Love, Yourself: A Solo Play

Tiffany Gilly
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LOVE, YOURSELF: A SOLO PLAY

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

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B.A., George Fox University, 2014
August 2021
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Abstract

This Thesis outlines the research, writing, and production process that lead up to the performance of an original Solo Play, presented by the author. The project, entitled Love, Yourself is a twenty-minute autobiographical journey about the author’s experiences as a child of a neglectful and abusive single mother, as a foster kid, then college student, and eventual aspiring performer. In the play, the author deals with writer's block from not having felt inspired to write a song in months and attempts to find inspiration by sifting through old memories and telling stories to the audience. By the end of the show, she discovers what truly inspires her, cures her writer's block, and sings a new song. The final script is included in this document.
Introduction

In 2018, I attended a production at Portland Center Stage, a professional company in Portland, Oregon. The show was called, *And So We Walked*, by Cherokee performance artist, writer and activist DeLanna Studi. Studi dreamed of one day following the footsteps her ancestors were forced to travel along *The Trail of Tears* and wrote this moving, full-length solo performance about it. Her story invigorated me to share my own. Later in 2018, I supported a Solo Fest, a festival of original one-person shows at Bag & Baggage Productions in Hillsboro, Oregon, which allowed me to learn the logistics behind creating and performing such a project.

When I applied and auditioned for the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) program at Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2019, one of the things that attracted me was the thesis project: each MFA candidate would spend two years working on their craft with the goal of writing, producing, and performing their own solo show. Ever since I was a teenager, I have been seeking a platform that would allow me to share my story as a foster child who was able to persevere despite difficult circumstances, defy statistics, and act as a potential role model for other foster kids in the system. I saw the thesis project in this program as that platform.

After work began on my thesis in the third semester of study, I began to put down on paper the many ideas that had been floating about in my head. I worked on writing a song, creating several different abstracts, writing and editing multiple drafts, and finally landing on a working script. In rehearsing the finalized, yet flexible script, I discovered different insights about my acting work including one especially key “aha!” moment about grounding myself in truthful authenticity using actions rooted in my own point of view. I also performed the show in a unique and
challenging format, filming in a small space for three preset cameras in less than an hour of filming time. After recording the final performance, I edited and submitted a digital copy to my thesis committee, composed of my mentor, Sonya Cooke, Nicholas Erickson, and Dr. John Fletcher, who offered critical feedback as well as positive insights.

Looking ahead, I would like to continue to develop this show. The twenty-minute runtime is shorter than many festivals prefer solo shows to be, which is typically between forty and sixty minutes. After discussing it with my committee and coming up with a process by which I could develop the show, my goal is to expand it into an hour-long piece that incorporates other foster youth success stories. I will gather stories from real people who went through the foster care system and have since made a successful life for themselves and synthesize the transcripts into monologues, which I would then perform in-character as each person. My hope is that such a show would be produced for many audiences that include any of what I call “opportunity youth,” commonly referred to as “at-risk youth.” I prefer to use the former term as it places focus on the opportunities available to a young person who is going through challenging circumstances, rather than their problems.

This written thesis is an exploration and reflection on the process of creating, writing, and performing this show, as well as the value it has been to my education as an actor. I have developed much as a storyteller, writer, and performer thanks to the support offered to me from my mentors and teachers and thanks to the determination I personally carried throughout a difficult two-year program during a global pandemic. My final product is a positive reflection of my growth as an actor and scholar over the course of these two years.
I. Getting Started: My Story and the Statistics

I knew that someday I wanted to find a way to share my story as a child who went into foster care as a teen and defied the statistics that said I would end up as some form of a failure. To help give context for current statistics, I did some research on how many foster kids there are in the United States (U.S.) and some relevant numbers to my story. According to the most recent research done by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHS), just under half a million children are in foster care in the U.S., of which 46 percent in nonrelative foster family homes. These children average around seven years old and around 47% percent are reunited with parent(s) or primary caretaker(s), 26 percent are adopted, and 11 percent live with a guardian. Of important relevance to me is that 55% of kids in foster care have the goal of reunification with their parent(s) or principal caretaker(s). My story was much rarer than the average foster kid. My age (16), the system’s eventual goal for me (guardianship), and the outcome (guardianship) made my experience more unique. I was in a small group of 4% percent of foster kids that had a goal of guardianship. The family that took me in and kept me there has since been a cornerstone to my success as an adult and I continue to call them family (Child 2021)

