, his claws bared. The man cowers, crawling away from the demon. And then, out of nowhere, one of the man’s old, neglected friends comes barreling at the demon, the magic sword in hand. He plunges the sword into the demon’s back, who instantly explodes into a cloud of ash.

Silence. The two men stare at each other a moment, mouths agape. Then both begin laughing hysterically. Standing, our hero pulls his friend into a tight embrace.

“You saved me!” the man shouts, stepping away from his friend. “How can I ever repay you?”

“You can’t!” laughs his friend. “And even if you could, I wouldn’t let you.”

And then the man realizes that at every step of his journey he relied on the help of others: the witch, the serpent, his friend. He feels deep shame, and expresses this to his friend.

“That pride will get you nowhere,” says his friend. *(Cell phone lights out.)* “You can hope never hope to be perfect, but you can always hope for help.” *(Spotlight out. Darkness.)* The end.

End of play.

APPENDIX B

THE MAN AND THE DEMON FILE

Submitted along with this thesis is a video recording of my original solo piece *The Man and the Demon*. This recording has been compiled from multiple performances:

The Man and the Demon.mp4