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Terrible Telegrams

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TERRIBLE TELEGRAMS

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 School of Theatre

by
Cara Lindsay Reid
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ABSTRACT

In compliance to the curriculum at Louisiana State University and Swine Palace's Actor Training Program, M.F.A. Acting candidates are required to create and develop a one-person show. The objective is to foster the actor's creative virtuosity and to give them the confidence, capability, and skill set to continue to create their own work after graduation. My play is about Lucy James, a recent college graduate, who moves to New York to follow her dreams of becoming an actress. Lucy's love for the craft is challenged when she takes a demoralizing job and her life begins to spiral out of control. Lucy's journey is to discover the importance of one's own humanity in the industry and the city. This thesis paper will analyze the process of research, evolution, production, and assessment of my solo play: *Terrible Telegrams*.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As the culmination of the M.F.A. actor-training program at Louisiana State University, candidates are required to create a one-person show. The parameters of the project are straightforward: devise a solo performance piece that runs 20 minutes, pick a topic that speaks to your artistry, use only minimal production elements, and play to your delight. Oh, and write, direct, produce and perform it all yourself. Completely overwhelmed at the beginning of this process, I sat down and asked myself a few important questions. How can I use this assignment to challenge myself as a theatre artist? What kind of change do I want to affect with this performance? How can I advocate for the elements of theatre that speak the loudest to me? As I began answering these questions, I realized how important this solo project could be to me because I would be able to revel and luxuriate in own my core values of theatre. After months of brainstorming, I finally decided that the best way for me to explore all these questions was to write what is now *Terrible Telegrams*.

A terrible telegram is a singing telegram that is sent specifically to deliver bad news. By bad news, I mean finding out your husband wants a divorce, you've just contracted a sexually transmitted disease, or your dog got ran over by a school bus. My hope in developing *Terrible Telegrams* was to tell a story about a young, confident, focused, and compassionate actress who has spent her whole life training and preparing to move to New York to break into Broadway. However, along the way her frustrations with the industry and her greed for glory get the best of her. After taking a job that she justifies as still "acting and singing," it ends up poisoning her sweet empathetic nature when each telegram, like a cancer, makes her forget her own humanity.

My intention for Chapter One is to summarize my research and rehearsal process starting with: the origin of idea, the tools I used to shape my concept, how I devised the telegrams, the

use of études, the change I wanted to affect, the triumphs and pitfalls of collaboration, and why the musical *Rent* became such an important part of this story.

In the second chapter, my hope is to reveal the evolution of Lucy's character and how these "Terrible Telegrams" affected her humanity. I will include the documentation of how the plot and script matured over time to tell a succinct, cohesive, and unique story.

Chapter Three will be focused on my performance experience and post-performance and feedback. I will be centering this chapter around my takeaways and the reactions I received during my living room performances (a pre-showing and remount of the piece before and after the actual scheduled performance). I will comment on my evolution from the Friday to Saturday night performance, as well as disclose the constructive criticisms and assessments I received from the faculty and my peers at LSU.

Finally, I will reveal my progression from where I started as a theatre artist before graduate school, where the training has led me, discuss my biggest triumphs and challenges after having created a solo performance piece, and what is next for me in terms of continuing to develop this show and myself as a citizen, artist, and human being.

I learned very quickly in life that compromising your own morality makes you a slave to the worst parts of yourself. For example, when you continue to make bad choices and not follow your instinct, you get stuck in a cycle of negativity. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that "hate breeds hate." I believe there is a similar symptom to destructive behavior. *Terrible Telegrams* is a journey of a girl who is determined to make it in New York regardless of the cost. She suffers the consequences of hurting others along the way, loses her ability to display remorse, and then rediscovers her own humanity in the doing for someone else.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH AND REHEARSAL

2.1 Origin of the Idea

On my 28th birthday, a package was delivered from two of my best friends that I later opened while Facetiming with them. It was a beautiful purple mirror that looked like it belonged to the Evil Queen in Snow White. They know that I loved purple and at times I can be fairly vain so they were convinced it was a perfect gift. They were right. I loved it and still own it to this day. However, once we started talking about gifts they mentioned that they looked into a singing birthday telegram. I was intrigued. They said they really wanted to send one because of my love for all things musical but that they were afraid my job wouldn't appreciate it. Again, they were right. Although, the next day I pondered what it would have been like if I had received the telegram. How happy it would have made me and how much I would have laughed. That birthday was nothing special and at the time I was actually quarreling with my then boyfriend and looking for a way out of the relationship. A quick thought came to me about how morbidly funny it would have been if I had gotten a telegram telling me my relationship was over. While the news isn't necessarily funny, the way it's delivered could have been, and I might have actually been a bit relieved. This minute afterthought started to take shape a few days later when I was in the car with my sister. I told her I had an idea for a one-person show or a sketch that had to do with delivering bad news to people through singing telegrams. We both laughed but there was no brainstorming of any kind. It was just a fun idea that would get tossed on the creative shelf that lives in the back of my head.

In the spring of 2016, Jason Lockhart and I were driving to Dallas to visit my sister. We decided that along the way we would make a plan for my thesis performance. So, on May 30, 2016 I created a note in my phone called Thesis Ideas. This is how it reads: Musical theatre

revue of different songs with the same theme; what is the story you NEED to tell; write songs with humor, dialects, and different characters; read *Grounded* and *Rachel Corrie*; look up female humorous one person shows; keep up with new musicals; how to develop discipline; the art of “to do” lists and how to create good habits; potential title could be *Anchors Away* or *Anchor Up*; creating a business plan for Voice Coach Cara; and career goals in your 30’s. Obviously, this list is full of viable options that didn’t make the cut. While I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted to do, I kept pitching the idea of comedy. After making this in-depth list, I told Jason of the idea that I had a long time ago about the singing telegrams. He loved it, which made me feel great. I remember getting very excited and passionate when I was explaining it. All the sudden we started to think of titles for the show. Jason loves alliteration and that was when the name *Terrible Telegrams* was born. From that moment, I was fairly certain that *Terrible Telegrams* was my new baby, a tiny seedling that would one day grow into fruition. Thus, my creative journey began.

2.2 Playing to my Delight

When contemplating what I wanted to do for my thesis project, it became a question of “What do I get to do?” instead of “What do I have to do?” In my mind, I started to revisit some of my favorite roles. It occurred to me that the ones that stuck out the most were those in which I was either doing comedy or singing in a musical. For example, I played Sylvia at the Pocket Sandwich Theatre, The Great Ghost in my friend’s original musical *On the Eve* at Theatre Three, Brooke in *Noises Off* at Swine Palace, and even Ado Annie in my high school’s production of *Oklahoma*. While every character is dear to me, there was something fun and familiar about these specific roles. It was as if there was a dimmed light inside of me, but with the joy of getting to play these roles that light would progressively get brighter every time I would rehearse. I

knew that because of these experiences I needed to find something that spoke to me the same way. What was my favorite type of “play” and how could I sneakily disguise it as “work?” After all, that is how it is supposed to feel, like you’re privileged to get to go to work. I decided early on that I wanted to write something that was fun for me play, I wanted to sing so I could keep my voice in shape, and I wanted to make people laugh. As cliché as it is, I really believe the adage that “laughter is the best medicine.”

2.3 An Exploration of Different Types of Performance

I gave a title to my show early on in the process. This worked well for me because it kept me on track of the story I wanted to tell. However, I had no idea what that story was going to be besides the fact that this girl was going to sing terrible telegrams to people. As I was brainstorming different plot lines, I was also considering what types of performance I could explore. I have always wanted to do standup comedy and improvisation but have been terrified of them. Standup seems like it would be easy for me. I love to hold a microphone on stage, tell stories and make people laugh. However, what I don’t like about most standup I’ve seen is that comedians tend to make fun of or pick on the people they love. That doesn’t impress or appeal to me. Also, I adore the idea of improvisation but I’ve always been very insecure of the fact that I don’t feel like I think quickly on my feet. I feel like I get tongue-tied and stutter something unintelligible when I’m not prepared. Graduate school has taught me that I thrive on my preparation. So, as much as I like to play improvisation games, I’m terrified at failing at them, which would lead to feeling like I’m not actually funny or smart. I considered doing a revue of musical theatre songs I’ve always wanted to sing, such as “Anything Goes,” from the musical of the same title, “Over the Moon” from *Rent*, “Roxie” from *Chicago*, “Someone Like You” from *Jekyll & Hyde*, “No Good Deed” from *Wicked* and “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les*

Misérables. All of these songs are reflections of what I love about musical theatre: heartfelt sentiment, fantastic storytelling, beautiful lyrics, and gut wrenching stakes. I wanted to take what I loved from these songs and make something of my own. Lastly, I was interested in exploring sketch comedy and variety shows. I was intrigued with the idea of having a concept that I could also turn into an episodic; that way the show could always grow and develop over time.

2.4 A Hodgepodge of Styles

There's an old proverb that states "variety is the spice of life," and I couldn't agree more. One of the reasons I love acting so much is because I get to explore many different types of characters and if for some reason I don't vibe well with one, then I get to move on to another one in eight weeks, if I'm lucky. The compilation of performance styles I finally decided on was sketch and musical comedy. These felt the most in tune with what I wanted to accomplish with my show and they also fit the needs of my artistry. I wanted to tell an authentic heartfelt story through the means of song, sketch, and dark comedy. I feel like I was able to accomplish just that.

2.5 YouTube Videos and Ted Talks

The very first piece of research I did was June 1, 2016. In my thesis journal, I made notes of different articles I read and videos I watched about women doing one-person shows and musical comedies. The first clip I watched was of Mel DeLancey in "Tinder Roulette." It is a musical memoir of how one woman turned her Tinder nightmares into a musical comedy. This hit home right away because it was very close to the style I ultimately chose. DeLancey was funny, smart, quirky, and a bit desperate. Next, I watched Joan Freed in "Chocolate Confessions." Freed does a hilarious job of building nuanced characters that sing about their obsession with chocolate using hit songs for which she changed the lyrics. This one especially

inspired me to use a similar concept when writing my telegrams. I shifted gears slightly and watched one that wasn't necessarily my sense of humor. "Bloody Show" from *Mumsical* by Moniquea Marion, is a song about women giving birth while disco lights bounce around on stage similar to a game show. The song was crass, raunchy, and the actress seemed to spend a lot of her time yelling at the audience. Although it was clearly well thought out, it didn't seem to inform the kind of show I wanted to create. After watching these videos, I got inspired to write a few ideas of what I could do. The first one, give or take a few conceptual differences, is what *Terrible Telegrams* turned out to be. A show about a girl that moves to New York to be a musical theatre actress and after a long stint of crappy jobs she gets work from a singing telegram service. However, the catch is that the company only delivers terrible news. The premise is similar to the approach of the restaurant Dick's Last Resort, where the servers are just horrible to you. However, in *Terrible Telegrams*, the girl has a huge heart and the bad news weighs on her until she quits the job.

