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Without A Net: Creating A One-Man Show

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WITHOUT A NET: CREATING A ONE-MAN SHOW

by

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ABSTRACT

During the Spring of 2011, I wrote and performed a one-man show entitled *Hamlet and Pancakes*, which was inspired by my Irish grandfather who used to cook pancakes for me while reading Shakespeare aloud. This sparked my love of all things theatre, food, and performance. This thesis contains the full script of that one-man show and it serves as an overview of the creative process that led to the show’s development and evolution. What began as a seemingly daunting assignment quickly became one of the more enjoyable endeavors of my life as an actor. The show seemed to write itself after I got started, and what began as a simple homage to my grandfather became an exploration of my own upbringing and my sense of humor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Research and Development</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) <em>Hamlet and Pancakes</em> by Joe Mallon</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Script Analysis</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Bibliography</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Endnotes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

I knew right away that my one-man show wanted to be about my grandfather, so the very first thing that I did was to talk at length with my mother’s side of the family about him. I wanted to hear as many stories as I could so as to better portray the man as a whole.

So I talked to my mother and her three brothers about my grandfather. What quickly became apparent to me was how fond my grandfather was of using hyperbole as a means of effective storytelling—a tool that I often implement myself. Another thing that I quickly learned through speaking with my mother and my uncles was just how silly my grandfather was. I know that he was always silly with me, but up until that point I assumed that his silliness was reserved for me alone. In fact, he was extremely silly throughout his entire life—a character trait that also definitely applies to me. Through these conversations, I learned about a man that was defined by the stories he told, so I decided that my one-man show would be spoken directly to the audience for the most part. In essence, I would be telling the audience a story.

I was shocked to learn just how similar my grandfather and I are. We both love storytelling, being silly, humor, performance, and spirited conversation. I had started out wanting to do a simple biography of my grandfather, but the more I learned about him, the more I knew that I wanted to show how my own personality closely resembles
his. So I decided that I wanted to include stories about myself that I would juxtapose with stories about my grandfather. The more I started to write, however, the more that I wanted to highlight the similarities I have in common with my grandfather as a means of showing the person that I am today. I decided to use humor to show how I came to be me, citing stories that affected me from my childhood and stories with my grandfather.

As I state in the script, one of the most impactful stories was that of the first man to commit suicide by jumping off of the Brooklyn Bridge. My grandfather always used to tell me that the man’s name was Steven Brodie. I don’t really know why that story stuck with me over the years, but it is one of the most vivid memories that I have with my grandfather, so I knew that I wanted to feature it in my show. I started researching the facts about Steven Brodie in order to be accurate in my storytelling. During the course of my research, I discovered that my grandfather had been wrong about Brodie being the first person to jump off of the Brooklyn Bridge. In fact, he was the second person to jump, and he survived. Additionally, it is widely speculated that he never really jumped at all, since he was discovered in the water and not one witness could be found to verify his story. This was fascinating. I had always assumed that my grandfather’s word was absolute, so this discovery was incredible. I realized that it perfectly summed up my grandfather’s penchant for embellishment and poetic license, so I chose to feature the Brooklyn Bridge story as the most prominent section of my show. For me, this story about a bridge acts as the metaphorical bridge between my grandfather’s characteristics and my own.
Another component that I knew that I wanted to incorporate was music. My grandfather had a habit of using any family gathering as an excuse to break out into song. He had a few songs that he loved to sing, but one stood out in my mind more than the others: *Mack the Knife* by Bobby Darin. I just really love the sound of that song, so I decided to learn it and sing part of it in my show. When I started to look at the lyrics, however, I realized that I never really knew what that song was about. It is about a murderer named Mack the Knife who is going around town and killing people. This was surprising to me, since the song is so upbeat and full of life. While the lyrics don’t really lend themselves to the premise of the play, I still liked the song because it was one of my grandfather’s favorites. Then it occurred to me that my grandfather used to sing this song at family gatherings like birthdays and holidays, which seemed really out of place once I learned the lyrics. He sang that song because it’s catchy and it was upbeat…and we all loved it when he sang it. So it made sense to me to include it in my show, regardless of its lyrics, for the very same reason that my grandfather liked singing it: it’s catchy and upbeat…like he was.

