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The Hanging of a very Tall Man

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THE HANGING OF A VERY TALL MAN

by

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DEDICATION

The Hanging of a Very Tall Man is dedicated to my most critical editor, my most ardent supporter, and to my wife: Jeanette.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their uncannily precise guidance and unfaltering support I would like to thank Robyn Hunt and Steve Pearson. Without them this play would not exist. I would also like to acknowledge my fellow artist: Carin Bendas, Nicole Dietze, Josh Jeffers, Rachel Kuhnle, Ben Roberts, Candice Thomas, and Dimitri Woods whose creativity and artistry helped to attune my own. Thank you also to James Costello and Brittany Kmiecik, who helped elevate the show to its next iteration.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate and give context to the development, performance, and future evolution of *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man*. More specifically, within this document you will find the plays script, an apology for its somewhat bizarre conception, as well as a description of how it has grown, and how I hope for it to develop in the future. As opposed to some scholarly articles which are written with the intent to dissociate themselves from the reader in an attempt to adhere to some kind of imagined etiquette, this document has been written rather personally. I invite any readers in turn to read it personally and take from it what they may.

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INTRODUCTION

When thinking about how to begin this thesis I was met with several confoundations. Confoundations. There's a little squiggly red line under that word informing me that it is in fact not a word at all; at least by Microsoft's dubious requirements. But I shall use it none the less. At the very least I shall be in the good company of other word smiths: Theodor Geisel; Anthony Burgess; and of course Bill, that good old fellow.

But why go through all this trouble? Why not just use the word "obstacles" or "challenges"? Why the run around? An in all honesty I have no defense for such questions besides the fact that I believe in the life of words. They live in our minds and in the minds of others. They can be become stale or corrupted, they can be rekindled or repurposed, they can wither and die or phoenix-like rise again from obscurity. And with all this in mind I thought it best to begin with a blank slate: Confoundations. Con-found-ations. Confound-ations. Con-foundations. In my mind it paints a funny picture of a bemused little architect who, being completely oblivious as to where to begin, simply begins to dig his foundations. And so will I begin to dig, with no clear picture as to what may come of it. And when it is finished, maybe I can fool everyone and say "Of course. There it is. Just as I planned!"

CHAPTER 1: IN DEFENSE OF MARGINALIA

All artists (or at least all that I know of) equally dread and relish answering that incessant question of “where do your ideas come from”? I believe they dread it because they are very aware that any answer they give will be inadequate to the person asking the question, but more importantly to themselves. And yet they also relish for the opportunity to attempt to describe the indescribable. One of my favorite answers to these kinds of questions comes from Leonard Cohen who, when asked where he gets all the ideas for his songs, replied “if I knew where all my good songs came from I would go there more often”. One might say that this answer contains more wit than actual answering, and yet I believe that it contains a fantastic nugget of truth; that truth being that while the golden shores of genuine creativity are always purposefully sought, they are almost never purposefully found. Rather, it is only after the ship of our initial intent lies battered and broken on the bottom of the sea, that we may find ourselves, quite accidentally, washed upon those illusive shores. With that in mind let me subject myself to my own dismay and delight by attempting to answer the question of where the idea for *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man* came from.

To this day I am baffled as to why I chose to persist in exploring the idea that later became *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man*. Certainly there were other, more well defined ideas; ideas with more substance that were farther down the road and closer to

completion. But the idea for Tall Man was persistent and nagging and eventually succeeded in drawing me into its obscure territory and away from better illumined prospects. And while I am still to this day completely baffled by the evolution of the piece, I can say with some surety from which primordial ooze the play arose. The first appearance of the tall man dates all the way back from the margins of my high school notebooks.