After watching several different clips of one woman musical comedies I read a few articles on the origin and importance of solo performances. In May of 2007, The New York Times wrote an article called "Theater Companies Learn the Value of Flying Solo." This piece showcased why the New York Theater Workshop, the Roundabout Theater, and the Vineyard Theater all concluded their seasons with one-person productions. What I learned is that there are many different reasons theaters decide to produce solo works but in the cases of these three companies, budgetary concerns were a huge issue. In general, there has been a paradigm shift in the way playwrights develop their stories because they know that a play with a huge cast is less likely to be produced. However, as pointed out by Douglas Aibel, the artistic director of the Vineyards Theatre, "there has to be something special for me to want to be in a room for 90

minutes with a sole person” (David). I took this to heart as I was developing my play because while I knew it wasn’t going to be 90 minutes, I thought the same consideration had to be taken with any piece no matter the length. It made me ponder what was going to be special about my show and me. Another article I read for research was “A ‘Cast of One’: The History, Art and Nature of a One-Person Show” by Paula T. Alekson where she so eloquently describes one-person shows as “largely artistic vehicles designed to display actor virtuosity and stamina, to highlight an actor’s ability of impersonation (of either one character or a variety of characters), to present a theater-going audience to a larger-than-life historical (or sometimes living) figure, and/or as a means of intimate autobiographical exploration and expression.” Of those four items, I was most interested in creating a show that would showcase my talent and tie in some autobiographical expression. *Backstage* did a write up on “13 Famous Actors with Autobiographical Solo Shows.” I love reading about other actors and their process. It’s exhilarating to feel like someone you idolize, or has a lifetime of experience, still has the same struggles you do. To feel that kinship of artistry can be a driving force in this industry. The specific actors that were named in this article are Mel Brooks, Joy Behar, Bea Arthur, Billy Crystal, John Leguizamo, Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin, Carrie Fisher, Rita Moreno, Chazz Palminteri, Jason Alexander, Sir Ian McKellan, and Elaine Stritch. The two that were the most intriguing to me were those by Billy Crystal and Carol Burnett. Crystal’s solo performance entitled *700 Sundays* was about the time he spent with his father before he died when Crystal was 15. It tells the story of his life and family from his childhood in New York to his adult years. Billy Crystal has been one of my most beloved comedians since adolescence when I saw him in *The Princess Bride*. He is instantly likable, charismatic, and never crude. Carol Burnett’s autobiographical piece, *Laughter and Reflection with Carol Burnett*, pays homage to her hit

television series *The Carol Burnett Show*. Burnett is able to banter back and forth with her audience as she holds a question and answer session reminiscent of the impromptu conversation style in her long running TV program. *The Carol Burnett Show* is one of my all-time favorite shows. I have spent so much time laughing at she, Vicki Lawrence, Harvey Korman, and Tim Conway. To me this show successfully embodies all forms of comedy.

After watching *Sarah Jones: A One Woman Global Village* I was so excited to find my voice in my own piece. Jones is a monologist who creates her own multi-cultural characters and is truly uncanny when it comes to embodying those characters. What she calls her “invention of selves” was incredible to watch; the way that she would transform in front of your eyes with only a small change in scarves was extraordinary. Her voice and her physicality would reinvent themselves with each new character and her point of view on the world would shift, as well. Her performances coincide a lot with the work we’ve done over the past few semesters. In Professor Nick Erickson’s movement class, we did a lot of mask work; in Professor Stacey Cabaj’s class we are working on dialects and character voices, which can be a lot like a vocal mask; and in Professor George Judy’s acting class we incorporated Period Movement Scores (PMS). All of these tools are giving us the ability to find the characters we’re working on at their fullest expressions. Masks in general give you the freedom and availability to make bold choices you might not make in real life and a PMS forces you to learn the unpacking of a character, from daily life to cultural upbringing and surroundings, and how all these things influence the characters’ mannerisms and physicality. Seeing her transform in front of my eyes was surreal. She is so utterly committed to each character—vocally, physically, and mentally—that you truly believe she is that person. She inspired me to want to be as flawless with my own character study.

In my search for what to do for this performance I also considered finding a way to write a piece about habits. By the end of spring semester 2016 I was feeling like I still needed to find better ways to prioritize and use my time more efficiently. Due to my tendency to procrastinate and self-sabotage, I decided to do some investigating into my time management issues. I started reading a book by Gretchen Rubin called *Better Than Before: What I learned about making and breaking habits*. This book, in a very non-judgmental way, helped me by disproving what I thought to be lazy and unmotivated. That book along with several different Ted Talks made me realize that success is no accident. If you meditate on and visualize what you want to achieve, why you want to achieve it, and how you can become the person you need to in order to make it happen, then you're programming your mind for success. If you're constantly negative and focusing on your fears, obstacles, and lack of motivations then that will train your mind in a different way. If you form the habit of honing positivity and good intentions, you are more likely to succeed because you're changing the way you see success. In Scott Gellar's talk titled "The psychology of self-motivation" I was particularly interested in his discussion of the "4 C's": competence, consequences, choice, and community, all of which are meant to fuel self-motivation and empathy. These are great words to carry with me as an artist and as a teacher. One of the questions that was asked is, how do you communicate? Are the questions you ask or the feedback you give out of obligation or opportunity? Lastly, I watched Sam Berns' Ted Talk about his philosophy on leading a happy life even through his diagnosis of Progeria (a rare, rapid aging disease) at the age of 2. Held in 2013, a year prior to his death at the age of 18, Sam's words changed me and put a lot into perspective. Here I was, complaining about procrastinating doing the things that I actually really liked, wanted to do, and could do but was just too fearful to do them because the end result might not be as good as I thought. Sam's three philosophies on

living a happy life were “be ok with ultimately what you can’t do because there is so much you can do, surround yourself with the people you want to be with, and keep moving forward.” It’s funny how they all sound so simple but it was like he turned a light on inside of me. Sam said, “being brave isn’t supposed to be easy.” After watching these Ted Talks, I knew that I had to write *Terrible Telegrams* and not give into the fear I had of it not being good enough.

2.6 Pinterest Page

As it is anytime I start something new, the first thing I do is create a Pinterest page. Here, I am able to pin pictures, links to articles and videos, and organize an overall digital visual board. These boards give me so much inspiration, a wealth of knowledge, and make it so easy for me to keep all my thoughts in one place. The Pinterest board I created for *Terrible Telegrams* is filled with material on different female comedians, tips on writing this paper, the healing power of humor, and inspirational quotations. This website was always the first place I would save any information I could find. My motto was “I’ll pin it for later.” Once my collection of influences started to grow I began more in depth research. I pinned articles on Margaret Cho, Anjelah Johnson, Iliza Schlesinger, Lucille Ball, Mindy Kaling, Aisha Tyler, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett, Chelsea Handler, Tracey Ullman, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, Wanda Sykes, Kristen Wig, Kristen Schaal, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Betty White, Bea Arthur, Vicki Lawrence, and Gilda Radner. I pinned a piece on comedian Mike Birbiglia from the New York Times and solo performer Mike Daisey. I pinned scientific articles on how humor positively affects the brain and how to overcome grief with laughter. All of these resources gave me the tools I needed to make decisions on the kind of work I wanted to write and produce.

2.7 Susan Merson's *Your Name Here: An Actor and Writer's Guide to Solo Performance*

After reading Susan Merson's book *Your Name Here: An Actor and Writer's Guide to Solo Performance*. I came up with five meaningful points I thought I could apply to my own process: start from a place of ease and curiosity, figure out what I wanted to accomplish with my piece, build my character to the fullest possible expression, specify my "ABDC&E's", and remember that the point of this is to educate.

When beginning to write a solo performance, I learned it was a lot like beginning to write any story. I tend to write the way I speak which is terrible for those having to correct my grammar, but it is also filled with lots of imagery and description. Also, when beginning to craft a story most writers will tell you to write what you know. This gives you the freedom and the availability to really drive the story because you could have had a similar past experience and once you press your emotional recall button, it's hard to forget. What stuck out for me is that writing what I know is easy, but creating a whole new world can be scary and overwhelming. However, if I begin from a place of ease and curiosity it's less taxing on my ego. The idea of having to get it right or make it funny lessens. I am able to put my ego aside and say, "What do I know? What do I like? And what do I want to talk about?" All the sudden this experience goes from terrifying to really exciting. The ease stems from the "what do I like" and the curiosity from the "what do I get to do."

The second thing I took away from this book was "what do I want to accomplish from this piece?" Susan Merson described one of her shows where she was playing several different characters and she talked about how at some point she was just basically showing off her versatility instead of giving any of these characters an actual voice. I immediately identified with this because as I kept coming up with ideas about my piece I started to leave the heart of my

character's journey out. I kept thinking of what I wanted to do and how funny it would be instead of why this story needed to be told. Also, she wrote stories that had a universal quality to them. I think that is incredibly important because it needs to be relatable. It needs to feel like anyone, a scientist, a preacher or a janitor could watch this show, hear these words, and feel the effects in the same capacity an artist would. Merson said "isn't it common wisdom that everyone we write is really ourselves wearing a different hat?" (144).

The third thing I took away was building your character to the fullest possible expression. Susan Merson seemed to have no problem with this and her insights on character development were very useful and wise. She says, "Define who the character is and how she is like and unlike your essential self. The definition will help you to commit to the theme of your presentation. By knowing this character well and why you choose her to introduce you, you will be prepared to lead your audience through the personal arc of your presentation" (57).

Susan Merson wrote about Alice Walker quoting that "the structure of a short story is as easy as ABDCE. That is action, background, development, climax and ending" (60). I love that she cited this. When I teach or coach monologues, I always refer to these things. To me, they are the given circumstances. To the students who know nothing of Stanislavski, they are the tools in which you use to write a story. These are just as helpful in monologue preparation because they become your evidence and reason in why you have to say this right now. I described it to my students as the entire life you lived before this moment.

Finally, the point of this process is to educate, to affect change in yourself and your audience. I started pondering, what do I want to teach? What do I want people to walk away with from this? Antonin Artaud wrote that "actors are athletes of the heart" (133); if this is true then are we not also educators of the soul? I've been told the more you know about life and this world

the more you can use in your work. The more empathy you can feel and the more vulnerable you can be, strengthens your ability to be compassionate. When you find a way to not judge yourself or the people around you the more you can investigate fully without bias and isn't that the whole point? In my acting class with George Judy, he taught me to always "play the love," which comes from Michael Schurtleff's book *Audition*, and I didn't know what that meant. It turns out that "playing the love" means raising the stakes and playing the scene like you're going to get what you want so within that, your character has much further to fall when they don't. So, when it comes to educating someone, I know that I would want them to leave with a greater sense of humanity, gratefulness, and admiration for people who are working hard to turn their lives around.

All in all, this book was very informative and inspiring as I took the next steps into creating my own solo performance. Also, I owe a huge thank you to Susan Merson who wrote that "you are the 'constant' underneath all the characters that you create as a writer or an actor. In that 'constant' energy, in that personal understanding and definition of the world from your point of view, lays the reason that the theatre will survive" (162). It was that quote that gave me the confidence to follow my intuition and to trust that my life and experiences were worth building theatre upon.

2.8 Stand Up Comedians

One of the best parts of my research was making the decision to research comedians. The most influential comedians I chose to follow were Carol Burnett, Iliza Schlesinger, Anjelah Johnson, Mike Birbiglia and Mindy Kaling. These five people were vital to my creative process due to their very authentic and different approaches to comedy and storytelling.

As I have mentioned Carol Burnett is my favorite comedian of all time. What I love most about her is the quirky quality that allows her to be both innately interesting and also incredibly unpredictable. I think that spontaneity is what all comedians long for. She creates characters that are larger than life but they showcase her versatility and comic genius. One of my favorite characters she does is Eunice from “Mama’s Family”. She’s a sniveling, whiny daughter that always wants to be the center of attention. She is always overly dramatic and irksome but somehow still incredibly loveable. The reason I chose Carol Burnett as a role model for my show is because I admire her ability to write her own imaginative material, improvisation on the spot and possess a down to earth and non-pretentious humility that demands respect. She is truly one of the great comediennees of our time and I feel truly inspired when I get to watch her perform.

Next, is Iliza Schlesinger. She is a comedian that I had heard of but didn’t know much about. I watched two of her Netflix specials, *Confirmed Kills* and *Freezing Hot*. I instantly liked her because she’s bold, sassy and very sarcastic. One of the reasons I have always been so afraid of doing standup is because I knew I didn’t want to be one of those people who made fun of everybody all the time. I didn’t want to spend the whole time being mean. Which is ironic since my show ended up being about a girl who spent her time happily delivering bad news to people. However, Iliza’s quick wit, honesty, aggression and feministic take on life had me rolling. While there was some racy content, that I’m not necessarily against but just don’t love, I gained a lot from her confidence and ease on stage.