We were taken away from our mother due to severe neglect and abuse. She struggled with many problems, chief among them being hoarding–when a person collects many things to store away–which led to an impossibly messy apartment, unsafe and unhealthy for children to live in. My mother, uncle, grandmother, and eventually older brother also physically abused us. According to the most recent research provided by DHS, provided in a study titled Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect, researchers shared,
“Aside from the immediate physical injuries children can experience through maltreatment, a child’s reactions to abuse or neglect can have lifelong and even intergenerational impacts. Childhood maltreatment can be linked to later physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences as well as costs to society as a whole. These consequences may be independent of each other, but they also may be interrelated. For example, abuse or neglect may stunt physical development of the child’s brain and lead to psychological problems, such as low self esteem, which could later lead to high-risk behaviors, such as substance use. The outcomes for each child may vary widely and are affected by a combination of factors, including the child’s age and developmental status when the maltreatment occurred; the type, frequency, duration, and severity of the maltreatment; and the relationship between the child and the perpetrator. Additionally, children who experience maltreatment often are affected by other adverse experiences (e.g., parental substance use, domestic violence, poverty), which can make it difficult to separate the unique effects of maltreatment” (Child 2019).

Children who experience neglect and abuse are more likely to develop memory impairments, problems with self-control, and the inability to look at things from different perspectives. They are more likely to have poor mental and emotional health, attachment issues and lack of social skills, and struggle with posttraumatic stress (Child 2019). These challenges lead to unhealthy sexual practices, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency or adult crime, and what I call a “domino effect,” exhibiting themselves and committing the abuse once inflicted on them. “A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [...] for nonfatal incidents of child maltreatment estimated a lifetime cost of $831,000 per child [...] that include both tangible costs
(e.g.), child welfare, health care, juvenile justice), and intangible costs (e.g., pain, suffering, grief) (Child 2019).

I knew early on I wanted to put forth my best efforts to resist these predictions, prove them wrong and show that it was possible to still grow up to be a more stable person in society than my upbringing was. Just reading these statistics empowers me to continue on my path of perseverance. Among many things, I was the first in my family since my grandmother to graduate with a four-year degree, then the first in my family to ever be accepted into graduate school. I resisted any sort of vice that might detract from my forward momentum as a young adult and remained steadfast in my pursuits for success. These accomplishments were made possible by preventative factors written in the research provided by DHS. Some of those things included a sense of purpose, involvement in positive activities, positive peers, school, and community involvement, and a stable living situation with my legal guardians.

The desire to share these personal successes was motivated by a hope to inspire other opportunity youth. In foster care, I once heard a fellow teenager say to me “I’m just going to end up like my mom anyway, why should I even try.” I have kept that phrase locked in my memory to keep me motivated. I want other opportunity youth to believe in themselves and not give up simply because the statistics are stacked against them. My desire is to inspire them—like I was inspired in my teenage years—to change the statistics. Hearing other stories of success kept me going and I wanted my show to one day do the same for others.
As mentioned in my introduction, the solo-show *And So We Walked* by DeLanna Studi moved and inspired me to begin brainstorming how I could put my experience in foster care and beyond on stage. The 2018 Solo Fest at Bag & Baggage Productions in Hillsboro, Oregon served as further motivation. Once I started classes at LSU, I was full of preliminary ideas and a vision that got more clear and specific as I was exposed to more plays, stories, and performances. One key performance presented by the LSU School of Theatre was a Theatre for Young Audiences piece called *Brooklyn Bridge* by Melissa James Gibson. Director Lori Parquet did a superb job of presenting a work for youth that refused to pander to them. The show was an uplifting experience that insisted its audiences be intentional about embracing their neighbors, no matter what their backgrounds were.

The message of *Brooklyn Bridge*, as well as the high-quality production in which it was presented, encouraged me to make my thesis a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) piece that also did not pander to young people. Because my story’s center was my experience in foster care, it felt important to frame the piece with young people in mind. I struggled with choosing an age range for which to target my show. At the time of my final recording, I was still keeping grades three through six in mind; after watching the tape, I feel that middle-school through high-school will be most appropriate moving forward. The strongest contributing factor to this decision is that the central age for my “character” is in her teens; with a teenage protagonist, it makes the most sense to direct the show with a teenage audience in mind.
II. Research and Development

Research officially began in the summer of 2020. Prior to this, I had asked my professor, Sonya Cooke, to be my thesis committee chair and academic mentor. Over the course of the summer semester, I met on Zoom with Sonya three times to brainstorm and discuss play structure, story ideas, various formats and structures, and how to research ways to share my story as a teen foster kid. She helped me solidify my ideas as well as make the general thoughts I was having more specific.

