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The Creation and Reflection of a Solo Show: Corner of 26 and Lost

Margaret McGurn

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE CREATION AND REFLECTION OF A SOLO SHOW:
CORNER OF 26 AND LOST

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Maggie McGurn
B.A., Hope College, 2009
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ABSTRACT

We knew coming into this two-year M.F.A. program in June of 2013 that our thesis would culminate in December of 2014 with the performance of a solo show that we would each write and perform ourselves. So as early as our first summer here, we were encouraged to get the ball rolling with potential ideas. The thought this project was to not only give us practice at devising work, but also put a show in our back pocket. So, when we graduated, we would have a full-fledged show that we could take on the road and perform anywhere with little to no support. This project fostered the idea of sending us out of this program not just as better actors, but also as well-rounded artists capable and experienced at creating work for ourselves that could sustain us in a career riddled with uncertainty. This thesis examines the process I underwent from spitballing ideas, to writing, to rehearsing, to performing, and the effect all of this had on me as an actor and an artist.

INTRODUCTION

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” - T.S Eliot

The following chapters are a reflection of my graduate thesis production at Louisiana State University: the writing, planning, devising, re-working, rehearsing, performing, all the way to reactions to the work and how this work has served in my growth not just as an actor but also as a theatre artist. I will be looking in depth at my solo thesis show, *Corner of 26 and Lost*, and will spend a good amount of time scrutinizing this process on a micro level. These micro level introspections will then allow me to zoom out and examine on a macro level to look at what I have learned about myself as an artist as well as what I have learned about my process to create work that is meaningful to me.

Chapter One will begin with, well, the beginning. I will talk about my initial ideas for the show as well as factors that helped me change course and steer my ideas in different directions. This chapter will also go into the frustrations, inspirations, and revelations that I encountered in my writing process, and it will explore the transition between writing and taking the piece into rehearsal, moving from writer/creator to actor.

Chapter Two contains my actual script and details the changes and evolutions that each vignette in the show experienced throughout the writing and rehearsal process. It expands upon Chapter One’s look at the writing process as a whole, and breaks it down even further to talk about each story in the script.

Chapter Three takes on technical rehearsals, performances, and beyond. I will spend time going through the significant notes I received in this final leg of the journey as well as the final tweaks I made to the script/performance. This will move into audience reactions as well as my

own recreations to the performance. I will conclude this chapter and my paper with a reflection of how this project affected me as an artist, what I would do differently if I could do it all again, and how I will take what I have learned through this process and apply it to my work in the future.

CHAPTER ONE

STARTING OUT

The task was to write a solo performance piece and perform it. This excited me as well as terrified me, because even though I had no idea which stories would actually end up in the fabric of my piece, I knew it was going to be about me. Something very important that I learned through my creative writing classes in undergrad was that, like most people, I write best what I know. What I know best is me. However, the idea of performing a personal piece about myself, especially when I knew it would be about the lost and somewhat dejected parts of myself, was daunting and, well, a bit scary. But it was a story I wanted to write.

We had several check-ins on thesis ideas throughout our first couple semesters; going around the room saying what each of us thought our thesis would be about. My answer was almost always the same: “Ummm, I don’t really know yet. I think it will be about me and that time in life when you don’t really know where you’re going or where you belong, and you have to decide between the connections you’re making and the dreams you have.” It was this answer in varying degrees of vague articulation. I’m sure from the outside, it looked like I had absolutely no clue what form my show would take. That may have been true, but I started messing around with ideas and stories very early on. I learned something about myself in undergrad, and it was only reinforced with this process; I don’t usually like sharing my work until I feel like it is in a good place to be critiqued. In the beginning stages, when I am still wrestling with what I want to say, I don’t like to have too many cooks in the kitchen. It is once I know what I am trying to say and how I want to say it, that I look for outside eyes and perspectives. With this project it was no different. Perhaps I was even more protective of it, because it was so intertwined with what I considered to be the “broken” pieces of myself.

Yes, I wanted it to be about me, about the journey to find where one belongs and the roadblocks that come up along the way. But I wanted it to be more than that. My own personal experiences would be the lens through which the story would be told, but I wanted it to be something completely and undeniably relatable. I spent a lot of time between undergrad and grad school floundering to figure out what direction I wanted to take, and I spent a large amount of time treading water, seemingly unable to make a decision. However, I spent enough time with friends, either talking for hours on aimless drives to help us feel like we were going somewhere or sitting at the bar until far too late into the night, realizing I was not the only one who felt like this. What I was experiencing was something a vast amount of the millennial generation was experiencing. For this reason, I initially thought my show could not be a solo performance. If I wanted to include the connection with others that we stretch or break in order to pursue our dreams, to pounce on long-awaited opportunities, shouldn't my piece literally show that connection? Shouldn't it be a scene instead of a solo? And maybe it could just be a clip of what it felt like to be lost and directionless. Maybe it didn't have to be multiple stories; maybe just one story would be enough to encompass everything I wanted to convey.

Our voice professor at the time, Margaret Kemp, stressed the importance of our projects being solo shows. She showed us clips of different solo performances in order to inspire us, but I remained unswayed. I was desperately clinging to the idea that I needed another person onstage with me; I needed a potent, physical manifestation of the connection I wanted to talk about. Maybe I just wanted the comfort of someone else onstage with me, and I was simply trying to convince myself that it was what my show needed. Either way, Margaret's persistence paid off. One day she showed us Julia Sweeney's solo show, *God Said Ha!* This made something click for me. The show was so simple. It wasn't quite stand-up, but it was funny. It was good storytelling;

it made me laugh, and it also made me cry. She wasn't necessarily doing full-out imitations of the people in her story, but she was imitating them enough that they seemed present in her storytelling. All of a sudden, it dawned on me that just because something was a "one-person" show, didn't mean it had to be crazy, elaborate, abstract, or any of the other notions I had somehow gotten into my head. If I thought of my show as a piece of simple, genuine storytelling, the idea of a solo performance was much less intimidating. The idea of doing a scene started floating out of my head and was soon replaced with coming up with the series of stories that I would weave together and tell alone.

THE WRITING PROCESS

I went back to the drawing board. I started by making lists of events from my life that felt significant to the overall gist of the story I wanted to create. I would then take events from this list and begin to free-write on them. Some I discarded almost immediately. Others I knew were significant, and so I spent multiple writing sessions playing around with the different ways I could write about each one. Sometimes I would just write stream of conscious on a particular idea, like, for example, the incredibly simple actions or moments in life that end up seeming monumental. I wrote many blips describing this, and ended up including a story that showed this sentiment rather than lectured about it.

There were three things I knew I wanted to include almost from the very beginning of the process: the song ("The Burning of Rome") my Great-Grandma would play on the piano during World War II that had become something of a family legacy, my dad telling me at a young age that the Devil lives in the basement of churches, and I wanted to include a story from my job at the call center in Chicago.

When I wrote a story that I felt good about, I would add it to a collection of other “good” stories, until I had a number of stories that I felt were on the right path of the story arc I was attempting to create. In order to end up in the “good” pile, a story had to be specific, emotionally connected, showing rather than telling, and something that contributed to the arc and atmosphere of my show as a whole.

After accumulating a pile of stories, it was time to figure out the order, how they would all fit together. This would then determine the actual structure and format of my piece. Did I want my show to be linear? Episodic? Cyclical? I knew I wanted my show to be episodic. I wanted my stories to move smoothly and easily from one to the other, but I also had no desire for a chronologically structured show. I’m not sure if I had any other reason for this initially except that I find non-linear forms more interesting. As I continued to work on it, I also found that the episodic structure helped to paint the idea that I often jump from thought to thought and memory to memory in a seemingly organized chaotic manner when I am trying to work out something in my head. So, my show was beginning to reflect how I work through things in reality.

Along with being episodic, I also wanted my show to be cyclical, mostly because I love circle stories. They are infinitesimal by their very nature, and therefore usually keep me thinking long after a performance is done. There is also something about them that makes my heart ache in a pleasant kind of way, just thinking about the multitude of outcomes for any given circumstance that then comes around full circle and gets another chance at it. It doesn’t reach an apex, as does a linear line, or fade into oblivion. It will keep rolling forward, changing and evolving with each turn of the wheel.

Putting my stories together in an episodic configuration turned out to be surprisingly pain free. Sometimes I look back on this part of the process, and see it as one of those children’s

puzzles that only have a small number of extremely large pieces, making it very clear where each one fits. Each vignette seemed to fit easily in its own episodic niche in relation to the others. The transitions were a bit rough, but I was saving that headache for later on. What wasn't working was the circle aspect of my story. This was bumming me out. Making my piece into a circle story started feeling like fitting a square peg into a round hole. I began wondering if I needed to give up this desire in order to better serve other aspects of my story that seemed to suffer under a cyclical vision.

The main suffering aspect was the song, "The Burning of Rome", which I absolutely had to include in my piece. As much as it would break my heart to give up my cyclical ideal, I could not give up this song. But it was becoming a problem. Instead of being the heart of the piece, the thing tying everything together, it seemed to be in opposition with everything. I didn't know what to do with it. It felt like a forced and disjointed thread in my show, when what I wanted was for it to be seamlessly woven in. It didn't help that I was having a very difficult time writing the section that explained its significance to my family and me. I have never met my Great-Grandma, and for all the meaning that the song holds, I don't know much about her other than her piano playing. This jolted me into an expository narrative mode. I felt like I was dictating something at my audience instead of showing the effect it had on me. I was striving for a showing rather than telling in all of my vignettes.

At this time, I had a thesis playlist. It was made up of songs that spoke to me either because they were directly linked with some of the stories I was telling, or because they so accurately tuned into the atmosphere and quality of my show. I listened to these songs as I wrote, and I planned on having some of them be the transition between tales, as that was a headache I was still heartily trying to relieve. However, as inspiring as these songs were, they were also

creating tension in my piece. It was as if they were trying to overthrow or displace “The Burning of Rome”. The answer was probably so simple, why couldn’t I see it?

Now I was in the thick of finishing my writing, and I had gotten myself caught in the brush. Not only were the songs warring amongst themselves, I couldn’t figure out a solution to my dream of a circle story. I also wasn’t satisfied with my beginning or my ending. The beginning was too contrived and expository, explaining the story of my Great-Grandma, when the rest of my stories seemed much more flushed out, specific, and alive. The end just seemed too easily wrapped up, and something was ringing false about it. It made it seem like I had everything neatly figured out and that getting accepted to grad school was the answer to all my problems, as opposed to looking at it from a larger perspective, knowing that our journeys of self-discovery are long and usually never-ending. Again, the answer was probably so simple, why couldn’t I see it?