Once I had the elements that I needed for the part of my show pertaining to my grandfather, it was time for me to think of stories about myself that could be used to show where my silliness and self-deprecating sense of humor comes from. I also wanted to show the audience the type of imagination that I had as a child so that they would better understand why I decided to pursue acting. I hadn’t sat down and really thought about my childhood in a very long time, and I quickly learned that there were details about some stories that I didn’t even know I remembered. For instance, I knew
that when I was a child I thought that I could control the weather, and I knew that when I tried to use those “powers” against my father nothing happened, but I didn’t remember my father’s reaction accurately. When I asked him about it, he told me that he laughed, but I distinctly remember him staring blankly and then walking away disgusted. So I was faced with a choice: tell the story with the actual reaction of my father or with the funnier embellished version that I misremembered? In the spirit of my grandfather’s knack for changing facts to make stories better, I decided to go with the latter. That decision helped make a number of subsequent changes to the script.

For instance, my grandfather is a first-generation Irishman, and he had the hints of an Irish lilt that were mixed with hints of a Long Island accent. Based on the decision I made about the weather story, however, I decided to portray my grandfather with a very thick Irish accent in my show. I thought this fit in nicely to the “whatever makes the story better” mentality that runs in my family while also pointing to my pride in my Irish heritage and in the Irish characteristics that I most loved in my grandfather.

Perhaps the most unexpected development of the show was the effect that the audience would have on the very performing of it. It wasn’t until I was in front of a crowd that I realized how incredibly fun it would be to tell them all these stories. It felt like my grandfather was alive in those moments. It also felt like the piece wasn’t truly alive until it was in front of people, and an energy that I tried to incorporate into the script presented itself in a way that it never had before when I was reading it to myself. That speaks not only to the spirit of my grandfather, but to the magic of live theatre.
In blackout: the sound of rain and thunder. Not torrential, but gentle...cleansing. Lights fade up on JOE standing center stage. As lights finish coming up, JOE calmly extends his arm towards the audience, his focus on the storm. He snaps. The rain and thunder continue. This was not the desired effect. Throughout the following, the rain and thunder gradually fade out until they are gone.

JOE:

When I was 10 years old, I thought I could control the weather. I was playing outside one sunny summer day in the booming metropolis of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. It was so unbearably humid and hot that I said to my friends poetically: ACTION!

As LITTLE JOE: “It’s hot.” My friends agreed. “Yup.” “No, I mean it’s like really hot. I wish it would rain.”

CUT! As soon as those words were spoken, the blue skies turned cold and grey. And it rained. Right on cue. And I did it...or so I thought. A few weeks later my father and I were in a heated argument over whether or not I could watch America’s Funniest Home Videos with everyone’s favorite sitcom kinda-gay Dad, Danny Tanner himself: Bob Saget (who is secretly a complete scumbag off camera, but that’s another story). I hadn’t
finished my math homework, but still felt I had earned the right to watch grown men get hit in the balls by their children, usually with an oversized plastic baseball bat. My father disagreed. The ensuing argument grew more and more heated, until finally I couldn’t stand it anymore. It was time my father beheld the fury of my newly-acquired weather controlling abilities...ACTION!

As LITTLE JOE and DAD: “Come on, Dad, I’ll do my homework after the show.”

“Absolutely not, Joe.”

“Come on, Dad, you’re not being fair.”

“I’m not going to argue with you anymore, young man. Now go to your room and finish your homework.”

“You better let me watch that show, or you’ll be sorry.”

Pause. “What did you just say?”

“I said you better let me watch that show.”

“That’s it! I’ve had enough of that disrespectful attitude. You are going to your room and you are grounded for one week, buster.”

LITTLE JOE shakes with vigor, summoning his awesome powers. “LIGHTNING STRIKE YOU!!!” LITTLE JOE points at DAD. Nothing happens. DAD shakes his head in disgust and walks away.
JOE:

CUT! That was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. I only wish it was the only one.