Anjelah Johnson is brand new to me. I found her standup on Netflix after I had searched for female comedians. Johnson has a much cleaner approach to comedy. Instead of relying on shock value, she focuses on strong story telling. While she’s not a Christian comedian, just a comedian that so happens to be Christian, her faith makes lots of appearances in her act.

Something that I took away from her performance that I wanted to add to mine was her sense of play. She didn't take herself too seriously and she wasn't trying to preach at me. With *Terrible Telegrams*, I wanted the audience to leave feeling uplifted with a "pay it forward" type of attitude. I wanted them to feel like they could take the lessons they learned from their mistakes and somehow create positivity out of it.

My Girlfriend's Boyfriend by Mike Birbiglia was by far the most influential part of my research. I would compare Birbiglia's standup to what I know of long form improvisation. His whole show focuses on one story but he goes off on tangents throughout. However, everything he talks about is intentional and has a purpose to the greater story. Ultimately, he was a huge part of my process because I focused on what it was about his piece that spoke to me and what I concluded was that his story was full of relationship and that was the thing I wanted to accomplish the most with my show. I wanted my audience to leave feeling like they knew me and could easily identify with my struggles.

Lastly, I read Mindy Kaling's book *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me*. I'm glad I chose to read this at the end of my process because it helped to pave the way of my writing style. Kaling does such a wonderful job of writing in her own voice and that is exactly what I wanted to do. While reading her book, it's like I could hear her speaking. While she tended to ramble, it was still funny and intelligent. Also, Kaling was unapologetic about who she is and how society views her. She joked about not having the body type that Hollywood demands, that her over confident nature has almost gotten her fired, and how she loves watching reality television and eating kids' snack foods. Basically, she did a wonderful job humanizing herself and she made me feel confident to write in my own voice.

2.9 Rehearsal Process

One of my first assignments in Acting Studio in Fall, 2016 was to come in with the first five minutes of my piece. What that looked like in the early stages of writing was: I raced back and forth between auditions that I was being rejected from, which were on opposite sides of the stage, and before each one I added a different article of clothing. Essentially, I was adding layers to symbolize the insecurity of my authentic self while running myself to exhaustion on a demoralizing path to be someone I wasn't. It was as if I had to change or add something each time instead of just being myself. This hamster wheel was supposed to be a metaphor for how I approached my artistry before and at the beginning of grad school, as well as Lucy's journey of finding out who she was, and at what lengths she was willing to go to get what she wanted. I decided I needed two doors at the end of the stage, a plethora of scarves, hats and other accessories and a headshot and resume for each audition. The primary lesson here is that I was doing exactly what I was trying to convey was unnecessary. After feedback from classmates we all came to the conclusion that I didn't need any of that. If I found a way to simplify and keep the story clear it would still be just as interesting but less messy. Stacey kept telling me "more isn't more," but ultimately I was struggling with the fact that I didn't feel like I was enough. I literally needed bells and whistles to make it interesting; otherwise, it was just me up there telling a story. That's when it dawned on me that that was exactly what it should be; I just needed to give myself the permission to do that.

2.10 Creation of Telegrams

There was no real rhyme or reason to my process of writing the telegrams. Some of them came very easily and others I racked my brain over for hours. My hope with each song was to

impress my audience with how well I delivered the telegram and to continuously lose sight of the news I was actually delivering.

Growing up, I loved writing songs and poetry, although they were, inevitably, always about love. Since I was young, I've been a hopeless romantic whose perfect guy was a cross between two fictional television characters, Ted Mosby and Chandler Bing. One, a bit sappy and obsessed with finding his soul mate and the other, sarcastic but with a wonderful sense of humor to always keep his audience laughing. However, as much as I loved to write songs they were never very funny so this was a wonderful challenge for me. The first song I wrote came very quickly. I had the idea, I came up with tune, looked up words that rhymed and voila. It seemed simple. I wanted each song to reflect a different genre with each new tragedy. "Your Mom's Gay" was written in the style of a contemporary Broadway musical song. "Divorce Papers" originated when I was listening to Christmas music too early in the year. I borrowed the tune from one of my favorite Christmas songs entitled "The Christmas Song." I was worried it was too similar and the audience wouldn't be able to get the original lyrics out of their head but my friend Caitlin commented that it didn't sound anything like that song so I kept it. "Divorce Papers" was meant to sound like a highlight from a Diva's collection, such as Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, or Whitney Houston. "Jim Told His Wife" was the third telegram in my show and it started out as a pop ballad. I thought that was the most appropriate because I referenced social media and dancing on bars. However, one day in Professor Nick Erickson's Movement Studio the idea for the song struck me and after I wrote it I took my classmates Caitlin and Fola out into the hall to sing it. They both thought it was funny but that it sounded too similar to the tune for "Divorce Papers." Then, one of them suggested it could be a country song. So, I rethought the pace and added a bit of stereotypical "yee haws" and I ended up with what I thought to be one of

the better telegrams I wrote. “Rogaine is for Losers” is the last song I wrote but the fourth telegram in the play. This was the hardest to write because I felt like I had exhausted all of my genres, but it quickly became one of my favorite songs to sing because I love jazz and blues music. When I was younger I wrote a jazz song called “Well, Well, Well.” I decided to use the tune to that and rewrite the lyrics to the first verse. This was a very triumphant moment for me because I had the hardest time with this specific song and then once I realized I already had a tune, writing the lyrics was fun. Telegram 5, “I Think This is Illegal”, thanks to my advisor’s suggestion, turned into an *Avenue Q* style song featuring sock puppets. At first I wasn’t sold on the idea since towards the end of the process I nixed all of my props except for the sandwich board and kazoo. I was worried of adding much more; however, once I got the note to give the puppets a point of view, I had a great time decorating them and giving them unique voices. “Rover Got Run Over” was the last telegram in the show that I delivered to another person. It was almost Thanksgiving and I got more inspiration from Christmas songs. One of my favorite memories is when I was a kid and I would wake up to “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” playing on my parents’ radio. Since that silly song has stuck with me throughout my life, I thought it would be interesting to play around with it. It’s already funny and a bit ridiculous so why not try to make it more so but in a different light? This song ends up being the worst and most insensitive out of all of them and it is no longer considered funny. My final performance of that specific song ended up being a moment in this process that I’ll never forget. “You’re Fired” is the very last song that Lucy sings in *Terrible Telegrams* and she sings it to herself. The moral is that she finally decides to quit her job because she’s tired of hurting people. This song’s tune and style reflects the very first telegram. My idea for that was for Lucy to make a full circle back to where she started and book end her decision.

2.11 Études and Learned Lessons

In my 2016 fall semester Movement Studio, Professor Nick Erickson gave us three étude exercises that we would complete over the course of 3 months. These études were like small improvisations where we were given a set of guidelines to abide by but mostly the exercise was to experience how our characters would react in their given circumstances. This was set to help us on our emotional journey and to discover who we were in the moment while living to our fullest expressions. The next three paragraphs come straight from my journals where I commented on the point of the exercises as well as my reactions to them.

“Getting Stuck” was the title of the first étude. The point of this was to physically get stuck while trying to perform a task. My scenario was that I got frustrated with a broken string on my guitar but in order to fix it I had to go into my closet that has a finicky lock. As I stepped on a stool to get the extra strings, I slipped and fell backwards impaling myself on the Christmas Star that I didn’t put away carefully enough. After a very long time of not wanting to move because I was frozen from sheer panic and pain I smelled smoke from the kitchen because my pizza was burning but the door had accidentally locked so I was “stuck.” Imagining that I was bleeding from the back, I had to break down the door with the stool and run to the kitchen before it set anything else on fire. The only thing that this étude reminded me of was how vivid my imagination can be. I left that day feeling exhausted by self-discovery and disgusted with my own self-loathing. I felt I hadn’t accomplished or learned anything aside from how much imaginary pain I could inflict on myself.

The next étude, “Trouble,” was a situation where the character has an event, or discovers something which puts them in crisis in a personal, important and immediate way and that the character has to scramble to untangle themselves. When working my “Trouble” étude my plan

was to start a standup routine, get heckled, forget my lines, get my ankle wrapped up in the microphone cord, fall, and break my leg. Only two of those things happened. I began with a mask on, my umbrella as a microphone, the stool holding my water bottle, and my journal filled with notes that I might need to progress. As I began my routine that wasn't planned, it turned into a story about my time in New York studying under Patsy Rodenburg. Rodenburg is a world-renowned director and voice coach who basically annihilated my performance of a Shakespearean monologue I worked on during a workshop with her in New York City. However, due to the circumstances of the étude I embellished a little bit of her response during the performance. To create an obstacle for myself, I decided to hand out pieces of paper for my classmates to say to me during my routine. These comments were harsh and full of meaningful criticism that I knew would hurt me to my core. However, the most surprising thing was that I was able to move past them fairly quickly. I was wearing half of a neutral mask and it felt like it created a protection shield that the audience couldn't get through. This étude was one of the most fulfilling experiences I have had in graduate school. It was my first time doing standup, something I have always wanted to do but have been too scared. The best thing about it was that it just felt like me telling stories without worrying about people judging me or that I would say something stupid or inarticulate. It also helped so much knowing that the classroom was a safe place so if I did fail I would have been in good company. I made a joke about Rodenburg's quotation "there is no failure in this room, only work," which I called "nonsense" on since she certainly made it feel like failure. I talked about how she was trying to adjust my alignment and being the good student I am I went into the Alexander Technique monkey pose but so much to where it actually looked like I just had to go to the bathroom, which is not normally my sense of humor. Also, at one point she asked in a therapist's voice why I was holding so much tension in

my arms and after prodding for a little while I finally told her that I broke both of them at different times when I was younger. Afterwards she took a dramatic pause and said, “yes, I see that,” as if she was Columbo and had just solved the case. “See what?” I gasped. So, I concluded that she could see that I wanted so badly to do well that I was trying to force it, which is the opposite of living in the moment. I ended my routine, which by then everyone was just eating up, with her saying that I wasn’t ready or emotionally available enough to do this monologue right now, and that I was trying so hard to impress her that I was missing the point of the work. To which I responded, “lady, I want my money back.” That was my last line, my button, and I was so proud. It was a great victory for me. I was grateful that my classmates didn’t spend the whole time heckling me. They did at first but as I handled it they started to taper off and I was able to just be in the moment. When journaling after that experience, I said I thought I needed to succeed before I could truly feel the depth of failure. Everyone was very complimentary and suggested that I use standup in my thesis performance somehow.

“The Interview” étude is fielding questions from the audience, answering on the spot in character and making up the answers on the fly. So, when I chose the given circumstances of this étude, my expectation was that it would be filled with questions about my character. Not unlike the étude I did the semester before with a character I created named Shoo Shoo. That was the interview I was prepared for. For example, questions about my past, how I became an actor, how long I had been in New York. These questions would have helped me specify who she was at the core. What actually happened was much different. It ended up being an audition for the Terrible Telegrams Company but riddled with demeaning elitist expectations. I made the choice to come in full, meaning something huge had just happened and I had to carry my emotional baggage of that event into the room with me. I had devised a story that I got robbed right before my audition

so the stakes were really high. The burglars took everything, my phone, wallet, keys, headshot, and resume. So, I was coming in distracted, distraught, and desperate for a job. A barrage of insults was the first thing that struck me, then I was interrupted, belittled, and asked to tell a story about a time when I did something really mean and was made fun of for it. I was asked to perform ridiculous tasks that had nothing to do with the job I was auditioning for and blatantly make fun of someone in the room. This experience was really hard and personal for me because I could relate to it so much. I have often felt like a waste of space in an audition room and while this étude was tough on my ego, I was able to walk away from it with a sense of accomplishment that I didn't give up, leave, or deflect. I was proud that I stayed true to the circumstances, tried as hard as I could to get the job and take direction to the best of my ability.