At this point, I was more than ready for another cook in the kitchen. I needed a fresh perspective. I had gotten some incredibly helpful feedback from George Judy, our acting professor, and from the colleagues in my thesis group when we read our scripts for each other a couple times over the course of the semester. Their perspectives had been beneficial in redirecting some of my wayward thoughts during the process, but now was the time that just one, timely insightful thought could be the thing that shifted the balance, causing everything to fall into place. The missing puzzle piece that would straighten out the kinks and fill in the gaps.

During a tutorial with Nick Erickson, our movement professor, I explained my script to him since he hadn’t yet read it. This ended up being incredibly advantageous since I was unconsciously relaying the pieces of my script that I felt were most important. When I was done talking over the basics of my show, he said, “It sounds like you are asking a lot of questions

without providing any answers.” Yeah, that was true, but I didn’t feel like I had the answers to the questions I was asking. He asked me what the most important question was that I was trying to answer with my show; I thought about it for a moment, not quite sure if I knew the answer and feeling dismayed that I still hadn’t narrowed it down. Correctly interpreting my silence as doubt, he said, “From what you’ve told me, it sounds like, at the heart of it, the real question you are trying to answer is what do you do with this song in your life.” I thought for a second. Yes, that was exactly it. I had been looking at the song for so long as simply a problem in my writing, not realizing that it was a problem in my writing, because I didn’t know what to do with the song in my life anymore. So, if “The Burning of Rome” became the vehicle through which I was trying to answer all my other questions, because the song was my release, I didn’t need all those other song transitions. I needed to be working through the song just as I was working through the stories of my life. They were one and the same. Instead of trying to make them two separate things, I just needed to merge them together. All of a sudden the circle story I had wanted came to life. I started the show by sitting in my car trying to solve the question of the song and me playing it, and whether or not it could live up to my Great-Grandma playing it, and that transitioned into why I played it and the things from which I was trying to escape. At the end, I come back to the same place, sitting in my car, but with a new conclusion about how I felt about the song. By embracing the enigma of the song and the conundrum of where to put it, by not ignoring its persistence not to fit, it became the last puzzle piece that fit perfectly.

GETTING INTO REHEARSALS

Not long after I solved my circle story dilemma, changed the transitions to playing pieces of “The Burning of Rome”, and re-wrote the beginning and end to my satisfaction, I also changed up my idea for a set layout. I had originally thought to have my set arranged in a semi-

circle, having an “apartment” section, a “car” section, the piano section, a “bar” section, and a “work” section. The idea being that I would move between these different locations depending on the specific vignette I was telling at the time. This had been the idea when I was only going to play the piano once, when I played “The Burning of Rome” at the end. But now that the song had become an intricate and interwoven piece of the story, and I was playing sections of the song throughout my show, it seemed like a lot of unnecessary traffic to move around a horseshoe type configuration. It felt more and more confining and overly literal every time I thought about it.

One night, as I was mulling it over (wine may or may not have been involved), it occurred to me that I didn’t need a set. I didn’t need literal stations for each story. All I needed was a baby grand piano. The only time I would sit at it like a piano was when I was actually playing, otherwise I could turn it into everything else I needed. I would sit on top of it, with the piano bench as a foot rest for when I was in my car, I would use the corner of it for my call center desk, I would sit on top of it for my apartment, I would use the straight edge of it as a bar. Yes, a baby grand had everything I needed, and it made my show much more simple and yet symbolic at the same time. In the midst of figuring out this song, there was a sense that I was trapped in a circle, trapped in feeling lost, trapped in my release not being a release any more, but not knowing how to break free of it and find something else. The song had become my security blanket, even if it wasn’t truly providing the release it once had; so there would be a sense in the physical nature of my show that I couldn’t escape the piano, I was still clinging on to it until it became part of feeling stuck, until I was forced to look at it in a new way and forced to let go of it.

For me, this new idea of staging everything on and around a piano was the beginning of answering George Judy’s question of, “how will you make the transition from a creative writing

piece to a theatrical event?” The ideas I had for using the piano opened up options for movement that were not simply walking from point A to point B. Instead, my movements into positions around the piano would help paint my story and reinforce the idea that I felt there was no escape. I also had a section where I would dance as if with a partner. This would be the only time, aside from the end, that I would move away from the piano. It would be as though this other song, being played for me, just might pull me out of my lost continuum. Presenting the possibility that this relationship would be the answer, since the show became about searching for answers, searching for the thing that would break the cycle. But the dance would lead me right back to the piano, holding on for dear life, with the realization that the relationship was not the answer.

I sent my script to a friend of mine who I was confident would give me some great insights from script analysis and directorial standpoints. In his notes back to me, he brought up an interesting question: what makes me play piano during certain transitions and not play during other transitions? I had not thought about this, but it was incredibly important for me to consider as I went into the rehearsal room. It would be another factor in my show’s evolution from a creative writing piece to a theatrical solo performance.

As I went into the rehearsal room, I found rehearsing alone to be much harder than I had expected. What did things look like? I had just done something I liked, but what was it again? That felt awkward; did it look awkward? So many questions came up that I had no answers to, because they required an outside eye. It didn’t help that with so many one-person shows rehearsing at the same time, we all had to share Studio Theatre time. Meaning that, most of the time, I wasn’t in the actual space with the actual piano. I snuck into the dance studio one day to play around with the piano in there and found that it was facing the mirrored wall. This should have been a solution to all my questions about what my show looked like, but since this was the

first time I had really gotten a chance to play around with a real piano, staring at myself while doing it got me completely flustered. As opposed to giving myself the freedom to explore seemingly silly choices and make mistakes, I found myself feeling pressured to have everything look good the first time. So, it was hard not knowing what things looked liked, but performing it in front of a mirror was torturous and destroyed all inklings of creativity. I started to find that when I was scheduled in rooms other than the Studio, I usually resorted to rehearsing in my apartment; there wasn't much difference where I rehearsed if I didn't have a baby grand at my disposal.

It was a bit weird when, drawing closer to tech week, I did half of my show for one of my colleagues. I felt like a little kid; I shuffled my feet, and embarrassedly said, "Ok, I guess I'll just start then. In a second. Ok, I'll just go ahead and start whenever I'm ready." I got halfway through my show, and stopped, saying, "That's really all I've gotten blocked so far. Did you get bored?" She assured me that she had not gotten bored, but it felt so weird to be just talking at the audience for such a long time (in this case only one person) and not have anyone else onstage with you. I was going to do this for an entire audience? The idea suddenly seemed very real and somewhat alarming.

Whether good or bad, I found myself making a lot of blocking choices cerebrally and then testing them out in the fleeting, wonderful times I got to be in the Studio with the piano. Some of my choices worked quite well, and some I found I had to build upon or change when I was actually in the space physically doing it. From a vocal standpoint, I found it odd to go from rehearsing in my apartment to rehearsing in the Studio Theatre. Obviously, the Studio Theatre is much larger than my apartment, and it required much more sound and support to fill the space. But I had also trained my voice when going through my show to fill my apartment. Suddenly,

being in the Studio made me feel like I had to push and strain my voice to be heard, so I had some support issues to work out.

With all of these things to consider: did my writing make sense? Was there anything that I needed to change/omit/add to? Should I move here on this line? What section of the song should I put here? Should I not play here? Maybe I should just touch the keys here? It was hard to step out of writer/director mode and slip into actor mode. Interesting that a show I wrote about myself should feel so foreign in my mouth. But at the point when my writing was done and my show was mostly blocked, I realized I had distanced myself from my own personal stories in order to write them theatrically, revise them, cut them, and build on them. Now I needed to learn to make them specific and emotional to me all over again? This was not something I had anticipated.

George Judy worked with me on keeping the energy flowing through each story, prompting me to think about what was spurring me from one story to the next. This is when little words or one liners were added to help the audience stay with me through these transitions as well as to help link my energy and the thread of the conflict through each new vignette. We also went through and cleaned up sections like the call center, so that my physical actions of being on the phone were more concise. This led us into playing with how energy would live in my body in the call center environment, pulling me up into a tense and tightly wound posture. This would play in opposition to my ex-boyfriend's laid back, relaxed posture that I would find in the next story. There were also sections that we added movements to make things more specific, like creeping around the piano looking for the Devil in the basement. Instead of staying on the same level, we played with me crouching down to peek around the corner before racing back to my

dad. These were all things that helped me back on my path to finding the specificity in my own stories and allowing them to live fully in my body.

The dance section I mentioned earlier ended up being an especially tricky section for me. During my first tech rehearsal, when I ran it for the first time with my sound cue, I just felt silly. All I could think about was how awkward and ridiculous it probably looked for me to be dancing with an imaginary person. After my run, Stacey Cabaj, our voice professor, gave me a note on it. “Really let yourself imagine you are dancing with him. What does he smell like? What does it feel like to have his arms around you? What does his shirt feel like?” I ran the dance section again. It clicked. I stopped feeling stupid; I realized that my default to think, “this must look so ridiculous,” was simply because I hadn’t actually wanted to let myself slip into an emotional state. But that was part of the deal I had struck when deciding to do a show about myself. So, if I wasn’t going to let go and really do it, what was the point? From that moment on, I rarely got through that section without getting emotional, and I actually found this release to be very cathartic.

During my second tech run, I got particularly emotional, and Nick Erickson reminded me not to let myself get caught in the emotion. If it happened, it happened, but my most important job was to tell the story. So, if I needed to take a moment to collect myself, I could take it, but I needed to jump back in and not let the energy sag or the story deflate.

So there began to be an interesting balance to strike between finding the honesty and real emotion in all my stories again and also not letting myself get carried away with that emotion. It was going to affect me, but I needed to remain in control and not get sidetracked.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SCRIPT

Note: Names have been changed to protect identities, and I have numbered each vignette to make the next section about script evolution easier to follow.

Corner of 26 and Lost

(Lights come up on a baby grand piano. I'm sitting at the piano, playing the octave run I can never get right. Try a few times, get frustrated, and close the piano lid. Get into car position.)

1.