I was, as I believe most all children were, a perpetually distracted high-school student. My participation in school could be accurately described as intense periods of focused daydreaming interrupted by occasional moments of halfhearted attention. Thus the true profit of my time was not shown in my academic notes, but rather in the volumes of doodles and sketches penned in the margins of my notebooks. One of the most reoccurring of these doodles was the image of a tall man with a gaunt face hidden under a wide brimmed hat. He wore a long dark cloak, as I was not yet adept enough to draw detailed appendages, and he leaned heavily against a cane that was always clutched in his left hand. I drew that figure 100 times in a dozen different notebooks and over the years it became like a favorite poem that you write out over and over again simply to remind yourself of it. Looking back now I wonder if the man was tall in the first place because he had to fit it the margins. Had the figure been given full access to the page perhaps he would have ended up being the Strong Man, or the Fat Man or the Perfectly Ordinary Man. But he was confined to the margins and thus the man was fated to be tall and gaunt*.

Eventually, sometime around my senior year of High School, the Tall Man was displaced from my conscious thoughts, but he still lingered in some dark corner of my

mind. The next time he appeared was in my Undergraduate Journal where he reappeared in a dramatically different form. He is in fact so different, an outside observer may object to any kind of connection at all. It is only in the inexplicable web of my own mind where the two are connected. Here he has become far more gruesome and for the first time associated with hanging. Here he has lost his cloak and is covered only by a small rag of a lion-cloth. A bag now has been placed over his head. His neck is bent at an odd angle against the strain of the noose and his feet are only inches from the ground. Below the image in my journal is written a small passage that reads:

“And people would look up and say “Oh what a shame. If only he’d been a bit taller” but in the end he was hung and I can’t help but to think that it could never have been any different”

How much of what would years later become *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man* is contained in this tiny passage. The grim humor, the theme of death and inevitability, the dichotomy of the observers and the narrator; so much of it is there. And it was merely an absent-minded doodle; a simple sketch in aim of nothing. But it persisted in my subconscious mind. It stayed there like an invisible channel or some unseen force propelling the work to its conclusion, like gravity. But why?

I do not know for sure, but I believe this passage and image persisted because of its marginal existence. I have observed an odd phenomenon in my writing; a strange and reoccurring trend where the writing that I return to most often, the writing that sticks the longest and often seems the most true, is writing that was penned in odd places or under strange circumstance. A pair of sentences scratched on the back of a receipt, a napkin that

has been filled to the borders with a section of a scene, note-cards filled out in the dark; these, I have found, are the most evocative and most consistently useful pieces of writing. I collect these odd little pieces and store them in a manila envelope, and whenever I feel stuck on a scene or when a bit of dialogue doesn't sound quite right, I take them out and spread them out on the floor like puzzle pieces. And perhaps it is because they are all different, I mean visually and aesthetically unique, that I can more viscerally recall the moment they were created.

If these words had been documented in the proper place on a page, correctly between the lines, or if they had been written down in the white void of a word document, would they be as evocative? Would they still be as sensitive? Isn't something lost when, in the interested of neat uniformity, we singe off the fraying edges of our work. I believe so. I believe that these unraveling edges are the nerve like fingers that touch on and sometimes even grasp at what is needed and what is missing from the piece. I believe in the value of marginalia and I weep for all the seeds of inspiration that are left to rot simply because they are planted in the "improper place".

CHAPTER 2: THE HANGING OF A VERY TALL MAN

The Stage is completely dark when the golden light blares to life which illuminates the performer. He is standing on a small platform very close to the audience. Besides him on stage there is a grave and a gallows

THE PERFORMER:

When you look at a window, but not quite through

You can see the outside and the inside too

But if you focus on the din of what's coming from within

Or anything else that's beyond it

Then you'll not learn about the things inside and out

Things you learn by just looking upon it.

(A Beat)

It couldn't be done in the usual way

When Amos and Jon hanged the Tall Man today

(A Beat)

We will begin with those who know very little and will end with those who know little more than they. Unfortunate, those who know a lot were not available for comment and the few that know everything about it did not return our calls.

The Performer exits

Amos is hauling himself out of the ditch. His arm appears and he pulls his torso to the surface with considerable effort. It is only after doing this that he finds that he is only a noses' length away from the toes of the dead man. He is perplexed at first. Hanged man's feet do not normally dangle so low. But then his attention is directed specifically to something on the Tall Man's foot...