2.12 The Audience

One of the most pressing questions I struggled with while I was creating this piece was “who are you talking to?” It was important because I needed to decide what kind of change I was trying to elicit and why. I went back and forth with several different options. After much deliberating, I decided upon something that felt very close to my heart. I almost felt guilty for using it because I can connect to it so easily but, again, realized that is the point. I made my audience into a congregation at church where I was giving my testimony to witness to people about forgiveness and the consequences of selfishness. I wanted to testify to the importance of my own humanity in the industry and in the city. The church is a safe place for me, a place I feel like I can bare all, not unlike the stage. Often people describe theatre as a religion or sacred experience because it allows for vulnerability and truth to come out. Both are homes to me so choosing to talk to a congregation felt right. Also, it was important that I see my audience. Like in a church, or at least the ones I grew up in, everyone is visible. It was vital for me to look in

their eyes and truthfully react to them. It's hard with a one-person show not to talk at the audience since there are no other characters on stage. I wanted to feel like I could be in present with the audience and take them on the ride with me, make them my scene partners. This was a decision that worked well for my show because no one could hide. I wanted the moralizing to be illustrative instead of instructive. If they were going on the journey with me, and living through my progression of embarrassments, then they would be just as affected as I was at the climactic moment of change.

2.13 Collaboration

One of the best and worst things about collaboration is having so many wonderful ideas that you don't know where to draw the line. Fairly early on I had made the decision not to veer off the path I saw for this show. However, that was fleeting once I put it on its feet. I was given a lot of great suggestions from my teachers and classmates about who the audience could be, which audition pieces I should do, and how the story could end. Also, like I said earlier, once I did my standup in Movement Studio a lot of people were insistent that I choose that path instead, myself included. There were times that I got overwhelmed and became completely indecisive. The most helpful times of collaboration for me were in my weekly thesis meetings with my advisor Stacey Cabaj, and my classmates Caitlin and Fola. I felt like that was the place that I could continue to come back to my original idea and further flesh it out. I had the opportunity to stress my struggles and then get feedback in the way I needed. For example, one struggle I encountered was that every time I would get a new idea I would feel like I had to start over and nix any other concept I had been working on. The waters were getting muddied because I was trying to incorporate certain moments that didn't fit in my story. I stopped listening to myself. My biggest break though was an evening I spent with one of my best friends. We sat in her living

room, talked through the story, and then recorded an outline. While the ending changed, the template for most of the play was set and all I had to do was fill it in. I am incredibly grateful for the people that I had to talk me through this process and learned that it was more important, than ever, to trust myself with the story I wanted to tell.

2.14 Does Anyone Know How This Play Ends?

Somehow writing the ending of my piece was both the easiest and the hardest thing I had to do. I was lost as to how I wanted to end it for months. I became so focused on writing the songs that I was leaving out the most important part. How did I want to affect change in my audience? I procrastinated figuring out the ending because I was waiting for some divine intervention or moment of genius to strike. I knew I wanted my character to hit rock bottom and finally be able to step outside herself by finding clarity in a place she least expected it. I, specifically, remember one day in a thesis meeting where I said, “I’m going home and writing the end of this stupid play.” I was frustrated because I had spent so long trying to brainstorm but nothing was coming. It’s not like I had alternate endings to choose from. I had a blank page with no ideas. Earlier in my thesis meeting, my advisor asked me, “What’s a story that lights you up?” and “What about the humanity of the piece do you want to see?” That was it. The answer to those questions was when it clicked. I was sitting outside at my apartment complex, drinking coffee, with my laptop open and I just started to write the story of Raynard. It was a true story, an actual encounter I had while walking home to my apartment in Brooklyn after a lousy day. I felt worthless and disgusted with myself. I wasn’t acting, I wasn’t helping anyone and I certainly wasn’t making a difference. It occurred to me that was exactly Lucy’s story as well so I thought it would be fitting to meet him and let him change her. It was important to me to keep her connection with him real since the idea of the *Terrible Telegrams* is a bit outlandish; perhaps not

for what I know of New York, but it's still almost plausible. Raynard being the catalyst of change was important to me because, despite his having suffered much more than Lucy had, he had the depth of humanity to be concerned for her well-being. The kindness that he showed her was supposed to reflect the kindness that Lucy was disregarding everyday by participating in something that brought pain to other people. I say in my script, "he is the first person in a long time to really see me for who I used to be," but I also think he is the first person in all long time that Lucy feels like she is able to help rather than hurt.

2.15 Rent

Rent is Jonathan Larson's Tony Award-winning rock musical that tells a story about a group of impoverished artists that are struggling to survive and create a life in New York City's East Village/Alphabet City during the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1990's. *Rent* is one of the first musicals I ever fell in love with. As a young adult, it was my dream to move to New York and be an actor. I romanticized the bohemian lifestyle because there was something so honorable about it. I was dazzled by the nobility it took to live only for, and by, your art. The ideal of the struggle meant that you were a serious artist and not just someone in it for the fame or wealth. I chose this musical specifically to be the show I auditioned for at the end because it always has a way of bringing me home to myself, relighting my sense of compassion and hope in the world. It reminds me that the most important things are people and relationships. It prompts me to be grateful and not take advantage of life. It makes me proud to be an artist and use that gift to make the world a better place. One of its most iconic songs, "Seasons of Love," tells a story about how people measure their life. I chose this song to play at the end because I feel like that is exactly what Lucy found in herself. She found a way to measure her life in moments of goodness, humanity, connectivity, and love.

In conclusion, I found that researching other one-person shows was helpful in terms of structure, creativity and being confident enough to write my own piece. I learned my process of writing, the benefits and pitfalls of collaboration, and how not to get stuck incorporating feedback. Also, it became clear to me that writing from a place of authenticity was the most exciting and truest form of my artistry. In my next chapter, I'll share the culmination of this work through the evolution of performance scripts and research analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: TEXT

3.1 My First Outline

Terrible Telegrams went through several different revisions throughout its development. In this chapter, I will first introduce my original outline which documents the genesis of the show's creation. Secondly, I will include the first full draft where I was still experimenting with several ideas. Finally, I will present the performance draft annotated with major changes driven by my needs as an actor.

As I began to craft the story of *Terrible Telegrams* in my head, I knew I needed to draft an outline of the plot. I have learned that what works best for me is to have a clear and defined shape of something so I can fill in or expound upon the missing pieces. There was a day in July that turned out to be one of my most inspirational days in the beginning of this process. I went to Highland Coffee with my boyfriend Jason and brainstormed the architecture of the show. I modeled my process of creating the outline from Susan Merson's "ABDCE" process that I spoke of earlier: action, background, development, climax, and ending. My goal was to make a rough sketch of the show and fill in the details as I went. Below is a copy of the outline I decided upon in its earliest form:

INTRO: (*Open with a terrible telegram *SONG 1*.*) (*Something funny and witty that grabs the audience.*)

- "So that's my job. Fun, right? It wasn't always like this."

- (*Walks in with a suitcase to NYC.*) "Hi, I'm looking for a room? How much? Well, I'm going to be a big Broadway star! I'm just not there yet. Sure, I'll take this tiny box with a cot for \$1400 a month. No, I love it."

- (*Audition fail, Audition Fail, Audition Fail.*)

- *(Reading online.)* “Are you an actress?” Yes! “Like to sing?” Duh. “Want to be a star?” “I was born to be!”

- *(Goes to audition.)* “Hi, I’m here to interview for Terrible Telegrams? I’ll be doing what exactly?”

- “Which brings us to now.”

ACT 1: *(Something happens that is a huge conflict (delivery of *SONG 2*) and I react to it, and debate over how to handle it. It’s life changing. At the end of the act, I’ve made a decision on how to move forward.)*

- *(Enters apartment and listens to voicemail 1 from Mom.)*

- *(Assignment one is in. The telegram?)* “She’s pregnant and you’re going to be a daddy.” *(You go to the neighborhood and recognize it. Turns out to be my boyfriend’s apartment. I realize he’s been cheating and debate with the audience and myself about how to handle the situation. I eventually knock on the door with rage or some extreme emotion. He’s speechless, I tell him it’s over, give the telegram but, with different enthusiasm than the last.)*

ACT 2: *(My decision is working. It’s fun, it’s inventive, it’s crazy, it’s funny, all is going well. I hit a high point where everything seems perfect, then something terrible happens. It all falls apart.)*

- *(Fun & Games!)*

- *(Open with a terrible telegram *SONG 3*)*

- *(Audition – callback)*

- *(Voicemail 2 from Mom saying “congrats.” Which lets the audience know you booked the job! Hooray! BF was holding you back.)*

- *(Really into work and does *SONG 4*.)*

- *(Rehearsal, opposite a cute actor, and turns out he's single! Move into this storyline...)*
- *(Get the apartment ready, he's coming over. Lights out. Morning. He's gone but we had a passionate night together.)*
- *(*SONG 5* - HIGH POINT/MIDPOINT)*
- *(Opening night! I think it went great. HUGE EGO! "Tomorrow I can quit my day job!" Next morning, bad reviews – I become cold and unemotional. The new guy is annoying and clingy, or it just doesn't work out, for now.)*
- *(End of the act, realize I can't quit the job, but hates it, and while doing another telegram *SONG 6*, I completely break down and apologize to a girl very similar to me.)*
- ACT 3:** *(Figure out how to deal with the crisis, and work toward fixing it. Whether I do or don't at the end, I have significantly changed from the beginning, and move into a new life afterward.)*
- *(Back in my apartment, depressed and listens to Voicemail 3), "Are you too busy to call me back?"*
- *(Finally call Mom, talking to her. Realizing that NYC isn't for her.) "I don't what I'm going to do. I don't where I'm going to go." (It's too long, beeps, she calls back to leave the 2nd half.)*
- CLOSE:** *(*SONG 7* - I write one for myself and sing it into a mirror. I'm firing herself, which is makes me realize I need to quit.)*
- *(After the song, I put the mirror in the same suitcase I enter with long ago, closes it up, takes one last look around the room/stage, and walks off.)*

3.2 First Draft

Beginning this draft, I felt like I was in a great place since my outline was so detailed. I had a lot of material to work with that would help in terms of character development and the arc of the story. Below is the first draft I submitted to my advisors for feedback and approval:

INTRODUCTION

(Song 1 beat)

“Ugh- Life wasn't always like this....”

(Some Frank Sinatra song about New York plays, as I'm walking around taking pictures and looking at buildings. Sit on suitcase, circle apartments- look at Backstage)

“Hi. My name is Lucy James and I'm going to be on Broadway! I'd like one apartment, please!

Just one bedroom. How much? Ok, what about a studio? How much? \$1400. Ok, I guess I'll take it. Wow, my cat's litter box was bigger than this. Huh? Nothing, I love it!”

(rents the apartment, establishes the space)

“Ok, *Backstage* what'cha got for me today?

Thank you for Being a friend: *Golden Girls the Musical* - too young

So, you think you can belt - *Season 11*

How to marry a Millionaire - I wish

Finding God- the musical; - perhaps he's somewhere with Waldo

Pirate Wives

Juggling your way to the top”

(Audition 1 - belt and then get cut off) (should I hand out head shots?) Lyrics from *Anything Goes*: “Cuz if baby I'm the bottom, you're the¹” *(gets cut off)* “Ok, thank you.”

(Audition 2- cover eye and argh pretending to have a sword in hand (Line: something about a wooden leg, ask if the character is Irish)

(Audition 3 - juggle and get hit with balls)

¹ “You're the Top” is a song from *Anything Goes*, a musical by Cole Porter, and the very first show I did in high school.