I'm sitting in my car, looking out over the bay, trying to make a huge life decision, waiting for some kind of epiphany. But all that keeps coming to mind is, "Maggie, you're not a very good piano player. Not bad, just not very good." What the hell does that have to do with anything? I mean, ok, I had just pounded out my frustration on the piano before taking off for a drive, and yeah, it hadn't been my best rendition of the song. Ok yeah, I don't count, I usually play too fast, I'm sloppy. But that all seems irrelevant to the decision at hand, which has nothing to do with playing piano. But, for some reason, my mind keeps coming back to the song: "The Burning of Rome". She would have been meticulous, precise, deliberate with it. At least that's what I imagine. It was her song after all. My Great-Grandma Perry. She played it during World War II for her four sons all serving overseas. She would line up their portraits on the piano and play the song to their pictures. And they all came home alive. She taught my mom to play piano, and even though it was never explicitly said, I always knew that I took lessons so that I could learn this song. Over the years, playing the song became my release, my little slice of control, but this last time it had felt hollow. It hadn't really helped. It had helped when I worked at a call center in Chicago. That had been a year ago. It had helped release frustration then. *(Thinks)* kind of . . .

(Start playing first few bars “the chariots dash to position” at “it had helped when I worked at . . .” Do a little glissando while walking to call center place. Should be in place by the time I say, “hi.”)

2.

“Hi, I’m calling from Connected Highways Human Resources, is Walter there, please?
Hi, Walter how are you? Good, good. I’m calling from Connected Highways. Connected Highways. Yes, I’m calling about the car hauling position you were interested in. I just wanted to let you know that we have not received your application and background release form yet, and we cannot proceed with your file until we receive those from you. You did? It doesn’t look like we received them. Well, sometimes – Yes, but sometimes – Yes, we have been leaving a lot of messages, because we haven’t been able to get a hold of you. No need to get upset, we can figure this out. What? I’m sorry what? You’re NOT Walter? You told me you were Walter at the beginning of this conversation, sir. Ok, ok, alright, well can I please leave a message for Walter then? Hello? Hello? . . . Not today. Not on the last call of the day. *(Dials again, phone rings once and goes right to Walter’s voicemail)* Hi, I’m calling from Connected Highways Human Resources. This message is for Walter. If you are still interested in the car hauling position, please send us your application and background release form as soon as possible. If you are not interested in the position, please give us a call back and we will remove you from consideration, thank you *(hang up)*. Asshole! *(Realize I haven’t successfully hung up, and violently hang up)*. Shit!”

(Come around front of piano, plunking keys as I walk.)

3.

I go home to my little studio apartment, walk in the door, and there’s my ex-boyfriend, Kyle, sitting on the couch. He slept on the pullout the night before as he does frequently, and he

is still here. I look at him, “Kyle, how do you get away with not going to work? How do you not get fired?” “How do you know I didn’t go to work today?” “Because we work at the same place, and you don’t have keys to my apartment, and yet you are here.” “You look stressed, are you ok?” (*Laugh, almost manic like*). “Stressed? I talked to 200 truck drivers today, some of them yelled at me, most of them hung up on me, and I also mined for resumes on careerbuilder, and the best one I found wasn’t even a resume, it was a soup recipe. Oh, and now we have to clock out to go to the bathroom!” He stares at me for a moment, and then tells me he is taking me to Flub a Dub Chub’s, our favorite hot dog place. “No, we can’t go to Flubs, we’ve been there three times this week already.” But a Chicago dog . . .mmm! So we walk down the street, Kyle puts in our order at Flubs, I go next door to Murphy’s, grab a Guinness and a Corona, stake our claim on the sidewalk patio, and Kyle comes back with our food, chuckling. “What?” “The woman behind the counter asked when I was going to make an honest woman out of you.” “Ha! Did you tell her we aren’t even dating anymore?” “No, she already has our order written down by the register under the Morsoe’s.” “Oh God.”

(Play first part of “Alarm bells ring”. Then go around SL side of piano.)

4.

I had started feeling like my life was just a strange phase of limbo, and if I didn’t break the cycle and get away as soon as possible, it would just eat me alive or generate a centrifugal force that would suck me down a black hole of complacency and suppressed anger. This had been my second time living in Chicago, and it hadn't gone any better than the first time. So what do I do? (*Sink down SR side of piano, to the floor, crushing a few keys on the way down.*) Move home to Traverse City, Michigan with my tail between my legs. Hardly a step forward.

I had thought love would be the answer; I thought it would be different, and somehow I still had hope that it could be. Somewhere under all my cynicism and sarcasm and realism, which I only slightly blame on the fact that my mom used to sing me Joni Mitchell songs as lullabies when I was a child. I had a very idealistic, optimistic outlook on love. I wanted something magical, I didn't want to settle for anything mediocre, in any aspect of life really, but especially love, what was the point if it wasn't going to be all-consuming, passionate, and something that made you feel alive? And I wanted someone with both feet in.

So naturally, I fell into a relationship with a guy, Jamie, who was just as lost and confused as I was. We had been in and out of each other's lives for a few years now, and even though the timing was terrible, because we were both trapped in our hometown, desperately looking for a way out, we also couldn't help but date, we called it "figuring things out", because that would make things less complicated if one of us got an opportunity and had to pick up and leave at any moment? Problem was, I fell for him, hard . . . Maybe I'm just too trusting. Or gullible.

(Just play the right hand slowly of "The Race." Plunk it out like a kid learning piano.)

5.

When I was seven, my brother and I took piano lessons at Trinity Lutheran Church. My brother always went first, because he is older. So my dad and I would sit in the lobby for a half hour before it was my turn, and I would think about how I hadn't practiced "A Tisket A Tasket" or "Yankee Doodle Dandy" quite enough that week. One particular week, my dad turned to me, and said, "You know the Devil lives in the basement of churches. In fact, he lives in the basement of this church." He nodded toward the stairs going down to the basement. *(Look at the stairs, look back at dad)* "Nooooo." "Yesss." I looked back at the stairs, and he gave me a small

nudge in the arm, as though he were pointing out the hidden Christmas present under the tree that might be my Red Rider bee-bee gun, except this was the Devil we were talking about. And, of course, I was curious, though I didn't even think to ask why the Devil had chosen Trinity Lutheran's basement. I wanted to know if he really had horns and a forked tail. I snuck over to the staircase, looking back at my dad one more time for reassurance. Maybe I shouldn't be seeking out Satan? What would mom say about this? But he gave me an encouraging nod. So I kept going. I made it to the landing, just one more set of steps to go before I reached Lucifer's Lair. I peaked around the corner of the landing, maybe that would be enough to just catch a glimpse. The red exit sign cast an eerie red glow on the bottom of the stairs. It was dark down there; it was always dark down there! What if he was waiting around the corner at the bottom to grab me? I descended one more step, thought I heard a creak, and bolted back to my dad. "Did you see him?" (*Shake head "no" violently*) "I think he is hiding behind the door." "Hmmm, maybe, maybe." This went on for about a year . . . or two. Years later, it was obvious to me that my dad had just been amusing himself, but the idea of the devil in the basement always kind of stuck with me. Wasn't that true in life? Events, things people say, seemingly little things that have an effect on you, build up, but always lurk beneath the surface, in the basements of our minds, whispering in a devilish way that we're not good enough. Just. Not. Good. Enough.

(*Go around SL side of piano; hop up on top of piano.*)

6.

When I graduated from college, there were a number of devils in my basement. And I was having a hard time figuring out how to drive them out. I made my first move to Chicago the fall after graduation, and I didn't have a piano to take out my frustration on. So, I spent a lot of time eating sticky rice, watching *Top Chef* and re-runs of *Ugly Betty*, drinking my roommate's

left over Summer Shandy Leinenkugel's for lunch, and eating my tears for dessert. I spent hours on Craigslist trying to convince myself that being a receptionist at a Law firm was everything I had ever wanted. I tried my hand at art projects, painting. I found myself painting a lot of trees and making a lot of birds out of cut up magazines like *National Geographic Traveler*, their wings were made of pictures of places I had never been. I hoped I would find myself in my art, I hoped I would have a sudden jolt of realization, one day I would just stare into the paint and I would say, "Oh, there you are!" But that didn't happen, instead I stared into my art, was disappointed I couldn't do better, and all I saw were birds and trees, which told me that I had no idea what the fuck I wanted. So I wanted to fly away, get away to anywhere and everywhere that wasn't where I presently was, and I also wanted to be grounded and rooted. Great. Awesome start to my journey of self-discovery.

(Slip off SR side of piano, move around the back, grab stool and bring it back to SR side on "Uvula of Old Mission Peninsula". Sit on stool.)

7.

But here I was, stuck in Traverse City for the second time since graduating, falling in love with someone I knew I couldn't keep. My hometown is shaped like a throat, two scooping bays partially separated by the uvula of Old mission Peninsula. It is beautiful, it will draw you in, and it will swallow you whole. At least that's what seemed to be happening to all of us quarter life crisis 80's and 90's babies who had been born and raised here. We tried to escape and some of us were even successful for a while, and we would tell stories about our adventures in far off lands like Chicago and Boston as though we were sailors who had explored the New World. We met in the bars on most nights of the week, veterans of the recession, spending our minimum

wage paychecks more on drinks than anything else, because what did we have to go home to, a refurbished garden shed in our parent's back yard? An attic room with no door? (*Pour shot of whiskey.*)

About once every other week or so, Jamie would forgo the beer and hit the whiskey on the rocks. Whiskey had a revolutionary effect on him, an almost William Wallace rallying the troops effect. Recruiting all us lost souls. He would make great, if not flawed, passionate speeches: (*Stand on top of piano for this*) "The previous generations have fucked us all over, they have all but committed infanticide on our hopes, dreams, and futures, and in retribution we should go burn down and destroy all the Baby Boomer summer homes on the rich peninsula that are currently under construction. Because they cannot take our freedom!" And I would say: "Uhhh, is that really going to solve the problem? Will burning down summer homes allow us to have retirement funds and stop us from doing unpaid internships and working five shitty jobs at one time?" He would look at me very intensely, and say, "Infanticide, Maggie, Infanticide!"

By the end of the night, after far too many drinks and more than a few blazing debates, I would watch the fire in him die down to embers, and I'd see in his face something very familiar: that desperate, exhausted, and seemingly hopeless need to find a place and a purpose in the world and just be able to pursue it. He wasn't really going to burn down and destroy incubating summer homes. He just wanted to be seen, he just wanted to feel something other than anger, and on that, we couldn't have agreed more.

(Bring the whiskey to the piano. Think about playing, but go for the whiskey instead. Cheers. Take a "shot". Then wipe down piano and put away whiskey as I talk about working at a microbrewery.)

8.