JOE walks over to a kitchen table where there is a plate of pancakes and a bottle of syrup. Throughout the following he eats the pancakes:

JOE:

DA is what people in an Irish family call the eldest male relative. I know my bronze, permanently tanned skin and dark hair can be deceiving, but I assure you, I’m 100% Irish. My mother’s father, my grandfather, was DA. DA lost his wife to cancer when the oldest of his 4 children, my mother, was only six years old, leaving him with a house full of children and no help with raising them. DA was a great cook and an amazing singer and entertainer, but all of those things took a backseat to supporting a family by himself, which he did by selling cars. But he never stopped cooking, singing, or acting when he wasn’t working. I am the oldest grandchild to DA, so I always had a special place in his heart. It didn’t hurt that I loved food and entertaining as well. When we would visit DA in Rockville Center, Long Island, DA would cook me pancakes and read me Shakespeare. It was my first exposure to scripted plays. I loved it. ACTION!

As DA:

“To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--
No more--and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep--
To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprise of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

At the end, as LITTLE JOE, with a mouthful of pancakes: “WOW…”

JOE:

CUT! I used to make rides for my little brother and sister in our basement. At the time, I thought Brendan and Annie loved them. Later I found out that they hated every minute of it, but they were frightened I would beat them up if they didn’t participate. So Brendan and Annie spent a few years of their childhood in a sort of Universal Studios-
esque torture chamber...created by me. My favorite was the Indiana Jones and the
Temple of Doom rollercoaster. ACTION! [START TRACK 2 AND PLAY WHOLE TRACK]

The audio from the mine-cart-scene in the previously mentioned film plays as LITTLE JOE
takes a laundry hamper and moves it back and up and down, supposedly simulating the
movement of the cart in the movie. His eyes are set in front of him, watching the film on
a television and frantically trying to keep pace, out of breath and sweaty. The music stops and LITTLE JOE stands up and looks down at the hamper, expectantly. LITTLE JOE then jumps into the hamper and sits, looking up at where he was a moment before. As BRENDAN and ANNIE, he slowly claps with a look of disgust on his face. Then he gets out of the hamper and takes a dramatic bow.

JOE:

CUT! Every time we visited DA, he would take me into New York City to see a show and
eat at some new and interesting restaurant. I was 9 the first time that we went. He always made sure to go over the Brooklyn Bridge, even though it was out of the way. These trips were also an excuse to show me the city and tell me strange facts. ACTION!

As DA: “The first person to commit suicide by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge was
named Steven Brodie, a good Irish fella. Don’t ever pull a Brodie, Joe.”

As LITTLE JOE: “Um...ok, DA.”
JOE:

CUT! While doing some research for this show, only a few short weeks ago, I learned that Steven Brodie was not, in fact, the first person to commit suicide by jumping off of the Brooklyn Bridge. He didn’t even die. The real story is fascinating. ACTION!

JOE takes a newspaper off of the table and proceeds to read the following as if it is a news story:

The Brooklyn Bridge

It officially opened in May 24, 1883 and was the longest suspension bridge in the world at that time (more than 50% the record). It crosses the East River, connecting the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan and is used by an average 145,000 cars per day and a couple thousand pedestrians

The Opening

It is estimated that over 150,000 people and 1,800 automobiles crossed the bridge on its opening day of May 24, 1883. However, newspapers in the area began to openly question the bridge's stability, which may have had tragic circumstances less than one week later. On May 30, several people were on the bridge when a rumor spread through the crowd that the bridge was collapsing. The frantic masses began a stampede towards shore and it took over fifteen minutes for calm to be restored. In total, 12 people had been either trampled to death or pushed off the bridge and another 35 people had been injured.

Jumps from the Bridge
Perhaps because of the bridge's size or possibly its early notoriety, the Brooklyn Bridge has also become well known for the amount of people that jumped off of it, either for publicity-seeking fame or to take their own lives. The first actual jump would come in the form of a Washington D.C. swimming instructor, Robert E. Odlum, who went as far as to make a public announcement that he would jump on May 19, 1885. Given his public proclamation, police were well aware of his plans and were in place to stop it. Odlum had planned for this and sent a friend ahead, who drove quickly on to the bridge attracting the attention of the police, got out of his car and went through the motions as if he were to jump. Three cars behind him was Odlum, who also stopped and jumped out in a bright red swimsuit and then leapt from the bridge with one arm at his side and the other pointing in the air. He died due to injuries sustained during his fall.

STEVEN BRODIE (FOR REAL)

Probably the most famous jumper might not have been a jumper at all. On July 23, 1886, Steven Brodie was found in the river below and was quickly arrested for "attempted suicide," despite the fact that was hardly his intent. Based on the story he told, newspapers quickly announced that he had survived the plunge. He became an instant star and the acclaim led him to become a fairly successful entrepreneur, but reporters and the general public alike began to question his claims. Friends of Brodie claimed to have witnessed the jump, but no one else could be found to back up their claims.