(come back in and go back to the computer)

(Reads aloud) “Craigslist- NYC- Gigs- Creative”

“Are you an actress?” Me: Yes! *(Reads)* Like to sing? Me: Why, yes I do! *(Reads)* Wanna be a star? Me: I was born to be! *(Reads)* Interview today at 2:30. 3838 West 52nd street Ste. 145”

(look at watch, grab purse and headshot)

“Hi, I’m here to interview for Terrible Telegrams...?” *(smile, smile, frown, bewildered)* “I’ll be doing what exactly?” *(perhaps a light change)*

- “Which brings us to now.”

ACT 1

(Enters apartment and listens to voicemail from mom.) (heard by audience)

“Hi, Lucy- I just wanted to see how you were doing today? Dad said you got a job singing. We’re so proud of you! See, all that church choir did pay off. Anyway, I know you’re busy but I really want to talk to you. I miss you. Love you so much, sweetie. Call when you can. Bye, bye.”

Lucy: “Love you mama but I’ll call you later.” *(Sit down, open computer- “You’ve got mail” pops up.)* “New singing telegram request: S found out she’s pregnant and wants to break it to G in a way he’ll never forget. Gah- this job’s terrible. Alright, where are we going? 345 Eldert Street. Apt. 127. That’s weird - I feel like I’ve been there before. Was that where Leah’s party was? Noooooooooooooo... is this Graham’s place? He told me he moved? Surely not. *(rereads)* S found out she’s pregnant and wants to break it to G in a way he’ll never forget. Well, well, well. That son of a bitch.” *(Grabs coat and purse. Lights fade down to walk out, fade up to knock on a door- the door opens.)*

(Song 2) “S wishes you called her back but now she's pregnant and you're the father, Congratulations, asshole!” - *(slam the door)*

Lucy: “So, that's that I guess. I can't believe I fell for that! How naive could I possibly be? NO, he wasn't running late because he was saving those kittens, NO he didn't want to split a salad because he was watching his weight and NO he didn't want you to stop by because he was afraid he would give you pink eye. He was cheating on you, the whole time!!” *(something else needs to happen here to make this dramatic shift plausible)*

“What do you do when you find out everything you believed was a lie? An awful practical joke the universe was making to just to test your gullibility? I moved here and I thought I had found the rest of my life. All my hopes and dreams falling into place. No, it's not perfect but it's mine and I'm working at least. Sure, it's a crappy terrible job but it's more than a lot of my friends are doing. I don't understand. I was so careful this time. Yeah, it was quick but the amount of time we spent together, in the beginning, was way more than normal. It's like there was a veil over my eyes but it doesn't really feel that way because I don't necessarily feel deceived, just abandoned. We said our goodbyes- he said that he was moving back to Maryland to take care of his dad and that being in a relationship right now was just too much pressure. How could he do this? Do people actually do this and do people lie about sick parents? What kind of terrible karma is that? Ok, Ok - so what do we do when we get hurt? We shut down. Great. Shut down commencing.” *(Sound cue of engine turning off or make it yourself) (Then, looking into hand held mirror)* “You know what, I want to cut everyone off, out of my life. I want to be one of those actors who will do anything to get the job. I'm sick and tired of being nice and polite and working hard for nothing, no payoff. My 'craft' is supposed to make me feel enlightened and compassionate? Bullshit- it needs to pay my bills. Screw it- I can be anyone I want here. I could

do drugs or become a sex telephone operator. I could stay out all night with men I meet at the bar and then get pizza at 4 am and throw it up in a cab. I don't have clean my bathroom or wash my dishes. I could become a slob; a girl who shaves her legs and doesn't clean the tub. I could flirt with a girl just for the hell of it. I could be a jerk on the train that refuses to get up for pregnant women or elderly people. I could just be a cold hard bitch. Someone who says 'outta my way' instead of 'excuse me.' Small town Lucy can be wiped away and destroyed for the pansy she is. Sleep with a ton of guys and never call them back. Just get slutty, guys do it all the time. They take advantage of girls, tell them what they want to hear, get what they want from them and then, boom, on to the next one. I could do away with everyone and just start taking from people. I feel like I've given for so long – I deserve to take for a while." (*back to mirror*) "Ok, now you're just going to put your head down, do your job, and make everything about your career. You're going to hustle like nobody else has ever hustled in this city? You dig? I dig." (*phone rings*) "Not now, mom." (*lights change*)

ACT 2

(Song 3)

Lucy: (*talking to the audience*) "This is getting to be pretty fun, actually. I mean, clearly, these people are awful and deserve to be told in a humorous yet sadistic way that their life is turning to shit. Sorry B, if you're going to cheat on your wife you deserve a little jingle about how terrible you are with a side of divorce papers. And no M you can't just sue a hot yoga studio because you got severely dehydrated. This one's ridiculous. P thought she could get away with stealing all the spoons out of her office - that one was fun to deliver. I show up to the office during a coffee break and there's not a spoon in sight. I deliver my telegram, the whole office cheers, and the spoons are magically restored 15 minutes later. I'm like a super hero. Well, that's

what the email said anyway. People are so weird. This city is so weird. I mean, why did she even need all those spoons? Why was she collecting them? Did she really think she was in danger of a spoon shortage plaguing the earth? Whatever. Stupid. Then there was J- ah yes, J is a mime. Apparently, J got caught sleeping around with C who is also a mime. His girlfriend, K, found a video of them on his phone but when she told me the story she said they we're just miming sex, which is just absurd no matter how you look at it, but apparently, that's even worse because it betrays some sacred clown code they have.”

(You've got mail-sound cue; looks at computer)

Lucy: “ooooo- an audition notice. Tony and Tina’s Wedding.² That’s real. That’s a real live play. Alright, need a comedic monologue and 16 bars of a song, a cappella. YES!!! I will be there at 3 pm.” *(grabs headshots and leaves) (audition) (write out comedic monologue and song)* “Thank you.” *(listens to them ask her to stay)* “Yeah, I can stick around.” *(goes back outside and sits in chair; to show passing of time cue clock sound and lights up and down 3 times and me in several different seated poses; lights up, beat)* “Yeah? Sure.” *(Walk through a door, close it but stays hidden, lights fade)* Then bust through it *(it’s apartment now)* “Oh my gaaawwwwwwd, I got it. I can’t believe I got it!!! Oh, my gosh!!! My first real show as a New York actor.” *(Turns on music: either another New York song or a Broadway hit “If they could see me now”, or some sort of celebratory song; phone dings with an email or cue: You’ve got mail)* “New Telegram- B is breaking up with B for cheating on him with B. Huh? I wonder if I should wear the bee costume? That’s not funny.” *(perhaps costume up, exit one door to enter another one)*

(There needs to be something else here to show the passage of time or some other way to move the story forward.)

² *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding* is interactive/ improvisational theatre that was originally created by Artificial Intelligence comedy troupe.

(Listen to voicemail from Mom)

“Hi, sweet girl. I miss you so much. Can you call me, please? I know you’re busy but I just really want to talk to you. Ok, I love you. Call when you can. Bye, Bye.” *(puts phone down)*

(Song 4)

(Direct address) “So, there’s this guy in the show. His name is Zack and he’s really cute. He’s talented, he’s funny and he can sing which I, of course, love and I don’t know but I think he kind of likes me. It strange, I feel like after Graham I’m doing such a good job of just shutting down, since I have so much experience in it, that I just forgot about guys and love and blah. I’m not one of those girls who needs to have a boyfriend because honestly, it’s all or nothing with me. I’m completely in or completely out. I get distracted or obsessed with them and what they want. I put all of my needs on hold and just cater to being a good girlfriend. And then the normal resentment kicks in when I don’t feel like that’s reciprocated which is ridiculous because no boyfriend that I’ve ever had has actually asked me to do that. I just do it and then get mad at them for it. So, when I go through periods of detachment from other people, it’s about the only time I let myself be selfish with my career. It’s like I can’t split focus or find a balance. I’m either a really good girlfriend, for a while at least, or I’m a hustling actor who cares only about that, nothing and nobody else. They just don’t fit together. Anyway, Zack asked me out and while a showmance isn’t the best idea, I think I’m going to do it. I finally feel like I’m back to being on top and I’ve earned this. This stupid job keeps me in practice and I’m working now. Sure, it robs me of pieces of my soul sometimes but that’s New York. You’ve got to learn to take care of yourself here. Maybe this time, I’ll just find a way to have fun and not let him in. Sure, he’s nice and cute but he probably only wants to sleep with me so maybe if I make that decision first it won’t hurt when it happens. Perhaps I should be the dude for once.”

(there is a knock on the door, lights down and back up with me in bed, back to the audience, very sportsman cheer) “Yeah Luce, atta girl. Just take what you want. No apologies and no excuses.”

(lights)

(Song 5)

“Here’s the deal, I hate to brag but I am leaps and bounds better than everyone else in this cast. Hardly any of these people went to school and half of them don’t even sound like real people when they speak. They’re so mechanical and don’t know what to do with their arms. Everyone’s just walking around like toy soldiers. People are still calling for line and we open in 3 days. I mean, sure, the greedy actor in me is like ‘yes, this is great!! I am better than everyone here!!’ but the shitty part about that is that nobody wants to work with terrible actors because you can’t get anything out them. They’re not doing anything except overzealously delivering their lines while you’re up there acting your pants off trying to be vulnerable and available or whatever. While, yes I’m sure I’ll get great reviews this show is going to suck. Also, Zack, ugh I can’t believe I slept with him. The guy is terrible. He seemed great at first but I was just wrong. He’s awful. Sure, he’s cute in a puppy dog kind of way but he can’t act his way out of a paper bag. And look, I am, I am slaying this show. The director loves me and everybody keeps telling me how good I am. I just feel like I’m finally right where I need to be and you know what, I am good dammit. I worked really hard to make this great. Well, my part at least and if we can pull this show off it will be because of me! AND, Terrible Telegrams has some weird cult following and is blowing up right now. Not that I will need this stupid job for much longer. I’m sure after my reviews come out I will get cast just about anywhere. I mean I’m not totally sure how all that works but surely if I walk into auditions with great reviews I will have a much better shot at getting the leading roles I want.”

ACT 3

(Song 6)

(excitedly pulls out a newspaper- thumbing through it) “Come on, come on, where is it? Oh, my gosh, here it is.” *(reads review)* “Tony and Tina’s Wedding- Tony and Tina should go ahead and file for divorce. Scratch that, you know sometimes when people accidentally confuse weddings and funerals? Perhaps that is what’s happening here. This is a show where live theatre comes to die.” “Jesus. Ok, Lucy James, Lucy James, where does it say? Ah ha- Lucy James.” “Lucy James, a new comer to New York theatre, should pack her bags and move back to her po-dunk farm where she thrives as a big fish. James clearly thinks so much of herself and her performance that I’m shocked I could fit in the theatre alongside her giant ego. It is evident James has minimal training and actually visibly scoffs at the other actors on stage. James is in for a real New York kick in the teeth if she came this far to do this badly. New York is a party you’re invited to, not one you crash. Go home, Mayberry, no one sent you an invitation.”

(Call from mom, totally distraught and doesn’t pick up so she listens to the message)

Mom: “Lucy, you can’t put this off forever. We have to deal with this. I know you’re sad. This is a big shock to all of us, especially me, but not talking to me isn’t going to make it go away. Not talking to me doesn’t mean it didn’t happen and that I’m not sick. Please call me back, there’s a lot of stuff we need to go over with dad and the lawyers. I love you, honey. Call me back.”

(Song 7) (a song about a girl getting broken up with, sings and then immediately breaks down.)