It was on nights like that, that I would think back to the summer that he and I first started hanging out. It was the first summer after I graduated undergrad, and I was working at a microbrewery in town before moving to Chicago. He came in one night and sat at the end of the bar. We'd actually gone to high school together. We'd really only been glorified acquaintances, but we struck up a conversation as though we were old friends just picking up where we had left off. So, we decided to grab a drink after I got off work. We got one drink and spent the rest of the night just wandering around the neighborhoods of Traverse City, talking, laughing, and discussing the things we were passionate about. At this time, he had an infectious, optimistic fire in him that I desperately needed, and I started feeling passionate about all those things again without bitterness. So, by the end of the night, we had grand plans that didn't seem out of reach, and if they were, we didn't fuckin' care! He was going to be a famous archeologist, and I was going to be the first woman in the Blue Man Group. Over the next couple weeks, we hung out a lot, and it was always easy, fun, and spontaneous. One night we were coming out of a climbing gym, and this huge storm was rolling in. I love storms, and I really wanted to watch it. (*Get into car position from start, except now in "passenger seat".*) So we drove out onto the uvula of Old Mission Peninsula, down Center Road which cuts the peninsula in two with rolling hills of orchards and vineyards that dip into West Bay on this side and East Bay on this side. And over East Bay there was an enormous, black ominous cloud eating up the city, and every now and then a flash of lightening would illuminate the shoreline. And over West Bay, the sun was setting behind these gigantic, fluffy clouds that had turned gold from the sun with an underlay of violet against a crazy, deep blue sky. And every now and then a sunbeam would shoot between these clouds and get swallowed up by the black mass over East Bay. So it was sunny and it was raining

and it was thundering and it was lightening. It was violent, and it was beautiful. And we were just driving. And all of a sudden James Taylor came on the radio, and I started singing along (“*Fire and Rain*”. *sing a piece of it*). Jamie was singing along too, he didn't know all the words, but he was trying. Then, just as natural as can be, he reached over and took my hand. Such a simple gesture, but it was everything I hadn't even known I needed in that moment. And in that moment, it suddenly didn't matter that I had no idea where I was going with my life, it didn't matter that I had recently had my heart broken, and it didn't matter that I wasn't sure if I had what it took to follow my dreams. Because in that moment, with James Taylor on the radio, this huge storm around us, and his hand in mine, everything felt like it was going to be ok. I looked at him and smiled, and he looked at me and smiled.

(Play portion of the prayer section from song. Then go around SL side of piano to sit on top of it.)

9.

But that had been years ago, and as much as I desperately wished I could be the one to reignite that optimistic fire in him, here I was in my parents’ attic working on another art project, and once again it was full of birds and trees. It was like I didn’t know anything else existed. And I had my melancholy music playing on repeat like an angsty teenager. My mom came up, and knocked on the side of the staircase, because I didn’t have a door. I paused my music and looked up at her. She had that look about her that she gets when she is about to broach a potentially touchy subject. “Maggie. Honey. I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently. And I was just wondering if maybe you would you like to go see someone? Like therapy?” “Why, do I seem unstable?” Her eyes scan the painted trees and the cut up birds. “No . . . you just seem so *unhappy*.” I wasn’t upset with her, I was actually grateful that she had asked. However, then she continued. “I understand how hard this is for you.” A very well meaning statement. I’m not

proud to say that I lost my cool here, something that had probably been building up in me for a while, just churning around inside me like volcanic word vomit, and she just happened to be the unfortunate recipient. “Do you, mom? Do you understand what it is like to be 26 years old, living in your parent’s attic with no door, and no idea where you are going with your life, desperately wishing you did? To live paycheck by paycheck at a job that barely gives you any shifts, and spending most of your time at an internship that can’t pay you at all. Dating someone who currently lives in a garden shed in his parent’s backyard and who will be moving in a few months to the Alaskan arctic! You don’t understand. You were married, living in this house, and settled into your well-paying, dream career at 25, and I have no idea where I belong and very soon I will have no one to figure it out with. I realize that I am a complete and utter disappointment, but if I had any idea how to change it, I would do that . . . I’m sorry.”

(Slip off SL side of piano, and come back to the piano bench as I say the next line.)

10.

I went downstairs and tried to take out the rest of my frustration on the piano. *(Start playing song from the beginning, but stop myself.)*

Would my Great-Grandma turn over in her grave because the song she had played for her four sons risking their lives overseas was now being played by her great-granddaughter just because she was lost and confused?

Was it fair to yell at my mom for not understanding, when her generation had lived through Vietnam and had actually stood for something outside of themselves?

What right did I have to feel downtrodden and trapped? What was my generation? The selfish generation? The entitled generation? The generation that walks through the doors opened by other generations? Who grew up being told that we can and should be whatever we want to be,

that we should follow our dreams, do what we love, but then get indignant, angry, bitter, and lost when we realize that sometimes the world just doesn't make room for that.

(Put fingers on the keys to play. Hesitate. Sink fingers down slowly, as if to play a chord, but no sound comes out. Then get up and go to SL side of piano. Work your way around the piano during this section, ending up on the SR side of piano by the time I say, "And I thought of Jamie.")

11.

A few weeks later, I receive an e-mail that could not have been more unexpected in response to the late audition video I had sent to LSU's MFA program. All it said was: "Maggie, if you haven't made any graduate school plans, we should talk ASAP. Nick."

(Dazed, then jumping and dancing around with excitement). I didn't know what that meant exactly. But if it meant what I thought it meant, I didn't have to be a lost cause anymore. This was my dream that I never actually thought was going to happen!

The next day, I found out I *was* actually being offered a spot in the program, and that if I accepted, I had two weeks to get everything in order and move down to Baton Rouge . .

.Louisiana. Other thoughts started setting in: my parents trying to dissuade me on the grounds of the debt I would accrue, and let's face it, they never liked the idea of me pursuing acting. And I thought of Jamie. Yes, he was moving to Alaska in the fall to get his PhD, on his way to becoming a famous archeologist, he had been offered his dream as well. And it had never been the plan for me to go with him. It had certainly never been the plan for him to give that up. But to say goodbye in 2 weeks? I wasn't sure I was ready for that. Suddenly, all I could think about was a night we had spent together just a few months before, when neither one of us had had any idea what the future held. He had been house sitting. It was a snowy afternoon; we spent the entire day curled up by the wood stove like a couple of cats, reading, occasionally talking, but mostly just soaking up the fact that we had a whole house to ourselves, that had doors and a bathroom.

As evening rolled in, we started playing music, and he asked, "can I play you a song? It makes me think of you." "Of course." I said, incredibly curious. (*Sound cue: "The Luckiest" by Ben Folds. Dance as though he is there with me. Fade out at 1:30.*) I had my forehead on his shoulder and my fingers entwined in his shirt, foolishly hoping that if I just held on tight enough, I could freeze time. I may have had no idea at the time that within months, I would move to Baton Rouge and he would move to Fairbanks, but I did know that as much as I wanted to believe that we belonged together, that probably wasn't how it was going to work out. We had dreams to pursue. And every dream, it seems, comes with a price.

(*Sit on piano bench, facing the audience.*)

12.

Here was the other problem: I had spent so many years letting the devils in my basement get the best of me, convincing me that I wasn't good enough. I didn't know how to believe I was good enough. All of a sudden having my dream seemingly handed to me was absolutely terrifying. For years, I had been working under the notion that I would hypothetically cross paths with my dream, hypothetically be able to pursue it, and hypothetically succeed at it. But when you are actually staring your dream in the face, the possibility of failure becomes very real. And if I failed at my dream, I honestly believed I would have nothing left. Which is probably why I had pretended for so long to want something else. I pounded on the piano for a while and then went for a drive, and I waited for some kind of an epiphany, someone to save me. I wanted that.

(*Be sitting on piano in "car" position by this line.*) Why did I want that? This was ridiculous!

What did I even need saving from? Having my dream offered to me? Finally having a direction in my life? I pulled over. Here I am sitting in my car, looking out over the bay, trying to make a huge life decision, but all that keeps coming to mind is, "Maggie, you're not a very good piano

player. Not bad, just not very good.” What the hell does that have to do with anything? I called Jamie, hoping he would, I don't know. Sit with me. Take my hand in his. Make me feel like everything would be ok. But he had skipped town to clear his head. So it's just me and this song that I keep coming back to. And the more I think about it, the more I think of not just how she would have been meticulous, precise, and deliberate, but *why* she would have been meticulous, precise, and deliberate. And then it hits me, that unlike me, who does actually have control over being lost and confused as much as I may not believe that I do, she had absolutely no control over what happened to her sons. Her only source of control at that time was playing this song, and playing it well. It was her prayer, her cry, her sanity. So that she could get up from the piano bench, turn around, and be the rock for her family that she needed to be. And I think about my Grandpa's face when he asks me to play this song. The only time I have ever seen tears roll down his face. Because he knows this song was for him and his brothers. No matter how irrational it may sound, this song is what brought them home. That is what it has come to mean in my family. It is sacred; it is bigger than one person. (*Set pictures of Grandpa and his brothers on the piano, and put Great-Grandma's picture up last.*) This is for them, for her. (*Play “The Burning of Rome”.*) That's for her, for them. It is their song. Not mine. And it's time for me to take control of my life, because I can. It's time to move forward.

(Take a step away from the piano, then turn and walk out House Right as lights dim on piano.)

The End.

EVOLUTION OF THE SCRIPT

1.

This opening section about my Great-Grandma was the section that underwent the most changes and rewrites. I felt like it was important to open the story with her, because if the

significance of her playing “The Burning of Rome” was not established very early on, it would not have the impact I wanted it to have.

The initial cracks I took at this section were attempts to bring my Great-Grandma to life. My first real attempt was on May 20, 2014, a time when most of my other stories were fairly close to being finalized. In this pass at the story, I talked about what I knew most about her; she was a strict, no nonsense kind of woman and a beautiful piano player. This was where I worked “The Burning of Rome” into the story. Then I explored the reasons I play piano and wondered if they were the same reasons she played: needing to be in control of something, having a release of frustration, something to focus the mind. I tried again on May 27, not verging much from my first attempt, simply playing around with different ways to say everything I had said on the first go.

I took a fairly large hiatus from this section, not coming back to it again until the beginning of August. This attempt was basically a condensed version of the other two. No new ideas. I took another stab at it in mid-August. Again, it wasn’t terribly different than its predecessors, but this one had more imagery. I painted a more vivid picture of my Great-Grandma, what I imagined she looked like as she played the song, and this flowed more smoothly into the significance of the song, and the reasons I find a release in playing. It was the closest I had come to something I was satisfied with, but it still didn’t hit the mark for me. It felt too distant compared to the rest of the stories. But it was with this version that I began giving up my hope for a circle story, trying to just be content with it and putting my concentration on cleaning up the stories with which I had a deeper connection.