Watching and reading other solo shows occupied a good portion of my research time over the summer. Several of my contacts from theatre companies where I had previously worked were supportive and responsive, sharing insights and answering questions that I had. Jenny Newbry, a colleague of my mentor Cassie Greer from Bag & Baggage Productions in Oregon, sent me a copy of her script, *Cinnamon and Cigarettes*. I read her play and we corresponded over email. I asked questions about the process of writing and performing it and she generously offered detailed responses. One such response that impacted my show was as follows:

> All solo shows are different of course, but one of the things I really love about them is the opportunity to delve really deeply into ourselves to explore personal, deeply relevant material. I think this kind of process tends to create work that is vulnerable (and therefore connective) in a deeply impactful way that is unique to solo work (Newbry “Connecting”).

As part of the curriculum in the Summer 2020 Acting Studio class with George Judy, I was tasked with writing my own creative piece. I used the opportunity to write a song, which
ultimately made it into the final draft of my thesis. In my mind, the song was written for my solo show, but I did not think it would become as significant a part as it did. In the final draft, this song became the ultimate obstacle for my protagonist, who struggles with writer’s block from lack of inspiration.

A strong suggestion from Sonya and her spouse, Brett Duggan, who is also a professor at LSU, was to tell my whole story in a conversation with someone and record the transcript. I scheduled a Zoom meeting with my colleague Alan R. White and conducted the exercise. Doing this yielded more specific stories to tell in the course of my twenty-minute monologue, and helped me narrow down what I did and did not want to devote time to. This activity also helped yield an early understanding of the form I wanted my play to take. Previously, I had considered delivering the performance like a stand-up comedy act in the style of Hannah Gadsby. That began to change after speaking with Alan as it revealed the great potential for a more narrative structure.

During this summer semester of research, I kept a regular log of my activities, which follows in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 11</td>
<td>Met with Nick and Rocky to discuss Thesis project over Summer.</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 12</td>
<td>Met with Sonya to discuss ideas and share resources.</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 23</td>
<td>Gathered resources online (older LSU Theses, YouTube videos)</td>
<td>2 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 24</td>
<td>Read and analyzed one woman show Cinnamon &amp; Cigarettes</td>
<td>2 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 26</td>
<td>Met with Rocky to discuss ideas, share resources, and plan next steps</td>
<td>0.5 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 5</td>
<td>Played with musical composition on Ukulele</td>
<td>0.5 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 9</td>
<td>Songwriting</td>
<td>3 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 16</td>
<td>Read parts of LSU Theses on file</td>
<td>2 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 22</td>
<td>Recorded story on Zoom in conversation w/Alan</td>
<td>2 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23</td>
<td>Edited Transcript from Zoom conversation</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 24</td>
<td>Met with Sonya to discuss summer and next steps</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 27</td>
<td>Workshop session: first monologue and song w/George</td>
<td>0.5 hr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the 2020 summer semester ended, I chose to study playwriting with Dr. Femi Euba during the fall. In this class, I wrote and workshopped several drafts of my thesis, utilizing one of the most useful resources available to me at LSU. Fellow scholars, classmates, and playwrights offered helpful insights after reading or hearing my script read out loud, which strongly contributed to its development over the course of sixteen weeks. Dr. Euba’s feedback, inspired by his book *Poetics of the Creative Process: an Organic Practicum to Playwriting* influenced the overall play structure for my thesis by outlining a three-part focus: the character has a goal, they must make a sacrifice to reach that goal, and the efficacy of their attempt is revealed.
III. Various Drafts and Iterations

My first draft was inspired by the following abstract:

Various forms of Tiffany Gilly, a theatre nerd from Oregon, gather in a room to convince one another of their own convictions. Thirteen is convinced that Jesus is the only way her family will ever find joy and peace. Twenty-Eight is convinced that personal freedom and self-discovery will give her the joy she has always been seeking. Six is convinced that the Hunchback of Notre Dame is the true hero that will save her from an unhappy home life. Together, they all learn that each of them is a little bit right and none of them is completely right about where joy will come from. Thirty-one is convinced of very little, except that all of these versions of herself are equally valid and wonderful and loved. In the end, they come together to share a song that they can sing when they feel hopeless to give them hope.