Lucy: “I’m so sorry. This is such an awful thing to do! What is happening to me? I feel so angry and sad all the time. I’m constantly blaming other people for everything that happens to me. I use to be such a good person. I went to church and I volunteered and I was a good listener and I wanted to save the world. I wanted to build wells for people in Africa and run a food bank. I

wanted to work at a children's hospital with a stupid clown nose and make people laugh. Where has my heart gone? What is this mysterious organ in my body that beats for all the wrong things? I'm so sorry- You don't deserve this. Nobody deserves this. I can't even tell my mom what I'm doing because she would be so disappointed. My parents have devoted their entire lives to helping people and all I can do is look for ways to help myself. To get ahead in this world, in this stupid industry, by stepping on other people. This is not who I am. This is not the way I want to live. I want to do better, to be better, for her. I owe her that. I owe myself that. I can't stay in this city anymore. It's eating me alive." *(Pause, realize she has said all this to a complete stranger.)*

"I'm sorry I sang really bad news to you. That was a really mean thing to do. I hope you can forgive me. It seems like D is a real jerk if you ask me. I'm sure you deserve better." *(close the door)* Call mom- "Hey mama, I'm gonna come home for a little while. Yeah, no I'm fine. How are you? Yeah? Ok, well I'm gonna take the train. I should be there in a few days. No, it's fine. I don't mind the train. It gives me time to think. Ok, well I love you and I'll see you guys soon. Ok? K, bye."

(Song 8) *(a song about getting fired) (Fire yourself, walk out the door, lights down.)*

(The end.)

After submitting this draft to my thesis committee, the response was the same across the board. I had written a play with three strong concepts but needed to choose one. I included Lucy's journey of personal relationships with men and her mother, of her time in *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*, and the job that is *Terrible Telegrams*. None of these plot lines could be fully fleshed out because I was focusing on including every detail from my outline. After discussing this with my advisor, I felt a little defeated as if I was back to square one. I knew *Terrible Telegrams* was the strongest and most exciting script for me to write but I still wasn't sure how to develop the

story. If I had chosen to make the play about Graham or *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, then the telegrams would have been an afterthought and less crucial to the story. Lucy's relationship to Graham and her relationship to the industry would have taken precedence over the statement I wanted to make with the script which was her losing her humanity in a job she thought would bring her happiness and success. I decided I didn't want to overshadow my chance to write the original idea I came up with so long ago.

3.3 Final Draft

The next step in this process was making a new outline for the topic I had chosen to write on. I mentioned earlier that I made a voice recording of a conversation with one of my best friends about where to take it next. This served as my next outline. While several moments changed and the ending was less clear in the beginning, I knew that I wanted to simplify her story and focus more on her humanity, the comedy of the songs, and the positive affect the journey has on her. Below is a copy of the final script I used for my thesis performance:

“Hi. I'm Lucy James.”

“The tempo is (*play tempo on leg*), thanks.”

(*Sing Kiss Me Kate- “Always True to You In My Fashion”*³ (*shy, timid, nervous*) *doesn't get to the end of the song*) “There's a mad man known as Mac, who is planning to attack

If a mad attack means a Cadillac.” (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

³ “Always True to You In My Fashion” from the musical *Kiss Me Kate* was a one of my first audition songs I learned in undergraduate training and it has stuck with me ever since. I chose it because it shows off my range.

Monologue: “Because they’re all gay, all the men I meet are gay. Some of them know they’re gay and that’s bad enough but some of them aren’t sure, so they go out with me for clarification.”⁴ (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Monologue: “I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths!”⁵ (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Monologue: “You know, this really, this was not how my life was supposed to turn out.”⁶ (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Song: “There’s a mad man known as Mac, who is planning to attack” (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Monologue: “I am very fond of you, Cecily.”⁷ (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Monologue: “Romeo”⁸ (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Breath, as if about to deliver another monologue. (*gets cut off*)

“Thank you.”

Song: “There’s a mad man known as Mac, who is planning to attack

⁴ This is the beginning of my favorite go to monologue from *Women of Manhattan* by John Patrick Shanley.

⁵ This is from one of Blanche Dubois’ famous speeches from Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named Desire*.

⁶ I worked on this monologue my first semester of graduate school and fell in love with it. It’s from *Candy Hearts* by Theresa Rebeck.

⁷ I chose this so I could incorporate a dialect piece. It is a line from Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

⁸ I’ve always wanted to play Juliet from William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

If a mad attack means a Cadillac, okay

But I'm always true to you darling in my fashion

Yes, I'm always true to you. Darling in my way." (*actually finishes!*)

"Thank you very much. (*beat*) Yeah, all of my information is on my resume. (*beat*) Oh, wow.

Thank you so much. Have a nice day."

(*Run to the train*) "Oh, hold the door please." (*they don't...perhaps sit down*)

(*Direct address to the congregation*)

"I have a Bachelor's of Fine Arts and a Master's of Fine Arts. I have been fortunate enough train with some of the greatest teachers and directors in this country. I've been able to work on Shakespeare, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, and George Bernard Shaw. I've been so lucky to sing alongside some amazing actors in *Les Misérables*, *Anything Goes*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Wicked* and as cliché, as it sounds my most favorite musical ever, *Rent*. I moved to New York about 6 months ago and I've been auditioning like crazy but I haven't booked anything yet. I know it takes a while but man, I just want to get back to the work. Those days of long rehearsals, breakthroughs, new discoveries, and fits of terror that you're a just a big a fat fraud. It sounds ridiculous but I love it!! Anyway, it's great to be in New York. I always said I would come and I would do it. Look at me now." (*phone rings*) "Hello. Yes, this is she. Hi. Ok. Ok. Ok! Great!

Thank you so much!!" (*back to audience*) "Oh my God! I just booked my first New York job."

(*Light's change - Knock, knock, knock- door opens, begin singing*)

(*Song 1*)

"Your mom's gay – just called to say. She's leaving your dad for Aunt Helen, her best friend. She thought you knew, you didn't have a clue so she kept their relationship a secret 'til you moved out.

Your mom's gay, go about your day. It doesn't change anything about your life except that your grandma had a heart attack and here's the address of the hospital that you can find her at.

Your mom's gay, go out and play. Modern families are the new black so just move on don't look back, everything will be okay there's nothing more for me to say." *(spoken)* "Your mom's gay!" *(Expecting applause but reacts to someone just standing there baffled. Living off the high of the humor.) (beat)* "Um...I'll just close this for you."

(DA) "So, I got this job, my first New York gig, 'Terrible Telegrams'. It's a singing telegram service that delivers...unfortunate news. It's kind of like Barbara Walters meets Amy Schumer. Well maybe not Barbara Walters, more like Katie Couric, well if we're going to be real here, it's more Sally Jesse Raphael than anything but listen, she got great ratings! It's not Broadway but I'm singing, at least. It can be pretty funny sometimes because people know that you're coming or they sing along. Well, that's what management said anyway. They said people tend to respond well and not in the stone-cold way that person just did..." *(beat)* "No, this is great! This is my FIRST New York job!! This is what I'm here to do. I'm here to be a working actor and singer and get paid for it!"

(Lights change - Knock, knock, knock- door opens, begin singing)

(Song 2)

"Divorce papers were filed and your husband signed

He found someone younger online

Her boobs still point up and she's just twenty-five

So now you're alone and past your prime

The kids are at the park while this song breaks your heart

Have a drink and consider your time apart

Oh, and he's taking the dog but leaving the cat

That puss would claw and it got too fat. *(spoken)* Sound familiar?"

(beat) (duck from her punch)- "Whoa, don't hurt the messenger, lady."

(DA) "Gees. Nobody told me that might happen. Ugh, what am I doing wrong? Other singers seem to be doing really well. They're getting tips and people are actually requesting them. I am going to do well at this job if it kills me! I wonder how they don't let it get to them? Sure, I guess I'm a little more sensitive than most and while these telegrams can be hilarious a few of them are downright cruel. Whatever, everyone's sense of humor is different, I guess. But I did read this article the other day about how helpful it is to use humor through grief. Which is what I'm doing. Great!"

(Lights change - Knock, knock, knock- door opens, begin singing)

(Song 3)

"So, your friends are getting married and everyone's having kids

But today your Facebooks flooded with pics of what you did

You went out cuz' you were sad and drank too much gin

You danced on the bar and then slept with your friend, Jim

Jim told his wife and now they're getting a divorce,

You ruined both their lives because social media's ruining yours (promiscuous whore?)

You're a selfish spoiled millennial who thinks she deserves it all

But you haven't worked a day in your life – oh wait- you've got a call

It's Jim's wife."

(React to the door being slammed in her face. Beat) "Slam the door in my face, slam the door in your face. Maybe somebody shouldn't have slept with Jim." *(Turns to walk away. Man*

interrupts her walk to ask for money.) “Excuse me? Does it look like I have any money? I’m wearing a sandwich board.”

(phone rings) “Hello. Yes. They did? Me, specifically? Wow. Ok. Thanks!!” *(hang up)*

“Awesome.”

(Run to song 4 - reminiscent of earlier sprinting back and forth to auditions)

(Light’s change - Knock, knock, knock- door opens, begin singing)

(Song 4)

“Rogaine is for losers and balding divorcees

She hit the pause on your relationship to say

Your dad jeans are a joke,

Looks like you’ve given up hope

You don’t make enough money, not to dress that way

You’re cocky and lame

And your underwear’s riddled with stains.”

(Prideful, she closes the door and walks off as if she’s on top of the world.)

(DA) “People love me! Well, the people who request me, at least. Apparently, a review came out

on Yelp saying that I was the best terrible telegram artist in the business. ‘Lucy’s lack of compassion or humanity is exactly what my husband deserved after the way he treated me.

Thanks, Lucy!!’ You’re welcome, at hot mama underscore pissed off underscore seven! Oh, my

gosh, is it awful that I’m really good at this? No!! Look, as an actor I was taught to live truthfully

in my imaginary circumstances and to commit fully to my actions. It’s just character work. I get

to really apply these methods that I was taught and worked so hard on. Sure, I wish I was on

stage instead. I really miss it, you know. I will say that the only problem with this work, is that it

doesn't allow me to audition for shows but this is a full-time job. Sometimes we have to make sacrifices. Also, they've asked me to join the creative team which basically means they want me to help write the telegrams. I think it's a really good step forward for me."

(Run to song 5)

(Lights change – Knock, knock, knock- door opens, begin singing)

(Song 5) (put on sock puppets)

"I think this is illegal but your doctor gave me your results and they're not good

She said you stole her parking space at work so you deserve to hurt.

You tested positive for Chlamydia- that's really too bad- I heard it itches

Or maybe that's just crabs- hell, I don't know the difference

That'll teach you to sleep with actors and bartenders and Jake the sexual predator

I think this is illegal so you should get a new doctor, perhaps get a new lawyer

Oh! And don't forget to tell your partner about your new Chlamydia."

(see him behind her, muffle speak) "He's right behind you." (awkward beat- hurriedly slam the door to get away) "Sorry." (run away) (take off sock puppets)

(DA) "This is harder than I thought. How are you supposed to separate yourself from this? The other day I was walking home from work and I saw this homeless man. The same one I see every day. He's a big guy, a little overweight, huge feet but no shoes. He has this grocery cart that he pushes around the neighborhood. It's filled with all kinds of stuff. Stuff you and I would qualify as trash but it's probably all he has. Lots of empty milk jugs, a pile of clothes, a blanket, something that looked like a radio but it was probably busted. Anyway, I was walking by him and he asked for money and I said I didn't have any. He just kind of scoffed and judged me and then I got offended that he judged me so I judged him back. I rolled my eyes and under my

breath, I said the worst thing. I called him a pathetic lazy bum. Ok, maybe not the worst thing ever, but why did I do that? He wasn't doing anything wrong. He just asked for help and where I come from if people need help, you give it to them. Why didn't I just give it to him? I think this job's hurting my heart."