In mid-September, I worked again on revising the beginning. It was probably around the time that I had read my latest draft in our thesis group. George commented that the start didn’t

grab attention; it just didn't feel like the start of the piece. When I got to the middle of the piece and had the explosion at my mom, which led me back to the piano wondering what my Great-Grandma would think of me using this song as my release, that was where she seemed to come alive. I completely agreed with him. So, how could I alter the beginning to be more of an attention grabber, establish her and the song, and bring her to life without having to re-configure my other stories? My solution in mid-September was to stick with the same idea that I had been playing around with, but cut it way down to just a couple sentences only to add a bit more to the middle section that had already seemed more alive. Essentially, I was simply introducing her and the song and adding a line or two that would make a smooth transition into the call center story. I nixed this after I wrote it, and went back to the version I had written in mid-August. I was completely stuck with this section.

After my tutorial with Nick, where we talked about the question I was trying to answer being, "what do I do with this song in my life?" I started having an idea of how to turn my script into a circle story. I had been distancing the song and my Great-Grandma from my other stories, not realizing that my struggle with the song was the same struggle that existed in my other stories. I finally took a new approach at the opening section. The rest of the vignettes were told about me through my eyes, this one needed to follow suit. It was just tricky; it wasn't really about me, it was about my Great-Grandma. So, I had to tell it through a context of a situation I found myself in. This led me to the idea of starting the story where I ended, sitting in my car trying to make a decision about grad school. I didn't want to say the exact decision I was trying to make at the beginning, I just wanted to establish that I was in the midst of making a big life decision. In trying to figure out this decision, my mind turned to the song, something that had always served as a release and source of comfort. I thought about why my Great-Grandma

played it. I had played it before getting in my car, to help clear my mind, but this time it hadn't worked. Why? Finally, with this version I was taking a step in the right direction. The final version of this section was a fine-tuned version of this last idea.

This section taught me that there are endless ways to look at a particular scene or a particular story, and sometimes finding the right match is as easy as rephrasing a question or perspective or coming at it from a slightly different angle. Most importantly, I learned not to let myself get trapped thinking inside the same box again and again.

2.

I knew from the start that I wanted a section about the call center in my show, so as early as September 19, 2013, I made a list of story-worthy memories from my time at that job. When the time came to write that story, I scrolled through the memory blips I had written down. The one I ended up choosing, I chose because it was a simple, short story that I could do without any backstory of the job needed, giving a taste of the job without belaboring it. It simply required me to be on the phone, and it wasn't necessary to hear the person on the other line to get the gist of the conversation. Changes to this story mainly consisted of little tweaks here and there to increase clarity and decrease cluttering details.

The small revisions that I did make to this section came mostly through rehearsals. Working on this section reiterated for me the importance of very specific, clean movement choices. If my movements were sloppy, it would ruin the punch line. I had no phone equipment to work with, so my finger to my ear had to act as a phone, and if my "hanging up" (a smack on the piano) was messy, it would not read at all.

3.

Looking at the process as a whole, the “Kyle” section underwent a decent evolution. As I mentioned in Chapter One, there was a point in time when I was convinced that my show would be a scene rather than a one-person show. This section was derived from the scene I wrote on February 17, 2014.

The majority of change this section saw was in being considerably cut down and redirected, but it also experienced a change in tone. The original scene had its bits of humor, but it ended on a more serious note. Since I had written the scene with the intention of making it a stand-alone piece, it was much more focused on painting a relationship between two stuck, floundering people who think they are present with each other. Really they are either trapped in their own past or their own future. They say they “see” each other, but they really see nothing but their own personal demons. While the “Kyle” section that made it into my script was making a point of being stuck, it was also to the humorous degree of the neighborhood hot dog place practically performing the marriage ceremony for my ex-boyfriend and me by putting our frequent order under the “Morsoe’s”. If I stayed in this routine, I would remain stuck, practically married to someone I wasn’t even dating anymore, working a job that sucked the soul out of me.

The scene had started with me coming home from the call center job, so that fit in perfectly after a story of me at the call center. The two stories ended up together chronologically, but they flow so smoothly from one to the other that the “Kyle” section is almost an extension of the call center section. That is exactly the feel I was going for, creating the atmosphere of routine leading into me feeling trapped.

Similar to the call center piece, this vignette also required clean movements. There was dialogue to deal with, so, as an actor, I had to differentiate between myself and “Kyle”. Writing

the scene this way gave me the opportunity to play with switching quickly from one character to another and the challenge to make that transition clear for the audience.

4.

This section was simply a transition section. I wanted to keep exposition to a minimum, but with an episodic show there were times when it was necessary to make sure everyone would be on the same page with me. I also needed to introduce “Jamie”. I couldn’t introduce him before “Kyle”, but I wanted to introduce him before actually getting into a story about him. If I could get most of my exposition out of the way in a transition, that would give my stories more liberty to jump right into the action.

This transition section was also needed in order to keep the conflict up in the air. So I was working a shitty job in Chicago and apparently engaged to my ex, what was I going to do about that? Move home to nurse my wounds. Why? Because I had thought love would be the answer that would make life make sense, but it wasn’t. I didn’t know where else to turn. And who should I cross paths with while living at home? “Jamie”. Maybe love was still the answer. Then the transition had to get me into the next vignette, which seemingly had nothing to do with Chicago, “Kyle”, “Jamie”, or love. So, why did I keep thinking love was the answer? Why did I fall so hard? Because I’m too trusting and gullible. This would lead into the story about my dad telling me the Devil lives in the church basement.

George Judy was immensely helpful in motivating me to find ways to connect the dots between stories and transitions, and helping me find the one word or phrase I needed to add to would make the conflict flow from one story to the next. This was a huge lesson not just in writing transitions, but acting transitions. It drilled home how essential it is to keep the conflict

in the air; transitions are not lulls, they are more like bridges, curveballs, or moving sidewalks in airports. They have to expedite you from one part to the next.

5.

The “Devil in the Basement” story was another section I knew from very early on that I wanted to include. Unlike the call center section, I found this one a bit more difficult to write. My early attempts provided too much unnecessary information; I felt like I needed to add a lot of exposition in order for it to make sense. But this would kill the momentum of the show, especially considering that this story was coming after a transition section. In my early attempts, I was giving everything away too quickly. I would start out by saying my dad told me the Devil lives in the basement, instead of building up the scene a bit. Or worse, I had a draft that opened the story with the metaphorical view I now have when I think of the idea of the Devil in the basement. This undercut all the fun in the interaction between my dad and me.

I had to get all these drafts out of the way first. In a lot of ways, they helped me figure out what was most important. In order to write the story well, I had to write it poorly a few times. The final draft of this section clicked into place when I stopped trying to tell it from a distant perspective. I brought myself and the audience back into that moment with me, creating an interaction between me and my dad where I built up to him telling me about the Devil and included me trying to catch a glimpse. Only after I brought the memory back to life did I talk about what the memory now means to me, which then acted as the transition into the next story.

I found with this story something I found with most; not only was it important to show instead of tell with my words, making the stories more simple always helped. Not simple in terms of actual content, but simple in terms of the amount of content. I needed to trust that my

audience would still be with me and might also find more meaning in it than they would if I was beating them over the head with something.

6.

This college section, I'll be honest, I don't really remember writing. I don't have a number of drafts for it. It was one of the rare sections that just happened in a night of writing. I wrote it down as I was thinking about it, changed things here and there as I was working on it, but for the most part I left it as it was when I first worked on it. It sounds like a fluke, but the truth is when I look back on my life after just moving to Chicago, this is what I remember most. I look back on it now and laugh, because it seems so ridiculous. And because I have thought about it before, laughed over it before, and talked about it with friends before, I think somewhere in my mind, I had this section written long before I ever had the need to write it down. It was simply writing it down as truthfully as I have told it to a friend at the bar. I didn't realize this while writing, but my work on this section goes hand in hand with the Meisner idea of working from a truthful point of view, because that is exactly what I was using while writing this vignette.

7.

This section happened similarly to the one above in the sense that it just seemed to want to come out in a way that didn't require much revision. I knew I wanted a section at the bar with friends, a section that made my struggle not just my own but showed that it was one shared by those around me. It was time to bring "Jamie" back into the picture, and the great thing about writing a personal story is that I had a lot of situations at the bar with friends and with "Jamie" from which I could draw. There was something so specific about his tirades when he drank whiskey; they were sometimes funny, but at the same time there was almost always anger and pain behind them with which I completely related. If anything epitomized for me the long nights

spent at the bar with friends disparaging our lost and wandering lives, it was those tirades. I wanted to do it justice, bringing in the humor as well as the heartbreaking quality. As with the section above, this section felt in some ways like it wrote itself.

Having a tirade at this point in my story, spiked the energy, and gave me an opportunity for a rhythm shift. It was important for writer-me to give actor-me a nice range and variety of dynamics throughout the show. Being aware of these kinds of details can be what separates a piece of interesting storytelling from a theatrical performance.

8.

I didn't want my entire show to be about depressing stories, even if some of those depressing stories were told light-heartedly or in a humorous fashion. Also, in order to set up the pain of letting go of a connection with someone in order to escape a directionless cycle, I needed to establish that connection.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, I did some writing sessions where I just wrote stream of conscious about the simple things that then become monumental in their meaning. This story about him reaching over and taking my hand was a perfect example of that. It was a story that showed the impact of small actions without giving the audience an exhaustive lecture about why I felt small actions were so important.

The writing process for this particular section was a bit strange. I have such a vivid memory of this moment with "Jamie". This should have made it incredibly easy, but for some reason, with this particular piece and only this piece, when I told the story orally it came out so much better than when I tried to write it down. This was unusual, because I am usually so much better at articulating myself through writing. Every time I said it out loud it was a little bit

different, but it was organic, raw, spontaneous, and it flowed. I found myself feeling disconnected from it when I tried to write it; it lost some of its life and became flat.

For a while I thought about not writing it down at all, to just have it be whatever version came out of my mouth in performance. I talked to Margaret Kemp about this, and she encouraged me to finalize it into writing; I wouldn't want to leave it to chance during a performance. I agreed, and I found that the more times I said it out loud to myself, the more and more I seemed to be editing it in my head. It became more and more similar each time, until it seemed I had finally decided on a version I liked best. This was the one I wrote down. From there I did some minor revisions, mostly on the beginning of it, which seemed to be the most difficult part of every piece for me. But once again, I realized that simple is often better, and more often than not, especially when it comes to exposition, less is more. There is no reason to make things more complicated than they have to be.