AMOS:There's an ant on this man's shoe... That is something ...

JONATHAN: (Calling, as if from a considerable distance away) What?!

AMOS:An Ant.On This Man's. Shoe. Do you see the implications of it! On any occasion other than this the only way an ant arrives on a hanged mans shoe is if it rides down with him on the drop, but given the abnormal proximity of this man's shoe to the ground it opens up possibilities. This ant may very well have crawled from the ground onto this man's shoe and may have now only just begun. It's making its way to you now as we speak; the thing just crawled up his pant leg. You have a long way to go my friend...

(Amos inspects the proximity of the Tall Man's feet to the ground)

AMOS:He is dead then you suppose?

JONATHAN: What?

AMOS:DEAD. THEN. YOU. SUPPOSE. QUESTION MARK.

JONATHAN: Yes, well of course he is, what else could he be?

AMOS:Might he be holding his breath?

JONATHAN: Amos you have no idea. The neck breaks on a proper hanging; it isn't a matter of choking

AMOS:Was this a proper hanging then?

JONATHAN: Of course it was...though I admit it was peculiar. I was afraid I would run out of wood building a gallows tall as this...Almost did, had to dismantle the coffin to make the trap door. Shame really...but at the end of it all which would you rather have a trap or a coffin? Coffin is no good without the trap, the man won't be too keen to get in it given he'd still be alive. But a Trap without a coffin works...it's not ideal, but...at the end of the day the man must be hung before anything else. Nothing against your profession Amos, just saying there is an order to such things. You wouldn't see much good in burying a live person would you Amos?...Amos...Amos...Amos!

AMOS:What!?

JONATHAN: What, what?!Why didn't you answer me?!

AMOS:I was holding my breath.

JONATHAN: What in God's name for?

AMOS:Well...Jonathan, are you sure this was a proper hanging? There was very little margin for error. Did you measure him?

JONATHAN: Did I measure him!? I know every dimension of that man! I know his weight, his height, his shoulder width, his collar size...

AMOS: Did you measure him on his Tip Toes Jon?...Jonathan?

JONATHAN: Amos...are his feet touching the ground?

AMOS: Ehhh, well...it's hard to say...they're certainly very close...

JONATHAN: Well even if he is, what then...If the man's neck isn't broken he's surely choked to death by now

AMOS: But then might he be holding his breath; the question has come full round...

JONATHAN: Finish you're hole Amos...We'll give him some time now, just to be sure.

AMOS: Right then (he glances again at the feet of the Tall Man) I wonder how far that ant has made it...

The performer enters again and steps up onto the platform

THE PERFORMER: Now, consider the Ant and THE SMELL OF US.

The performer becomes the ant.

THE ANT: The earth was churned up and on top of itself and then the loud smell of us was gone. The long, thin smell of the path is gone too. The only smell left is this. We are smelling the part of us that is...me for the first time. I smell like us, but I am not us. I am the quiet smell of us...I am the path now too. The old path made by the old us is gone. The new path begins where I begin and ends where I end. And where I walk will

be the new path. Then any path I choose will be the right path, for it will be walked by me...I will go up (he begins to ascend)...The ground of this path smells sweet and warm, like flesh. It doesn't move like flesh, even on its insides....It's insides are very still. The loud smell of open flesh is coming from above me, sweet and wet and warm. Crows are at it, eating. My path is safe. Ants are too small to be bothered by birds. I am not afraid. (Beat. He smells something) There is something moving in this ground...Not the tightening hot movement of flesh....It's the soft an cool movement that only small things make. It smells very quiet too, quieter even than me. Though I know it is actually very loud. It just smells quiet I am so close to it. Perhaps if I were farther away...If I were longer down the path I could look back and smell it all; large and loud as it is. When I am farther away I will understand

The ant continues his journey climbing up. He reaches the top and just as he is about to reach his limit, Jonathan kills the ant with a sudden smash of his palm. The resulting sound causes a commotion from the crows that are beginning to congregate around the hanged body of the Tall Man.