(Light's change - Knock, knock, knock- door opens, (With trepidation, begins singing)

(Song 6)

"Rover got ran over by a school bus

We think that the driver was drunk

He swerved to miss the grandma on the sidewalk but instead he hit your dog in the park

The police came by but they couldn't help him

His leg was broke and he had internal bleeding

I think you could press charges if you found him but the driver freaked and decided to flee"

(Responding to her) "I got it. I'm so sorry." *(close the door)*

(DA) "That was awful. This isn't funny anymore. I'm getting less and less jobs and I don't think I care. I saw that homeless man again the other day. I was sad and of course, I had been crying on the train because that's what you do in New York. I was walking by him and he looked down at me and nodded. He didn't ask for money, he just nodded as if he knew I needed some comfort. I cracked a smile and out of the blue, I just handed him \$5. But what's crazy is that I don't lie, because honestly, I'm terrible at it, but for some reason, I gave it to him as if I was apologizing. Then, I said 'this is all I have' and I shoved it in his hand. He didn't know what to say and I didn't even give him a chance to say anything, anyways. I walked away and I just lost it. It wasn't all I had... I had made a conscious decision to lie to a stranger that had asked me for nothing. Who am I? I turned around, I walked back and gave him a \$20. He looked at me in

shock and I said ‘I’m sorry, I lied to you. Please take this too.’ His eyes got huge when he saw that \$20 bill. He paused, looked down at me and said ‘are you ok?’ And then I started laughing because no, I wasn’t ok! Here was a man that had nothing to his name but a cart full of jugs and radio parts asking me if I was ok? Then, like a normal human being, I pulled it together and introduced myself. His name was Raynard. I shook his big giant calloused hand and offered him the money again but he wouldn’t take it. God bless him, he probably thought I was nuts but you know what, he’s the first person in a long time that might have actually seen me for who I use to be. No, for who I am.”

(Lights change- Slow walk to the middle of the stage.)

(Song 7) (as if you’re fixing yourself in a mirror and then:)

“You’re fired, you’re the worst at your job

You’re fired, employees gawk at your sob

Story you’re terrible, you’re a bully

How can you go on treating people this way?

You know better, it’s not ok

What do you think your parents would say?

You’re fired...”

(DA) “I wrote myself a little song today. It felt pretty good. It’s interesting to rediscover your own humanity in the doing for someone else but, of course, that’s where it lives. Over there. It’s how you treat the over there, though, that’s what counts. Also, something good did come out of all this, after I fired myself, guess what happened? I got an audition.”

(change and place the sign, walk back to the line- humming “Seasons of Love”⁹)

⁹ “Seasons of Love” is a song from the musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson.

(DA) “Hi. I’m Lucy James.” (end of play)

I wanted to make sure that with this draft I took more of an active approach and told my story through the doing instead of explaining. Having decided to cut so much from the first draft, I received a new freedom to craft a stronger and more cohesive plot line. I was able to drive the story through my actions in the songs and react to the responses. This concept served me much more as an actor than the previous draft would have. In the first draft, there is a lot of exposition and fewer opportunities for me to be specific. Here, I had playable actions and the only time I spent directly addressing the audience was when I thought it was necessary. I tried to cut out anything that didn’t advance the story. Also, what made this version more fun for me were the spaces in which I could go back to my roots. There were two ways this occurred. First, I was able to delve into the comedy of the songs and revisit the aspect of “sketch” that I was originally going for. Second, I further developed the ending by writing what I know. I see now that one of the reasons the first draft was so broad was that I was focused more on creating a fictional story instead of writing the truth. The memory of Raynard’s story flowed through me like rushing water out of a faucet. I was so eager to write about him and how he impacted my life. I wanted to give that moment meaning in a way that I never had before. I wanted to simplify Lucy’s journey so that delivering these terrible telegrams would challenge her to stay connected to her most authentic self and help her make decisions about what actions to take when she felt as if she had hit rock bottom.

Overall, I am very pleased with how my script and the concept of my show evolved over time. I am glad I was able to be specific in my choices because it led my performance to be more

nuanced and grounded. It also proves one of the ideas that I tend to struggle with in general, which is “more isn’t more.” I feel like I was able to harness my focus of humanity, comedy, and humility into a more concise and cohesive piece of theatre.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE AND POST PERFORMANCE

In this chapter, I will be reflecting on my performance experience and the feedback I received afterward. I did several “living room” performances that gave me the confidence to put *Terrible Telegrams* on its feet while adjusting to new playing spaces. Also, I will be commenting on the performance of the scheduled shows and how each night differed, along with the feedback I received from the audience, my peers, and the faculty at LSU.

4.1 Thanksgiving “Living Room” Performance

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, I decided to perform my show for my family as a final rehearsal, but also because they wouldn't be able to attend the performances the following weekend in Baton Rouge. The stage for this performance was my sister's living room in Dallas; after pushing the chairs back, I was able to work with a playing space of 5 feet by 13 feet. The space was a little tight during the beginning when I was doing my auditions in figure eights but after that, establishing the rest of the space was easy. I was also glad, now especially, that I decided to cut all of my original props and sound cues. This proved to me that I could tell the same story without all the bells and whistles. I brought only the necessities: the sandwich board and kazoo. John Eddy, the props master at LSU, helped me design a sandwich board with the play's title in a carnival font and a vaudevillian sad face that was the business' logo. Overall the performance went really well and I was very pleased with how far it had come. The jokes were landing, the telegrams left them laughing and mortified simultaneously, and by the end everyone was in tears. Success! While that seems like I was seeking a superficial reaction, I designed my play for the audience to meet Lucy at her highest confidence, be excited for her when she gets the job, and then empathize with her as she starts to crumble. By the end, the audience has seen how the job has changed her, is rooting for her when she rediscovers her humanity through her

interaction with Raynard, and when she decides to quit. I felt like by the end of my performance my family and Jason, who so graciously filmed it, had taken that ride¹⁰. There were a few moments that were particularly effective for this audience. The first was when I sang the first telegram because it was a complete shock to everyone, except my sister. Everyone's mouths dropped and they became a bit apprehensive. This was exciting to me because I wanted to surprise them with how terrible the telegrams really were. The second moment was telling the story of Raynard, which was an important moment to me because that story immediately brought me into second circle¹¹. I became fully engaged and present with my audience, which is grounded on a lifetime of preparation of meaning. Growing up, I spent a lot of time going on mission trips, singing at rest homes, and visiting the elderly at church. Having these experiences have allowed me to be empathetic in ways I might not have been otherwise. Those people were so appreciative that I was there, so whatever we were doing, whether singing, playing with kids, or building, was just icing on the cake. I learned early on that just being present while talking or listening to people was the most important thing I could do. Similarly, I wanted Lucy's experience with Raynard to hit home and ignite her sense of compassion and communion. Therefore, telling the story of Raynard was my way of reminding the audience that Lucy wasn't a bad person, just a little lost. Finally, one of the moments I connected to the most was during my final song where I'm firing myself and one of the lyrics is "you know better, it's not ok, what do you think your parents would say?" I am very close with my family and they are incredible role

¹⁰ This is an expression I first heard in my Meisner Technique focused Acting Studio. Taken from *True Acting Tips* by Larry Silverberg, this is a term used when describing the emotional journey of a character.

¹¹ Second circle is a concept that comes from Patsy Rodenburg's book *The Actor Speaks*. One of the "circles of concentration", it can be described as the circle of energy that requires the most presence and attention from another person (226).

models, so doing something hurtful to other people for my own selfish gain would have never been allowed in my house. My parents only preached kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. This was a moment in which I could tap into my own upbringing and respond truthfully to how disappointed my parents would be if they found out I was hurting people.

Needless to say, if you're looking for positive feedback, bear your soul to the people who love you the most in the world and expect a giant ego boost in return. Everyone was very kind with their compliments; my parents couldn't believe I wrote the whole thing, my sister laughed and cried, and Jason was very sweet and commended me on developing a more in-depth story than the one we brainstormed months before. He said it was a much deeper and more compassionate piece than the idea with which I started. Also, he suggested that I add one more encounter with Raynard in the middle of the play. He suggested that I introduce him early on when I'm starting to spiral downward and then when I bring him back up the next two times it will be in service to "the rule of three," a commonly understood comedic principle that suggests that things that come in threes are more funny. I felt like this was a great addition to my story and helped to demonstrate that Raynard was the catalyst for Lucy's change of heart. All in all, the best thing about this performance was that afterward I felt like the hard part was over. I had performed it for the people who mean the most to me and from then on, every other time would be an opportunity for me to play with less pressure and nervous energy.

4.2 Performance 1 – Friday Night

After my Thanksgiving performance, Jason and I found the perfect costume for Lucy's character. He had the idea of polka dots, which I thought was a nice addition to my carnival idea. I found a black and white polka dotted dress that was perfect and really helped me get into character. It's sweet but a little showy, like Lucy. What was so wonderful about Friday night's

performance was that I was barely nervous because the previous week's performance for my family had felt like the play's opening. I remember a few highlights from this performance, including a few people in the audience to whom I could really talk. This is crucial in my show since my direct addresses clearly break the fourth wall. I wanted these to be interactive without making people feel like they had to participate. What was exciting about this performance was that I had to hold for laughs. It was thrilling to experience their reaction to a certain telegram and often they would clap, laugh, or even verbally respond. Laughter was drowning many of the songs out, so it was a fun challenge for me to stay connected. Finally, one moment that was very special to me was the very last bit where I exclaim that something good had come out of all of this and I had gotten an audition. After I turned my sign around to show it was for *Rent* and the music to "Seasons of Love" began to play, I became very emotional. That was a key moment for me. I chose that specific song because it makes me feel strong, compassionate, and an advocate for art so there was an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and pride. It had sunk in that I had written, produced, and performed my very own piece of theatre and I was immensely proud of it. In no way, do I think it is perfect, but being able to take ownership over something you have worked so hard on is a wonderful feeling. Afterward, I was very grateful for the acknowledgment I received. Several members of the faculty said it was the strongest and most honest work they had seen me do, which meant a lot. Friends and acquaintances said I made them laugh and cry, while perfect strangers congratulated me for being "truly hilarious" and having a nice singing voice. All of those are generous sentiments I will treasure for a long time.

4.3 Performance 2 – Saturday Night

I was excited about Saturday night's performance for several different reasons: the anticipation of getting to perform, the elation of new discoveries, and frankly, the relief of being

done. I went in with clear objectives to not play the previous night's moments and continue to talk to the new people in the audience. To my surprise, several of the undergraduate theatre students were sitting in the front two rows. They were a wonderful, calming, engaged audience, though perhaps more reserved than the previous night. There was a meta-theatrical element to sharing this story with an audience of young theatre students. *Terrible Telegrams* is a play about an actor who loses her humanity in the midst of professional hardships and then rediscovers it by remembering the most authentic acting lesson she can, focusing on the other person. By fixating too much on her own ego she overlooks the most important part of the craft she studied: the other person and how she wants to affect change in them. These lessons on life and acting were especially timely and relevant for this group.

Since most of the audience members were actors, they already understood the life of rejection, vulnerability, and desperation to work any way you can. The most magical moment that evening was during the song "Rover Got Ran Over." Previously, I had played this song to an adult female because several of my friends have dogs that I love. It was easy for me to connect to telling one of them that their dog got ran over and how much it would break their heart. However, as I was singing that song, I had the impulse to change 'my other' to a child. This idea popped up in my head because throughout the show the audience was responding more to her lack of humanity than the frivolous comedy of the songs. Acting on the impulse to sing this song to a child instead of an adult really worked for me. The door opened and my eyes had to drift downwards to see her. I bent over and started to sing. It was so magical because in that moment I had no idea what was going to happen. I felt disgusted and somehow guilty of a crime. It was my most truthful experience of shame in the show. It was the moment I could feel the audience shift. It went from being awkwardly funny and uncomfortable to cruel and disgraceful. It reorganized

my insides and raised the stakes in a way that was previously lacking. Lucy had truly hit rock bottom. After the show, a good friend who saw both shows commented on the fact that he didn't realize that song was being sung to a child. I told him I had made the choice in the moment tonight and the look on his face was priceless. He was astonished and told me it changed the whole show for him. He said that moment was so powerful that it brought him to tears. While I've never been in the business of self-congratulations, that discovery was my proudest moment in graduate school. It was a tiny speck of the spontaneous, moment-to-moment work for which actors strive. I was so proud to really live in the newness and surprise of what can happen in live theatre.