9.

The snap at my mom section. I cringed when I wrote this section, but this show would not have been complete if the conflict didn't build. I mention earlier in the show a "suppressed anger", and I mention in the bar section, "he just wanted to feel something other than anger, and on that we couldn't have agreed more." It only seemed natural that at some point in the show my anger would come out. I'm not actually sure that I consciously planned out this progression of my anger. Truth is, I have a temper, and since that was part of my real journey, it was also going to be part of the show. It wasn't until I finished writing and putting together my whole script that I looked back through it and noticed a lot of recurring imagery of fire, passion, and anger.

I did consciously tie in me working on an art project in the attic when this story begins. It was an image that would harken back to my days in the Chicago apartment, showing that, in my

mind, I hadn't moved forward since then. The outburst at my mom, though based in truth, also needed to address the fact that "Jamie" was leaving town. There was a threat to a very serious connection, and that needed to be established before the actual story came about us going our separate ways.

By the time I got to this outburst section, it was fairly clear what needed to be included. Everything that deviated slightly from what had actually happened in the conversation with my mom needed to be there to tie in a previous story and link to a future story. At this point, it was mostly about filling in the missing pieces and making sure everything connected.

Working on this section taught me that I couldn't shy away from things, especially my truthful point of view. I may have cringed at myself in this story, because I can look back on it now with a rational mind, but in the performance of it, I couldn't apologize for myself and rationalize myself in that moment. It would undercut its meaning and deflate the conflict, defeating the whole purpose and rise to that moment.

10.

What would I do after getting really angry and needing to blow off some steam? I would play piano. This was a perfect opportunity to bring it back around to my Great-Grandma and "The Burning of Rome".

This section was written as a combination of questions I have asked myself in the past. I have wondered before what my Great-Grandma would think of me using this song as a release. These questions when written down in the context of my show, spurred other questions. It really did make me stop and think about why she played. Writing this section helped me formulate what I was trying to say in the opening section. It struck me one day that she was scared. She played because she was scared she would lose her sons. It seemed so obvious. How could I have

not thought about it before? With that simple thought, she suddenly seemed so much more human to me. I couldn't relate to worrying about losing sons, but I could relate to fear. Now she wasn't just a distant relative, I felt closer to her. Looking at it like this made me think, once again, that my reasons for playing the song were trivial compared to her reasons. This incited another topic of interest in me, one that I had touched on in the bar section: the topic of generation. I needed to ask: was what I was feeling a generational thing?

All the sections that dealt with my Great-Grandma were a bit tricky, because I have never met her. But in this question section, I realized I could approach her the way I would approach any character that I was encountering for the first time. Trying to find a way in, a way to empathize with her, and relate to her. Since she is family, and family is something I hold dear, this concept of finding a way in came around full circle to show me that trying to connect with characters on the emotional level the way I would connect with a distant family member or someone very close to me is incredibly helpful in finding a deep and truthful connection to a character.

11.

The biggest evolution that this section went through was the dance sequence. I knew I wanted the dance to be in movement, not explained literally. This was the only section that had a sound cue. The dance sequence happened while the first minute and thirty seconds of "The Luckiest" by Ben Folds played. This was a song that I listened to quite a bit in my writing process. This story about the moment "Jamie" and I had with this song embodied the difficulty I saw in our relationship. The gist of the song as a whole is "we belong together, I can't believe I found you" with the intention of never letting go. However, the evening we had with the song happened before we found out that we were both going to opposite ends of the country to pursue

our dreams. But on that night, it might have seemed plausible for us to end up together. I wanted this story to come late in the sequence of my show in combination with the decision about grad school, so that the audience would see the connection between “Jamie” and me and would also see that it couldn’t work. So the question that begs to be asked is: do you choose love or do you give up your dream, follow someone else’s, and hope to God you don’t resent yourself or that person later in life?

After I decided to cut all the other songs I had once thought of using as transitions, it became a very specific and calculated choice to have “The Luckiest” be the only song played outside of “The Burning of Rome”. I do sing a few measures of “Fire and Rain” by James Taylor in one section, but I sing it, and when I play “The Burning of Rome”, I’m the one playing it. “The Luckiest” is the only song that comes from a source not controlled by me. If “The Burning of Rome” had become another thing to figure out in my life, another tangle, a security blanket keeping me caught in an indeterminate cycle, the “The Luckiest” represented an opportunity, an answer, someone reaching out to pull me away from my own hamster wheel pattern. The dance that accompanied the song mirrored this sentiment; it was the only time that something physically pulled me away from the piano, until I chose to walk away at the end. But this song only pulled me away for that minute and thirty seconds. Then the magic was broken. It is the moment I realize it was never meant to be; we could not belong together, because dreams cost a price. This realization brings me back to my piano, figuring things out on my own.

More than anything with this section, it taught me that I need to trust myself and that there is a beauty to allowing my vulnerability to show.

12.

The last section of my show didn't go through as many transformations as the beginning, but it did make a large shift at the same time the opening section saw its revolutionary change.

Originally, when I was still having difficulties bringing my dream of a circle story to life, the end of my show made getting out of my directionless tale spin much too easy. It wrapped things up with a fairly neat bow, and it made it seem like making the decision to move down to Baton Rouge and go to grad school solved all my problems. I didn't like that it ended on such a neat note, but at the time that I was struggling with the beginning, I wasn't sure how else I could end it. In this version, the story about "The Burning of Rome" didn't really find closure. I simply told the audience what the song meant to me, and then I got up and I played it. In this draft and the one previous to it, I thought about including other songs at the end along with "The Burning of Rome". The first song idea was "Both Sides Now". Since this was a Joni Mitchell song that my mom used to sing to me, it would tie back into an earlier story. In the later draft, I thought of including "Here I Go Again" by Whitesnake, mostly because I like this song and thought it fit well with the moment. However, these songs started to upstage "The Burning of Rome", diminishing the meaning of my Great-Grandma's song. Honestly, had I decided to go with either of these drafts, I may as well have taken out "The Burning of Rome" altogether; it would have gotten lost in the mix and simply been a somewhat poignant side story, when it needed to be exactly what it was: pivotal and at the middle of everything.

When my circle story finally became a reality, new life was breathed into my end section. The point was not that I got into grad school and made the decision to go; what mattered most was the actual making of that decision, the moment when I would break the cycle of being lost, depressed, and trapped. Since the show began with me trying to make this decision but not being

able to get “The Burning of Rome” out of my head, thinking through what playing the song had meant to me in the past, when I came full circle at the end of my show, it allowed for a new perspective on the song. In fact, it demanded that I have a new perspective. Since I had made, “what do I do with this song in my life?” a question that permeated my entire story, it was much more clear to me what needed to be resolved at the end of my show. I needed to find a way out of the rut I had found myself in, and I needed a new frame of mind for this song. Suddenly, the end became much less about the actual trip to grad school. It became more about actively dealing with a family legacy and needing to “give it back”, so to speak, to my Great-Grandma and her sons, before I could completely let go of it. In letting it go, I also found I was able to break the cyclical pattern of being directionless, and I could move forward. Grad school was what I happened to be moving towards, but the real accomplishment was that I had decided to take control of my life.

This seems to be a theme, but my work on this section once again highlighted the effectiveness of simplification. I went from the idea of having two or three songs to having just the most important one. I went from telling about my grad school decision and my trip down the Baton Rouge, to saying “It’s time to move forward.” When I simplified these things, the real meaning, the real emotional connection to my material was right there, because I had gotten to the heart of what I wanted to say and decided to say it without clutter.

CHAPTER THREE

I will start this chapter talking about my experience in the technical rehearsals and the insights that these rehearsals provided me as I moved into the actual performances. This will lead into talking about the performances themselves, the responses I received following, my own reflections on the process, and what I have learned about myself as an artist.

TECH RUNS

I considered the tech runs of my show almost like preview performances. I had very few tech elements, so I was able to run straight through my show, with minimal stopping, for all of my tech rehearsals. Up until this point, I had either been rehearsing on my own or with just one spectator. So, with more people watching my show and giving me feedback, these tech runs provided me with invaluable insight.

FIRST TECH RUN

At my first tech run, I had the stage manager, the lighting designer/light board operator, the soundboard operator, George, and Stacey. The notes I received from George and Stacey after this run led to some of the last remaining tweaks to my show, helping to clean up bits as well as improve overall clarity and specificity.

The dance section, in particular, saw a much needed transformation. Nick had helped me with choreography, but I was still focusing on the technicality of it as opposed to its emotional connection to the story. After a full run of my show, we went back, and George helped me find marks for a few of the dance steps, to bring me into the light and use the space more efficiently. This is where Stacey's note came into play about really imagining "Jamie" there, to think about what it felt like to have his arms around me, etc. Taking these notes to heart, the emotional connection was suddenly right there at my fingertips.

George encouraged me to play with the levels in the Devil in the basement story, to make it seem even more like I was creeping down the stairs to catch a glimpse. Stacey helped me flush out the sections where I embody other people; we spent a bit of time with “Kyle”, my dad, and my mom. She asked me things like, what do these people wear? Do they have a habitual gesture? How would you describe them? How would you describe their voice? What’s something they would always say? These questions often brought something specific to mind that made transitioning into that person much easier and much less intimidating.

Stacey and I also had a conversation about the “The Burning of Rome”. I spend my entire show building up to the moment when I play it. I tease the audience with snippets of it, so that by the time I play it all the way through, they not only recognize pieces of it, they also understand its importance. I created a somewhat inevitable anticipation and expectation for the song as a whole, which is all well and good in the writing process. But when it came down to performance, the playing of the song had my nerves in quite the tangle. When I play piano it is usually just for myself. It is, like I mention in my show, a way for me to release frustration; it is an outlet. So, playing perfectly or going back to fix mistakes is not usually my goal. However, when I play for other people, the need for perfection often kicks in. In the opening section of my piece I compare how I feel about my own piano playing with what I imagine my Great-Grandma’s piano playing was like. I criticize myself, saying, “Maggie, you’re not a very good piano player. Not bad, just not very good.” I originally wrote that line only because I was nervous about playing the song at the end; if I gave myself an out, if I gave the audience a reason to have a low expectation for the quality of my piano playing, maybe they would be pleasantly surprised. Turns out that line fit incredibly well into my show. Here I was consciously writing a show about feeling lost and not good enough, and I had written this line only for a direct purpose in my show not realizing that it

came from a completely truthful point of view. It hit the mark of how I felt about myself in almost every aspect, not just piano playing. It would be interesting to get into the psychology behind that, but I digress. The point of Stacey's comment about playing "The Burning of Rome" was: "you don't have to play it perfectly. It is almost more powerful to watch you struggle through bits of the song and see how that struggle affects you." This was an immensely helpful note, because it helped take my focus off of needing to pay a perfect tribute to my Great-Grandma, my Grandpa, and his brothers. It offered me a new perspective; the whole show is about holding myself back, thinking outside forces are going to save me and get me out of my rut, but what I realize at the end is that I am the only thing that can save me. Struggling through the song shows me confronting my fear of failure in order to break free and take a step forward, knowing that there will be times that I fall, have to get back up again, and keep trying. On a broader spectrum, this note helped remind me that, there is no "perfect" performance for which to strive. Working from a truthful point of view is what makes a performance compelling. Most often it is the human failures and struggles that make a story far more captivating than the successes and seeming "perfections".