Regardless, Brodie's fame translated to a film in 1933, titled The Bowery, and even coined the phrase: "Take (pull or do) a Brodie," which now means to take a jump or fall
(in boxing), to commit suicide by jumping, or to survive a suicide leap. There is even a 1949 Warner Bro’s cartoon which shows Brodie being coaxed into jumping by Bugs Bunny. The newspaper accounts at the time greatly sensationalized Odlum's fatal jump and Brodie's supposed successful attempt, which led to many more people attempting it.

JOE folds up the newspaper and places it back onto the table. He then walks downstage center and spends one whole minute silently looking embarrassed. Then:

JOE:

CUT! That last part was all of the pent up embarrassment that has accumulated from the hundred or so times I have told people in my life, with absolute certainty, that Steven Brodie was the first person to commit suicide off of the Brooklyn Bridge because he was a “good Irish fella.” Now I know where my tendency to embrace embellishment and hyperbole comes from. When I was a kid, for about 3 years, I was convinced that I had control of the video camera that my father often used to film the family. So every home movie I have from the age of 8 to 11 has me saying, “ACTION” and “CUT” before and after every bit of video that I wanted to be recorded. Only years later did I realize that the camera was on the entire time, not just when I wanted it to be. What a joke.

ACTION!

As DA: I’ve got a joke for ya. You’re gonna love it!
So a teacher is teaching her 4th-grade class, and she tells her class that they are going to learn how to spell their names using phonetic syllables. As an example, she uses her own name: Mary Scott.

You got your M-A-R, You got your Mare.

You got your Y, You got your “ee.”

You got your Mare-ee.

You got your S-C-O-T-T, You got your Scott.

You got your ee-scott, You got your Mare-ee-scott.

When she has finished, she asks the class if there is anyone that who would like to try it.

Archibald Barisol raises his hand.

You got your A-R-C-H, You got your Arch.

You got your I.

You got your Arch-I.

You got your B-A-L-D, Bald.

You got your I-Bald.

You got your Arch-I-Bald.

You got your B-A-R, You got your Bare.

You got your Bald Bare.

You got your I-Bald-Bare.

You got your Arch-I-Bald-Bare.
You got your A-S, You got your Ass.

You got your Bare-Ass.

You got your Bald-Bare-Ass.

You got your I-Bald-Bare-Ass.

You got your Arch-I-Bald-Bare-Ass.

You got your O-L, You got your Hole.

You got your Ass-Hole.

You got your Bare-Ass-Hole.

You got your Bald-Bare-Ass-Hole.

You got your I-Bald-Bare-Ass-Hole.

You got your Arch-I-Bald-Bare-Ass-Hole.

Pause.

You asked for it lady.

As JOE:

CUT! DA passed away when I was 16 years old. I visited him a few times in the hospital, and each time he was doing worse. By the end, he had lost almost half of his weight and he couldn’t get out of [START TRACK 3]

The sound of rain and thunder, closer this time. JOE tries to snap furiously. The rain and thunder continue.
JOE:

Damn.

_The rain and thunder continue._

He never lost his unique sense of humor. Self-deprecating to the end. **ACTION!**

**[SLOWLY FADE OUT TRACK 3]**

As DA, _coughing phlegm into a tissue that he pulls out of his pocket:_

“You would think I would have run out of this stuff by now, huh, kiddo?”

**As JOE:**

CUT! When I was 11, on one of our trips to New York City, I told DA that I had to use the bathroom. We had just left a Broadway show, so it was around 11 o’clock at night, and we had already made it to the car. DA suddenly got really excited and drove us 2 miles out of the way to a very busy bar called P.J. Clarke’s. He double parked the car in front and told me to go use the bathroom inside the bar. **ACTION!**

**As DA:**

Biggest in the city, probably the world. **[START TRACK 4 AND CUT IT OFF WHEN I SAY “CUT!”]**
As LITTLE JOE, he mimes walking through a packed Irish bar as the song Mack the Knife starts to play. His voyage shows him getting bumped around like a pinball in a sea of people before finally reaching the bathroom. The urinals are 8-feet tall! Giants to this 11-year-old. He faces upstage and mimes urinating, then reaching up in the air to flush.