JONATHAN: Amos...you're ant made it...I think...that is to say that I am certain that an ant made it, but I only think it may be your ant... There is more than one you know.(The sound of a crow). These carrion up here are getting rather peckish...He must be dead by now...at least one would hope so. (beat) It's damn embarrassing that's what. A gallows-maker stuck on his own gallows and a grave digger stuck in his own grave...It calls professionalism into question (Jon waves away the crows).

AMOS:I never really consider it to be my grave...you you consider it to be your gallows?

Jonathan: What?!

Amos: Do you consider it to be your gallows?

JONATHAN: Of course it's my gallows...I built it didn't I?

AMOS:Yes, you built it, but it was built for him. It's the gallows of Jonathan, not for Jonathan. If this were the gallows for Jonathan they would not be so tall, ergo Jonathan would not be stuck upon it. But Jonathan is stuck upon it, ergo it is not the gallows for Jonathan. If that were the gallows for Jonathan you would be afforded a rather quick way down, though I doubt you'd be very keen to take it.

JONATHAN: I suppose it's a matter of semantics (He waves away the crows again)...

AMOS:Yes well, all the same, I'd prefer if it were not my grave. It would make being stuck in it all the worse

JONATHAN: Well...If that were the grave for the Tall Man he would be in it. And, given his current condition, The Tall Man would be stuck in it. But the Tall Man is not stuck in the grave, Amos is stuck in the grave. Ergo, the grave is in fact Amos' grave, and not the Tall Man's at all.

AMOS:No...Can't be my grave...it's too deep for me.

JONATHAN: But there-in lies the fallacy...Why a deep grave? The man is Tall! A tall man needs a long grave, not a deep one. A fat man needs a deep grave!

AMOS:And what do you know about it Jonathan. You only send them down to me, I'm the one that needs to find a place for them all. If I bury every poor dead sod lying down comfortably on his back, then what room will be left for you at the end of it, or me for that matter. They'll be done with us and want to put us out of sight like the rest of them, and if there's no room for us in the hide of the earth, it's because this man and those like him were buried without an ounce of foresight.

(A beat)

JONATHAN: Do you bury all my hanged men inverted?

AMOS:No, just the tall ones...

JONATHAN: (Jon shoos away the crows again)...they're getting difficult to handle up here. Soon they'll likely have their way about it.

The Performer enters again bringing with him a blank chalk board.

THE PERFORMER: Consider the Crow and THE IMPOSIBLE TASK OF REMEMBERING IT ALL

The Performer becomes the crow

THE CROW:(During the following lecture the crow constantly and manically takes notation on the chalk board. However, the audience cannot actually see his notes. Effectively the audience is treated only to the excited voice of the crow punctuated by the staccato sound of chalk against black board).

The Ultimate problem is one of space, and there not being enough of it. The human brain is not capable of consciously registering never the less imprinting into permanent memory all of the sensory impute the human organism is exposed to constantly. It is estimated that of the 7.6 to the 127^{th} power bits of entropy that are subconsciously observed and recorded by the human brain, only 6% are consciously observed and recorded. And from that conscious observation only about 2 percent, approximately 30 trillion bits of entropy, are available for conscious recall. However, the entirety of our experience, that first enormous number, 7.6 to the 127 power, IS stored in the memory. But how? It shouldn't be possible. If that amount of data were to be present in a physical object the size of the human brain it would become so dense it would collapse into a black hole. This is not hyperbole or rhetoric, this is fact. The largest amount of information that could theoretically be stored in your head is related to a black hole the size of your head and the entropy of a black hole the size of your head is less than the entropy contained in a perfect human memory. So, that should seem to be the end of it, there is not enough room in the brain to contain all our memories. However, this is only true if you regard the amount of space that memory takes up as only occupying 3 dimensions. If you were to imagine that it were possible for a memory to collapse its size, not by becoming thinner or shorter, but rather by stretching itself out across the 4th dimension of time, then it becomes possible for the brain to contain all of our memories. If scientists allow this 4th dimensional expansion of memory we can then apply Xiangwa's principle of diffusion and calculate that in order to fit in the brain memories would be stretched approximately 7 million years across the space-time. We can observe this theory coming to fruition in Dr. Nelson's notes on macro-temporal partial trajectory