George suggested I have a pre-show song. He made the point that with only a piano onstage, it brought with it the expectation of music. In order to channel the audience onto my wavelength, perhaps I should choose the song that would be going through their heads. I felt like he made a strong point, and I spent a few days mulling this over. I even found a song that I strongly considered using: "Nocturne in F Minor, Op. 55, No. 1" by Chopin arranged by Chad Lawson for piano, violin, and cello. I had actually learned "Nocturne in F Minor" for my last piano recital when I was a senior in high school. This particular version, however, has a poignantly beautiful quality. Not only does it include the violin and the cello, but it was also

recorded from inside the piano. So, there is a haunting reverb and you can hear a bit of the inside mechanics of the damper pedal and the piano hammers. I seriously toyed with adding this as my pre-show song, but I continued to debate with myself. There were only three songs in my piece, and they each held significant meaning to me; only one of those songs was a recorded track, and that was for a very distinct reason, as I have mentioned. My entire piece was centered on and around a piano, there were only three songs in the entire show, and only one of those songs was actually played on the piano. A lot of significance was placed not just on music; it was placed on very specific music. When I thought about it this way, I couldn't justify putting a song in my audience's head that did not show back up in my story, especially when I wanted them to have "The Burning of Rome" in their minds. I thought about having a recorded version of "The Burning of Rome" playing as my pre-show, but I felt strongly that the whole song shouldn't be heard until I played it at the end. After a few days of thinking it through, I decided I liked the idea of music only existing in the sphere of my story, as if it were part of what kept me trapped and clinging onto the piano. So, if I were not trapped there, there would be no music. Almost as though music were the pied piper keeping me dancing in this cycle of lost and despondent habits. But it also, in a sense, became the thing that set me free. With this view, I actually liked the idea of the audience having their own song in their head at the beginning as they stared at the piano in a silent studio and having "The Burning of Rome" in their minds at the end as they stare again at a piano in a silent studio.

SECOND TECH RUN

Tech run round two felt even more like a performance. This was the first time that all my colleagues watched my show. Some had more knowledge of it than others, but none of them had seen it at this stage in its development. Along with my colleagues, Nick was also in the audience.

I'll be honest, the beginning of this run for me was fueled by annoyance; as I was about to make my entrance and start my show, I looked out in the audience to see faces lit by phones. It distracted me. The stage manager stopped to ask if I was ready, because I hadn't hit my pool of light yet, which was her cue to bring up the rest of the lights.

It could have been this frustration, along with nerves, that caused this run of my show to be the most emotional yet. The dance sequence affected me much more than usual, and it caught me a bit off guard. The end, right before I sat down to play the song, felt slightly out of my control, emotionally speaking. After my run, Nick gave me a note that, for some reason, took a couple of days to process. When it finally sank in, it was a note that I kept in mind for each of my performances. He told me not to allow myself to get sidetracked by my emotions but also not rely on them to always be there. Whether they were there or not, my most important job was to tell the story. So, if I needed to take a moment to compose myself before continuing, I should let myself to do that, but I couldn't let the emotion derail me or impede my storytelling.

The notes I received from my colleagues were also incredibly helpful, and once again helped to clean up certain moments and make them more specific and meaningful. I had been putting the piano lid down every time I got into my "car" position. This was simply because I was worried about knocking it down in the middle of one of my stories. However, Colt brought up a good point. He said, "it's such a powerful gesture when you close the piano lid at the end before walking offstage. I feel like it would be more powerful if that was the only time you closed it." I agreed with him. It was worth running the risk of knocking it down to have the moment at the end be the only time I closed the lid.

Joe thought I could make the end stronger by taking my time standing up after I play the song. Instead, I could try just turning around on the piano bench and addressing the "it's their

song, not mine” from that position. Standing up only when I get ready to shut the lid and exit. Also, he thought I could bring more joy and positivity to the line, “it’s time to take control of my life, because I can. It’s time to move forward.” Since playing the song is poignant and a bit sad, this would help me end on a more upbeat note.

Tim and Addie (Stacey also mentioned this in the first tech run) brought up the issue of eye line. Out of habit, I had been directing my show just above the audiences’ heads. But that is problematic for a show where I am talking directly to the audience, and they are acting as my scene partner. Tim, Addie, and Stacey thought, and I agreed with them completely, that my show would connect more with my audience if I were looking right at them as opposed to over their heads. This note, however, was a lot more difficult to implement than I anticipated. Over the years, it had been ingrained in me to look just above the audience. Looking right at them seemed a little too personal. I was afraid it would make me feel too vulnerable. I chuckled at myself when I caught myself thinking these things. Here I was, doing a pretty vulnerable piece about myself, and I was afraid that looking right at the audience was a little too personal? It was too late for that; if I wanted to keep a barrier between them and me and not show any weakness, I had written the wrong show. Looking over their heads would only serve to alienate the audience, and what was the point of my show if I didn’t get them to connect and relate to me? So, I worked on lowering my eye line until I was able to level with the audience for the performances.

FINAL TECH

My third and final tech run was at the end of a very long day. By this point, we had all spent about twelve hours in the studio, and my show was second to last on the docket. We were all completely drained and burned out. It felt like I was performing my show to a crowd of

zombies. I can't say this was an enjoyable run for me, because it wasn't, but it served as an incredibly important lesson.

In the midst of this run, I could feel I didn't have everyone's attention. If I did, it was only as much as they could muster at the time. I didn't blame them; it had been a grueling day. But I realized how much I was depending on the audience for their reactions, and when I didn't get any, I immediately became stuck in my head. As soon as this happened, I concentrated more on their experience watching me than I did on telling my story. I became distracted and felt myself dropping the ball and letting my energy drop. "They are supposed to be my scene partner, and they aren't giving me anything," I thought to myself. When I was done, I was incredibly frustrated with myself. As the only one onstage, the story could not exist without me; there is nothing else for them to watch. Even if they give me absolutely nothing, I still have to be present with them. I had to keep things moving, I had to be connected to every part of my story even if they were not. I could not get trapped in my head, or the show would completely fall apart.

As frustrating and unpleasant as that run was, I was thankful for the experience it provided, especially since it occurred during a tech rehearsal and not an actual performance. Now if I had a completely unresponsive audience during performance, heaven forbid, I would be much better equipped to handle it. It also reminded me how important the connection is between an actor and their scene partner. In a solo performance, with no one else onstage, the audience is your scene partner. The absence of a conventional scene partner made me appreciate them all the more, but this absence also helped me become more comfortable making a direct connection with the audience.

PERFORMANCES

The way the thesis performance schedule worked out, there were two performances the first night, three the next, and the final two the night after that. Then we repeated the cycle. My show was one of the final two, so by the time I was having my opening night, everyone but Ashley, who performed right after me, had already performed once. I was incredibly excited for all of my colleagues on their respective opening nights, and I could feel myself getting empathetic butterflies in my stomach. It was so fun to watch everyone's shows and see the audiences' reaction to them. Yes, these were solo shows, but we had all been through vigorous creation processes together. So, it was wonderful to share in the excitement of each other's success. In some ways it felt like a collective success, because we had all taken on the rigorous challenge of putting these pieces together. I felt a sense of community in our frenzy of putting up these shows, and it was so gratifying to see them all come to fruition.

FIRST PERFORMANCE

I'm going to be honest; I have never experienced nerves like that before a show. It was very weird to stand backstage, warming up, knowing that I was about to go out and perform by myself for thirty minutes straight. If I messed up, there would be no one to save the moment but myself.

When "places" was called, I went backstage, stood behind the curtain, and waited. I listened to the audience and tried to calm my breathing. However, instead of calming myself down, I started convincing myself that as soon as I got onstage my mind would go blank. I would forget all my lines and have to call up to the stage manager in the booth, "Can I start again?" I tried again to calm my mind, telling myself to just concentrate on breathing. The lights dimmed,

the audience became quiet, and I realized with a profound flip of my gut that it was time for me to go out there.

I played my first beat on the piano, turned to the audience, went to hop up into my “car position” and slipped on the piano lid, nearly falling off the piano. I caught myself, thankfully, but I heard a collective gasp from the audience. I hadn’t even opened my mouth yet! But I kept in mind the lesson I had learned during that final tech run. I also took into account our Meisner work with Stacey, remembering to work off of what was happening as it was happening. I didn’t allow myself to get stuck in my head; I just went on.

It was strange having an audience after rehearsing on my own for so long, even with the buffer of the tech runs. Like most audiences, they laughed at unexpected as well as expected moments, but it was hard not to be hyper-aware of them. Again, I tried not to get caught up in what the audience was thinking but to do what was most important: tell my story.

When it was over and I got backstage, I was shaking. It was a crazy adrenaline rush. All my nerves that had built up before going onstage, along with the ones I got onstage, and the pure exhilaration of having just held an audience’s attention all by myself for a half hour seemed like a lot for my body to handle. I needed to take a moment to let it go before slipping back into the studio to watch Ashley’s show.

FINAL PERFORMANCE

This performance had me even more racked with nerves. This time I had family in the audience. My parents came from Michigan to see it; I told them both that they were part of my story, but didn’t go into much detail. I had no idea what they would think, but I wanted so desperately for them to love it.

My nerves made me feel like I was going to explode, but this time, standing backstage, I just breathed. Instead of freaking myself out by thinking about my lines, I told myself that I knew the show backwards and forwards. This was my last time to perform it. I just wanted to enjoy it and have fun.

That was a much better mindset to enter the stage with, and this time, I did not slip on the piano. The audience was with me, so I just trusted the connection I felt with them. This made it much easier to lower my eye line. I fed off of their energy, and this made me much more at ease. I tripped up on a couple words here and there, but I didn't let it throw me off. I just kept going. I also got emotional but followed Nick's advice; I took a second to gain control of myself, and then I kept going with my story.