4.4 Opportunities for Growth

Over the winter break I was fortunate enough to revisit my show twice. I performed it for family and friends in Ohio and North Carolina. While it was a fun experience, I felt like I cheated my audience and myself a bit. I had taken several days off from looking at the script and these performances were just not as full as I wanted them to be. However, what I took away from the experience is that I need to be overly prepared and adaptable to my playing space. That is not brand new information to me but it was still a little disheartening. I was easily taken out of my given circumstances, the stakes were nowhere near as high, and my heart just wasn't fully in it. While I received wonderful feedback that I am grateful for, I couldn't help but feel a little underwhelmed. The point of simplifying the technical aspects of the show was so I could do it anywhere. Going forward it's helpful to recognize these challenges exist and to make plans to address them.

From an acting perspective, I am very aware of my opportunities for growth. For example, I can get much more specific about who is at each door. I need to develop very intricate

character descriptions of the people that are receiving the telegrams. Who are they? Why are they getting this telegram? What has just happened before they opened the door and how will it affect them once they've heard it? During my writing process, I overlooked this important detail because I assumed I would just add it in during rehearsals, however, it quickly became an important part of the puzzle that was missing. I would also make a stronger choice about my relationship to my imagined audience. The idea of a congregation is a great home base for me but I didn't make any strong choices about why I was there. I decided that I was giving my testimony so I could ask for forgiveness and bear witness to those that might be going through the same thing, but looking back there were no real stakes. There was nothing driving me to the end of the play and no real sense of urgency to change. From a research standpoint, I would interview people who have actually delivered singing telegrams before. While writing the play, I contacted someone in New Orleans who never got back to me, so in the future I would definitely get in touch with the singing telegram company in Dallas. Getting insight on how they write the telegrams and how people respond would be very useful. As I said earlier, I tend to write what I know, so being able to work from actual experiences instead of making up fictional circumstances would help to foster my belief. Finally, I would focus more on the idea I had at the beginning of how to use humor through grief. Unfortunately, throughout my process that idea got lost in the mix but it is definitely a topic I would expand more on. I would find a way to incorporate that concept in a more meaningful way. However, I feel like that could be a new play in itself so perhaps it can spawn a whole other story.

Throughout this process I was fortunate enough to get a lot of assessments, constructive criticism, and questions to ponder as I move forward with the play. The faculty at LSU, as well as my thesis committee, provided insightful feedback that guided me toward a more nuanced

performance, especially in terms of specificity and clarity. For example, they asked questions like: “What kinds of warm-ups does Lucy do before she delivers the telegrams? Is there a trajectory of her feelings about these? Does she have to try harder as she progresses? Does she get more disillusioned? More strident? More excited? Does she actually, maybe, get a kick out of this job? What's the conflict for her? How desperate is she?” (Walsh). These were very helpful prompts when I was working on character development and objectives. I am someone who thrives off of such direction and feedback. I don't often have an ego about the work because I know there is never a right answer. I get excited about new discoveries, I like to take risks, and I enjoy seeing what lands and what doesn't. Knowing as much as I can before I go into performances is the best way for me to stay confident.

I had a lot of directorial help from my thesis advisor, Stacey Cabaj. In addition to vocal, writing, and structural notes, Stacey also suggested adding the sock puppets which I couldn't imagine doing the show without now. She also recommended placing the kazoo in the spotlight at the end which signified letting that part of Lucy go. She advised me on how to clarify the styles between each song and recommended that I give the Yelp reviewer a name. All of these made my performance more nuanced, meaningful, and complex. Stacey's final assessment of my show was that it “was a lovely showcase of Cara's charming presence, sketch comedy savvy, vocal versatility, and depth of feeling; though it may need some further dramaturgical work for a future production, it handily met the goals for the thesis project” (Cabaj). I was grateful for Stacey's feedback because she was there for the entire evolution of my piece and helped shape it into a fully realized production. She helped me stay focused on my concept and what I wanted to get out of this experience.

I also received additional feedback during my end of year assessments with other LSU faculty. Nick wrote, “Cara’s thesis solo showed tenacity through its many incarnations finally resting on a clear and playable narrative. It was an effective forum for her to demonstrate her singing ability and her comic sensibility while turning the audience attention toward a more serious crisis of personal growth and empathy” (Erickson). Finally, my thesis advisor Rick Holden wrote “Cara’s solo piece was entertaining, and even touching, as Lucy James fought to survive and thrive as an actor in New York. It also showcased her singing voice and comic sensibilities. What could have been just another version of an oft-told story surprised us with a more probing thrust as she questioned how her day job might be nibbling at the corners of her soul. Indeed, the piece might easily have become merely a fun, dark, comic romp but instead made us think and demonstrated Cara’s understanding that as actors we must not lose touch with our sense of empathy and need to be of service.” This feedback was constructive for me because I felt like I had accomplished several of my goals for the piece: to create empathy for an imperfect character, to challenge myself as a singer and comic, and to remind my audience that kindness that doesn’t cost anything.

The idea of how far I came in so little time and how much further I could go is very exciting to me. I am so grateful for the comments, feel fortunate enough to have performed several times outside of just the scheduled show days, and look forward to where *Terrible Telegrams* can go next.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to summarize where I started as an actor and theatre artist before graduate school, what I've learned through working on this thesis project, and how my training has bettered me as a citizen, artist, and human being.

In 2008, I had already spent two years struggling to live in New York. My parents were up for the weekend and they surprised me with theatre tickets to see *The Lion King* on Broadway. As an actor who was always too broke to see theatre, this was like winning the lottery. All my bitterness towards the city and the industry melted away the second the lights dimmed and when the first few chords of "The Circle of Life" began, I immediately started weeping. I didn't know what had come over me. I had not expected it to happen but a wave of energy and excitement rushed over me and I was home. I wasn't even onstage and I was home. It wasn't even my favorite show and I was home. That was just one experience that I can recall and remember exactly how it felt to be totally present in the theatre. I write this to recapitulate what it is about acting that still feels magical and why I knew that I wanted to continue down this challenging, uncertain career path.

I have been interested in pursuing a graduate degree for a very long time. I wanted to luxuriate in the process and go back to spending all of my time studying the craft. I felt I would be better equipped with the tools I needed to continue to work professionally. I hoped to learn more about the business and earn Equity Membership Candidate points towards full union membership. I looked forward to having the privilege of time to really dissect a script. I was excited to explore objectives, actions, intentions, physical embodiment, and script analysis. I yearned to continue my education to further my craft and hone in on certain parts upon which I desperately wanted to improve. I was excited to focus on classical theatre, modern realism, film,

improvisation, and voice work. I wanted to deepen my understanding of and facility with playwright's like Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Brecht. I hoped to explore new avenues of Eugene O'Neill, John Patrick Shanley, and Rajiv Joseph. I wanted acting on camera training with a focus on internalization. I wanted to learn the fundamental rules of improvisation and live in the excitement of thinking on my feet. I desired further voice training to learn how to fully support the text, gain more resonance, and study dialects. Grad school at 31 was a much better fit for me than it would have been right out of undergrad. At 21, I was fresh, naive and excited about any job I could get. Now, I'm a bit more careful and seasoned in my life experiences. I have stories of failures and rejections; because of these I am now more able to fully appreciate the work.

We create from a deeply intuitive place and I feel like *Terrible Telegrams* went from being a flicker of a flame to a full out house fire. It was an idea that lived in me that I never said yes to, until now. It gave me the opportunity to develop, write, sing, direct, produce, and star in a piece of theatre I got to create from the ground up. As a result of this show, and graduate school in general, I've identified that specificity, authenticity, and humanity are the fastest ways for me to access a role. This was especially true for developing the character of Lucy James. Lucy's journey, like my own journey, reminded me of the importance of vulnerability, the need for human connection, and the kindness that lies in others we overlook because of our own egos. This process taught me that I needed to go deeper instead of bigger. I need to be less afraid of failing so I can take bigger risks. I've learned that I must put my attention on the other person instead of always trying to be two steps ahead on my own. I have to focus on living in the moment and stop trying to be the smartest actor in the room. This process has taught me patience and humility. It has taught me that collaboration can be your best friend and your worst enemy. *Terrible Telegrams* allowed me to explore my darker sense of comedy in a non-judgmental way

and forced me to play to my delight. In the future, I hope to either expand the show or at least remount it in a festival. I would keep Lucy's story the same but improve upon several different elements that I felt were lacking. As noted in Chapter Three, I would take more time with the telegrams, establish a clearer idea of who I was speaking to and why, as well as focus more on the moment before. The questions I would continue to ask to deepen that preparation are: "Why now?" and "What has just happened?" I would give Lucy a greater sense of humanity in the beginning so that there's a larger progression or character arc. I would be interested in expanding upon Raynard's role in her life and further develop his backstory. The possibilities are endless but I would love to explore where it could go and rework it in a way that made it more accessible to a broader audience.

Graduate training has underscored that an actor can't pre-plan what's going to happen, that one must discover it in the moment by way of inspiration, which leads to impulse, and results in action. I understand now that there are so many different ways to explore a play or character. For example: through rhythm, tempo, space, music, Laban efforts, vocal choices; developing a period movement score; finding the major dramatic question and a unifying principle. I've also accepted I work differently than other people and feel especially drawn to imagery and kinesthetic approaches. My tendency to sensor my impulses has lessened and naming what I see or how I feel helps me elevate my ability, to tell the truth in the moment. I've discovered how important it is to be simple and specific. How to not affect anything and just do what you're doing, no more and no less than what's really happening. I've learned to let how

someone is being with you affect your response to them instead of memorizing a certain way of responding¹².

My hope as an actor is to create art that inspires emotion and to explore a character's deeper truth with compassion, understanding and open mindedness. I desire to create something from the abstract and present it in a tangible format. I revel in the words I get to say and the characters I get to study. The lives people lead every day, no matter how tragic or heroic, they resonate with us. An actor's job is not easy. It requires having open access to one's emotions and to the most private parts of one's life. I am always looking for ways to elevate my work, but the tricky part of this business is that we are in constant pursuit of the unattainable. That's the magic of imaginary circumstances; there is no perfect way to play something. There is no algorithm or definitive method. There is only you, your instincts, your life experience, your ideas, and above all else your willingness to take risks and let yourself be seen.

While I love all types of theatre, it is important for me to focus on moving our society forward by working on productions that focus on social injustice. It is with great conviction that I will continue to work in this industry to create art that stimulates discussion and cultivates compassion, understanding, and open-mindedness. Martha Graham said that making art was "a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others" (qtd. in Popova). I am so proud to be an actor and I will continue my journey because I love that blessed unrest.

¹² Through my Meisner training, I have learned how important it is to play off how my scene partner is being with me rather than working off of pre-conceived ideas.

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VITA

Cara Reid is a native of Sylva, North Carolina, where she began her pursuit of acting in high school. As her passion grew, she attended the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where she received her B.F.A. in acting.

After graduation, Cara decided to follow her dreams to New York where she spent four years working in various theatres and freelancing with different talent agencies. Wanting to be closer to family, she moved to Dallas, Texas, where she spent five years working as an actor in the amazing arts scene, making wonderful friends and building her life around the fantastic community of artists that thrive there.

Cara hopes to use this M.F.A. from Louisiana State University to further her acting career and pursue teaching jobs at the collegiate level.