The music stops and he turns around.

As JOE:

CUT! Mack the Knife was one of DA’s favorite songs.  

The music for Mack the Knife starts again, and JOE sings along to it.

Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear
And it shows them pearly white
Just a jackknife has old MacHeath, babe
And he keeps it ... ah ... out of sight.

Ya know when that shark bites, with his teeth, babe
Scarlet billows start to spread
Fancy gloves, though, wears old MacHeath, babe
So there’s nevah, nevah a trace of red.

Now on the sidewalk ... uuh, huh ... whoo ... sunny mornin’ ... uuh, huh
Lies a body just oozin' life ... eeek!
And someone’s sneakin' ‘round the corner
Could that someone be Mack the Knife?

At the end of the song, the rain and thunder fade in, gentle and cleansing like at the beginning of the performance. This time JOE slowly extends his arm, closes his eyes, and
snaps. The rain and thunder immediately stop. As JOE opens his eyes, a hint of a smile flashes across his face as the lights fade.

BLACKOUT
I wish that I could say that I meticulously planned out the order of the stories and sound cues and ideas that are in my show, but truthfully, I cannot. Perhaps my subconscious played a role in how it all worked out. I’m really not sure. All I know for certain is that I was as surprised as anyone at how the whole thing coalesced. It was like my grandfather’s spirit was with me helping to guide which story went where in order to build an overall picture of love and life and death that I previously hadn’t imagined. I loved how the rain sound effects played into the weather changing, of course, but also into my inability to change the things in my life that have hurt me; most notably, the death of my grandfather. Originally, my only reason for writing the rain into the show was to setup the weather story. It was only after the whole script was finished that I realized how it played into the script in other ways.

As for writing a longer version or performing it again in the future, I would jump at the chance to do either. When originally trying to conceive of a one-man show, I found it very intimidating, but after I started writing, it took on a mind of its own and quickly became incredibly rewarding and enlightening. In truth, I never really fancied myself as a writer of any merit, so the very idea of writing a play, let alone a play about my own life and experiences, seemed downright impossible. It was with great pleasure that I discovered that not only do I absolutely love to write, but also that I wasn’t too bad at it.
It was like opening the door to something creative that I never thought possible in myself. I feel like I would be doing myself a disservice now if I don’t continue to write and create theatre.

Since producing this one-man show, I have continued to write and develop new works. Not all of them are any good, but they all serve to keep that conduit alive within me. The process of writing this show has given me the lifelong gift of confidence in myself as a writer, and that is a gift that I plan on using as much as possible in the future.

Overall, the experience of writing a one-man show was an incredible one. Since putting the show up, I have had the chance to speak to several other actors that I have met at The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington DC about what it was like. More often than not, I’m finding that most performers harbor an urge to write a show about something that they care deeply about, but lack the confidence to pursue. The best thing that this experience has given me is the ability to tell those actors, without a shadow of a doubt, that writing a piece of theatre, regardless of the topic, is a cathartic and inspirational endeavor that every performer should experience.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENDNOTES

1 *Mack the Knife* was a song that I heard my grandfather sing no less than 10 times at family functions without ever knowing that it was a song that was about murder. All that I knew about it was that it was upbeat and that it might my grandfather smile, which in turn made me smile. My only sister Annie got married in October of this year, and to honor Da’s memory at the wedding, she asked me to sing *Mack the Knife* in front of 250 family members and friends. So the *Mack the Knife* tradition is alive and well.

2 The “tracks” referred to in the stage directions refer to different rain and thunder sounds. The rain and thunder sound cues throughout the one-man show were a much smaller element of the play before I heard the cues that Steve Pearson brought into rehearsal. I asked for two sound cues: one rain sound and one thunderstorm sound. He brought in ten different options for me to use that were so different that I realized the possibilities that the rain sounds could be used for.

3 Even though the play is called *Hamlet and Pancakes* and the monologue I mention is the famous “To be or not to be...” speech, the breakfast sessions of Shakespeare that I had with my grandfather were very diverse and included most of his works. I chose that
speech because it is my favorite Shakespearean monologue and I remember my grandfather reading it to me with vivid clarity.

Some of the facts in the Steven Brodie section were taken from Wikipedia and then cross-checked for accuracy.