and Zeno's theory of infinite series. Using these two discoveries as the foundation of our inquiry we are able to construct a model of 4 dimensional memory activity, to a certain degree of accuracy. These facts of course can only be calculated to a degree of statistical certainty, not absolute knowledge. In death memory is not beholden to the brain and it has a distinct talent for finding space for itself in the most startling places. But I'm hardly qualified to lecture to this...If you want to know exactly you would have to ask The Tall Man. But I doubt he'll be very interested in talking, I just ate his tongue.

The Performer crosses again to the outside of the screen dragging with him the blackboard used by the crow. For a moment, after it comes out from behind the screen but before it disappears off stage, the audience can see it in all its complexity. The scientific and mathematical phrases written on it appear like another language and it is gone before the audience is given the chance to gain even a slight comprehension of it.

AMOS: Jonathan...Jonathan..Jon...Jonathan.

JONATHAN: I'm trying to think Amos...(Beat) Can you remember?

AMOS: Some.

JONATHAN: What?

AMOS: I don't know...you'd have to be specific.

JONATHAN: Oh. Well then, specifically what do you remember?

(A beat)

AMOS: I remember...My feet on unsteady ground...And around my neck there was a...(he puts his hands to his throat) And then the ground gave way and I was halfway somewhere...No that can't be right, that's not mine...I was never (he looks to his feet)...and I never had a (again a hand to his throat)...It's not mine. I don't know where that memory came from...

JONATHAN: Maybe you dreamed it.

AMOS: No...you remember dreams from behind your eyes...this is tickling the tip of my head, like a memory does...I don't like it.

JONATHAN: Well put it out of your head.

AMOS: Well, it's not so easy is it? How does one forget something he remembers?

JONATHAN: Maybe you should try to remember something you forgot. What have you forgotten?

AMOS:I don't know, I've forgotten it.

(Beat)

JONATHAN: How many men have you buried?

AMOS: Oh, yes that's a good one! I'd completely forgot that. It umm....Well if you count...(again, the hand to his neck) Ah, no it's no good. My memory is all bunched up. I can't remember anything with this tickling.

JONATHAN: Maybe if you asked me the question...

AMOS: How would that help?

JONATHAN: Well it's a matter of perspective. If you are the one who is asked the question, it becomes a problem of remembering, but if you ask the question yourself it is only a matter of thinking, which is an entirely more liberating exercise.

AMOS: Well it's worth a try...(he readies himself)...Jonathan, how many men have I/ 87! Eighty-seven. I've buried 87 men. Well...no, 86 and a half. This grave is dug but it is not yet occupied...leastways not by its intended.

JONATHAN:Excellent Amos, so did it work? Have you forgotten?

AMOS: Forgotten? No, I just remembered: 86 and a half.

JONATHAN: No, I mean have you forgotten about...never mind. That's excellent Amos, 86 and a half...I suppose that means that I've hung 87 in total, no half.

AMOS: I suppose it would be hard to half hang a man...

JONATHAN: Well I wouldn't worry about in Amos. We're always even by the end of the day.