This time when I got offstage, I was shaking and crying a bit. It was very bizarre. I had been in the zone, and it was a rush. I was proud of myself, and that was such a good feeling. There is nothing to hide behind when you are onstage alone, telling a personal story. It is scary as shit, and it was one of the most liberating experiences of my life.

RESPONSES TO PERFORMANCE

My target audience was most specifically my generation and those a little younger than me. I worried that the generations above me would find it obnoxious, entitled, and whiney. And what if no one related to it? With these worries on my mind, I was incredibly relieved and somewhat surprised at the number of people, spanning a variety of generations, who spoke with me after my performance and told me that they knew exactly the feeling I was talking about. Some even shared a story of their own with me. I shouldn't have been surprised, I suppose, given that it is a pretty common thing to feel lost and have a desire to figure oneself out. However, I also think there is a pressure sometimes to appear as though you never doubt yourself and have it

all figured out. So, it was rewarding to feel like I had opened the door for others to tell me about a time when they also struggled to find the ground beneath them. It was also a nice reminder that this is something most people face at one time or another, and it goes beyond barriers of generation.

There were two stories in my show that came up frequently in the responses I received. Most frequently, it was the “Devil in the Basement” story. It was an entertaining story, but most often, this was not why people brought it up. They brought it up because of its underlying meaning, what the Devil in the basement had come to represent: all the things that make us question ourselves, the things that hide in our minds and make us believe that we are not good enough. This was the heart of that story, so it was heartening to know that this is what the audience had gotten from it and liked most about it.

It is not easy to share with an entire audience the insecurity of “not being good enough”. But instead of feeling like I had just lifted the curtain and would no longer fool anyone into thinking that I was completely confident and self-assured, I was greeted with a much more comforting reaction: you’re not alone; I know what that feels like.

The other part of my show that came up a lot in conversation was the dance sequence with “Jamie”. I had been so worried about this section, because up until I worked it with Stacey and George during my first tech, I just felt awkward and uncomfortable with it. I thought, “people are just going to think this is cheesy”, or they’ll think, “Girl, it’s time to move on and get over this guy.” But these thoughts showed that I didn’t trust my audience to understand the meaning behind it: the pain of giving up a treasured connection for a chance at a dream when it becomes clear you can’t have them both. Perhaps there were people in the audience who had the dreaded thoughts I feared, but overall, the responses I received showed that they were

overwhelming with me in that moment. This taught me that I should trust my instincts more. Had I truly allowed my doubts to get the best of me, I may have ended up cutting that portion, and that would have been extremely detrimental to my show as a whole.

A recent graduate of the undergrad theatre program here at LSU, approached me after my opening night, gave me a hug, and, in tears, said, “Thank you for telling that story.” I’m glad I got the opportunity to share it, and that those I shared it with were as incredibly supportive as they were. This show reminded me of why I love theatre. Not only that, it also provided a solid experience that I hope will encourage me to trust in my work in the future. So I can spend less time questioning my choices and spend more time making them strongly and confidently.

AFTER THE GLOW

There is a tricky line to walk with personal stories. I, as the writer/performer, am portraying some of the people in my life and with that comes a sense of responsibility to them. In creative writing classes in undergrad, I experienced a sense of guilt when writing personal stories, because I was afraid that I would write something that could somehow be construed as offensive, even if the person I was writing about was never going to read what I wrote. I combatted this guilt by changing their names and mine in the stories, so it wouldn’t appear to be a personal story at all. I would usually put a creative spin on the story as well, so it wasn’t entirely factual. My creative writing classmates were often the only ones reading these stories, and I didn’t have to read them out loud, which made this all easier.

However, with this show, I was actively playing myself. I didn’t change my name, and therefore it was safe for the audience to assume that the people who appeared in my show were actual people from my life. Of course, there were parts of some of the stories and details here and

there that were creatively manipulated to suit the needs of my story, but most of the stories came directly from my own experiences.

I was so intent on creating a show I would be proud of and having it be relatable and something that would land with the audience; I didn't have much time to think about the guilt of portraying certain people in my life. It snuck in every now and then, but I had a show to create, rehearse, and perform. Concentrating on that guilt would make me second-guess everything, and then I would never get the project done.

After the glow of my performances receded a bit, I was able to look at the whole process from a larger perspective, and the guilt started creeping back in. I felt it especially with my "Kyle" story, the story about me coming home to find my ex-boyfriend on the couch. This story was not based on one particular day, it was a mosaic of moments we had together. He was my best friend in Chicago at that time, which was more than a bit complicated, considering that we had recently broken up. Everything pointed to the fact that we shouldn't be as close as we were, especially not to the point that the neighborhood restaurants should be expecting our wedding invitations. I have to look back on our situation then and laugh, because there is something off-center and amusing about it, and it so aptly typifies my life at that time. However, I know all the details, and my audience did not. They didn't know all the ins and outs of my three-year relationship with "Kyle"; they didn't know the beautiful moments, the painful moments, or the lessons I learned through it. Because of that, I felt like I had reduced a significant time with a significant person in my life to nothing more than the butt of a joke. Is that what he would see if he read it? And it was this thought that started to plague me.

Around this time though, I made some other realizations that countered this feeling, important realizations that I would like to take to heart for my future work. One of my creative

writing teachers in undergrad once told our class something along the lines of: “good writing looks where it shouldn’t look, goes where it shouldn’t go. It peeps into people’s windows and sees the bits of their personal life that it shouldn’t see.” I could have written any number of stories about “Kyle” that I wouldn’t have felt guilty about. But what my story needed at that moment was a distinct bit of our personal history that characterized my sense of not belonging anywhere, of being caught between moments in life, and ending up in some distorted version of a life I had imagined. This story about us hit the nail on the head. The only purpose my guilt served was to make me question my work, causing me to seriously consider watering things down so there would be no potential of offending anyone.

In looking at the “Kyle” story, it isn’t even all that offensive, which makes it all the more important for me to nip the habit of apologizing for my work in the butt. If this habit continues, it will only stifle my creativity, my impulses, and my work in every aspect. So, finding myself face to face with it after this project and actively handling it, will help me if I encounter this problem again in the future.

WHAT I WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY IF I COULD GO BACK

If I could do it all again, I would spend more time with the piano. I could have made my transitions cleaner, more connected, and more specific. We had eight shows sharing the studio space; none of us got as much time in there as we would have liked, but I could have worked on transitions without being at the actual piano in the actual space.

I noticed the suffering of my transitions when I watched the video of my performance. It was obvious to me that I hadn’t spent enough time on them. They were a bit rushed and unsure. Especially the moment where I put my fingers on the keys but decide to take a shot of whiskey instead of playing. I could have taken a longer beat there; I didn’t give time for the moment to

land. I had never taken the time to decide what that transition really meant to me, so it wasn't clear what I wanted the audience to get out of it either. All of the transitions just seemed a bit under-rehearsed. If I could go back, I would make them more full and decide specifically the significance of each one for myself, as well as what I wanted the audience to get out of each one.

I also wish I would have reached out to more of my colleagues and asked them to watch and give feedback. I realize that I like to get most things figured out for myself before I seek reactions from others, but it would have been nice to have multiple perspectives at the point in the process when I was still playing around with blocking and ideas of overall structure. In retrospect, I think I was ready for feedback before I started seeking it out. But rehearsing alone is a bit estranging, and by the time I asked Ashley to come watch my piece, I wished I had been asking people to sit in on my rehearsals much earlier in the process.

Through my journey on this project, I understand that devising work is best when it is a collaborative process, no matter if it is a solo show or not. So, as much as I like to get what I am trying to say figured out before seeking critique from others, once I have that figured out and I have things flowing in a direction I like, feedback from others is paramount. If we had had more time, and even with the time we had, it would have been nice to be more actively involved with each other's shows, giving one another feedback, reading the actual scripts as well as hearing them out loud. It is clear to me that my show would not have been what it was, and I wouldn't have been nearly as happy with it, if it hadn't been for the insightful and incredibly beneficial feedback, critiques, and notes I received from others along the way.

CONCLUSION

The writing process for this project taught me that I am more organized in my creative process than I think. Perhaps I cannot call myself organized in the conventional sense of the word, but there is a method to my madness of which even I was not aware. I learned this in my reflection of the process. So, something to keep in mind for the future is that I learn a lot about my process and the way I work when I allow myself a postmortem, when I allow myself the time to think back on what worked, what didn't, and how I managed the work as a whole.

Through the evolutions of the script, I continually reminded myself, as I remind myself in all my writing, that sometimes I have to "murder my darlings". Sometimes, I have to give up little moments I love for the good of the piece as a whole, and sometimes, in order to fit the arc and story line, I have to be okay with changing and manipulating a beloved draft. I sent a copy to a friend, who then returned the copy with electronic notes on it. This was extremely helpful, and I realized that this is the most effective way for me to receive notes on my written drafts. That way I don't forget notes, and I don't have to look back on usually jumbled fragments I jotted down in order to remember verbal notes. I also inadvertently found that just talking through the basics of my script with someone who had never read it was helpful in pinpointing the main conflicts and arguments of the piece. So, I need notes in various ways; spoken notes on drafts is alright as long as I also receive written notes, and talking through my draft with someone else is helpful in sorting out the ideas and moments I am stuck on.

In the rehearsal process, I could have asked for feedback much sooner than I did. I do not particularly like rehearsing alone; it was nice when I was first trying to figure out my blocking and the general look of my piece, but as soon as I had a skeleton for what I wanted, I would have liked multiple pairs of eyes to help me figure out what was working and what wasn't.

I don't know if I will ever do another solo show, but I found it to be an incredible experience. The most vital thing I can say that this work reinforced in me was the importance of getting out of my own way and just trusting myself. Being completely alone onstage, having no one else to rely on if things go awry, and telling a personal story where I couldn't hide behind a character made the success of my show absolutely dependent on these two things. So it was this work, more than any other I have been involved with, which showed me this is a must in every piece of work that I do.

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VITA

Maggie McGurn was born and raised in Traverse City, MI. She is an alumnus of Hope College in Holland, MI, where she graduated with a B.A. in Theatre with an emphasis in performance and English with an emphasis in Creative Writing.

Her experience in the Louisiana State University M.F.A. Acting program has stretched and developed her love and understanding of acting. She hopes to continue expanding upon the knowledge and experience she has gained in her time here at LSU, knowing that there is always more to learn and always a chance for growth.