The Performer enters again

THE PERFORMER:Consider the Tall Man and THE DEATH FLIGHT OF MEMORY

The Performer hangs himself

THE TALL MAN: I never felt how much memories hated being in the brain when I was alive. Impossible not to now that I am dead. I could feel their bleary screams stifled with their faces pressed too tightly against one another, suffocating. “Better let them out” I thought “better let them out. And I did. All at once. Wonderful it was. Like finding you can breathe underwater. Like you needn’t worry about it, it’ll all just take care of itself. My young memories rushed out right away. Eager they were, eager. Didn’t like it very much in the hippocampus, not one bit. Weren’t there for very long, not much obligation to stay. Rushed out. One right to my elbow, another to my toe-nail. Oh, my youngest one just dove out from under my left foot. He was so young he didn’t even want to be in me never mind my brain. He’s under me now tickling the hair of the man bellow me in the hole. I can still feel him, like a nerve. Joyful little memory. “Outside’s best” he yells to all the other memories, and they all became quite jealous, all of them, even the old ones. They all are bounding out past my skin now. The one in my elbow is so excited; he just jumped a mile away and landed in the cup of a church bell. He resonated there for a while, causing quite a commotion and giving himself quite a shock. Frightened, he thinks he may have gone too far, but no, I can still feel him. Imagine that...a memory a mile away and I can still feel it...that’s incredible. How far can I feel? All my memories are trying to find out now. There is one between the teeth of a comb very far away...I think he crossed an ocean in the belly of a bird. My youngest one, the one that tickled the man’s hear, is snaking into the earth and my oldest one is going up, up, up, up into air and thinner air, and now nothing and...nothing. I have a new skin...A giant new skin of memories. The old skin, my flesh skin, feels small now. Terribly small... it may even be shrinking, falling into itself. Hard to say for sure, it’s so small. And all the time, the skin

of my memories still expanding. It feels like it is moving slower now, though in fact I know it is flying very fast. It's one of those things you know, like the moon...you know it's falling very fast but it seems to move so slow...my flesh skin is receding. I'm sure of it now. I wonder how small something can get. There is such a distance between my two skins...I can feel myself becoming mostly empty space. (The Tall Man takes a deep breath in and then quickly expels it out in a breathy gasp, his mouth open as wide as he can)

Lights down sound down

END

LIST OF PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

A Ladder- To represent the Gallows

A Panel- To represent the Grave

A Chalk Board

CHAPTER 3: THE FUTURE OF THE PIECE

The Hanging of a Very Tall Man has already seen several subsequent iterations since its debut performance in June of 2016 at the Center for Performance Experiment (CPE). Soon thereafter, it was shown again, mostly unchanged, at The Center for Contemporary Art (CCA). The performance area at the CCA was significantly smaller than at the CPE and therefore mandated several staging changes. For example, because the stage at the CCA was almost totally without depth, the gallows, grave and chalkboard were placed startlingly close to the audience. But as I said, these changes were relatively minor and did not significantly change the essence of the show. The same lines were spoken in much the same way by the same actor. The piece did not truly evolve until the end of that spring semester of 2016.

After that semester, when *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man* was finally done, and all of the props and sets and costumes tucked away, I began work on another piece. Originally, I intended simply to write another independent one-act play. However as I continued to work on it, its tone, atmosphere, and characters began to parallel *Hanging of a Very Tall Man* so neatly that I began to consider this new piece as a kind of companion piece to the original. The two pieces eventually became so entwined that developing one led to edits in the other and vice-versa. By the beginning of the next fall semester I had finished the new piece titled *The Ones Who Drink the Cane Juice* and *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man* had also changed significantly. It retained its original structure, that being

sections of dialogue between Amos and Jonathan interrupted by monologues from outside entities, but a significant amount of content was rearranged and added. What was originally the second and third section of dialogue became combined into one section and an entirely new third section of dialogue was added. Once I felt that both *The Hanging of a Very Tall Man* and *The Ones Who Drink the Cane Juice* were relatively complete, they were shown together, again at the CPE. It was performed with three actors instead of one with two actors playing Amos and Jonathan and a third playing the roles of the Performer, the Ant, the Crow, and the Tall Man. Overall, the production was a success and seemed far closer to my ultimate vision for the piece.

Besides this performance at the CPE, the show has taken one additional step forward. Shortly after the show was done and put away, I submitted it to New York City's Summerfest theater fringe festival. To my delight, both *Hanging of a Very Tall Man* and *The Ones Who Drink the Cane Juice* were both accepted. They are slated to run together as a single piece titled *The Tall Man and the Cane Juice* in mid August of this year.