I submitted the first draft to my thesis committee and for Dr. Euba’s playwriting class. When I received feedback, the three-part structure from Poetics of the Creative Process: an Organic Practicum to Playwriting influenced how I made edits and adjusted the script. Specifically, I needed to better define both my audience and the arc of the story. I decided at this point to focus on the song as the central object of the story. The second draft was a heavy rewrite. It shifted from four characters to one, became less of a removed story happening behind a fourth wall and more of a direct address to an imagined young audience, and had the ultimate goal of completing a new song. In this second draft, I still struggled with language that pandered to young people and made adjustments based on workshop sessions with my director and husband, Chris Gilly-Forrer, and conversations with my mentor, Sonya.
The final draft was a shorter, clearer, less pandering story about trying to finish a song that had a melody, but no lyrics. This version incorporated many different pieces of my education, from my undergraduate experiences, to my assistantships, to graduate study. The storytelling structure was very similar to the function of the University Players, a touring devising group I was part of in my undergraduate training at George Fox University. The use of simple staging and design elements was influenced by my training at Bag & Baggage Productions during a year-long Emerging Artist program where I learned how to practice, devise, design, and perform a TYA piece that could travel easily. Moment Work, a devising technique I studied with Leigh Fondakowski in my fifth semester of graduate school, influenced how I utilized my props’ narrative potential, and the show as a whole was rooted in a truthful connection between myself and the audience.

The final draft, which follows this paragraph, tells an honest, autobiographical journey about my challenges as a child with a single mother, then eventually being taken into foster care. The show landed on the theme of self-love, something many teenagers struggle with. In my own story, I needed to overcome some extreme obstacles in order to navigate loving myself and allowing my story of strength and perseverance to inspire creativity within myself. A subtle message of the power of listening (a previous title of the show) is present in the play and will likely return in a more prevalent form as the show is developed into an hour-long production in the future.
IV. The Final Script

Love, Yourself

A one-person show

by

Tiffany Gilly-Forrer

Draft 6
A simple stage with an acting box or chair. Tiffany enters carrying her suitcase, a Ukulele, a notebook, and a pencil. She is trying to figure out a song. She sits on the acting box and spends a minute trying to find lyrics to a melody, but can’t figure it out.

I can’t figure out the lyrics. I’ve got this song I’m trying to write and I have the melody, (she plays the melody briefly) but no words come to mind. No inspiration. This year has been really hard and I’ve been feeling kinda depressed lately, so naturally I haven’t been able to write a new song for a very long time. Have you ever heard of writer’s block? It’s the worst, right? It’s when a writer feels blocked for some reason and can’t think of anything to write or lacks inspiration.

She tries again, making up some lyrics about her things on stage, then notices the objects on the stage.

I brought these along to see if they could help.

She puts down her ukulele and goes to the backpack to pick it up.

This is my backpack from grade school. I am not embarrassed to say that when I was in kindergarten, I loved Barney the dinosaur. Okay, I was obsessed with Barney the Dinosaur.

She sits on the floor.
I had Barney bedsheets, Barney pajamas, a Barney stuffed animal that I thought would actually come to life, I watched Barney on tv everyday, and I wore this backpack everywhere I went.

*She opens the backpack and looks inside, pulling out different things and laying them neatly on the ground as she speaks.*

It may seem funny, but school supplies has always inspired me. School supplies represented the excitement of the new school year, a new teacher, the smell of bark dust, recess, library books, and spending time with friends at school instead of being home.

My home life was really challenging as a kid

*She opens the crayon box, then sets it on the ground.*

I grew up with a single mother and five siblings all squished into a tiny apartment. My mom had really bad depression and anxiety and tried to cope with it by hoarding, which only made it worse. Eventually we lived in a real pig sty.

*She tosses the school supplies and other items everywhere.*

For those of you who haven’t heard of it, *(she starts to gather the school supplies up again)* hoarding is a problem someone has when they have a hard time getting rid of things because they think they need to save everything.
She scoots as much of the items as she can together quickly.

Often, they’re trying to fill a hole in their lives with lots of stuff that just piles up and piles up and piles up. It got so bad with my mom that we couldn’t see the floor anywhere in our apartment and there were even mushrooms growing in the hallway at one point. Diapers were piled up in the bathroom, clothing and trash all over the floors, and we could barely open the front door because it was blocked.

She starts putting away the crayons.

My biggest job was to try to make my mom feel better, to be positive for her, and cheer her up. My sisters and brothers would sing songs to her from her favorite soap operas while we walked home from the grocery store, and sometimes we would get to ride in a shopping cart all the way there.

She sings the chorus of a song she used to sing to her mom.

Breathe in, breathe out
You keep me alive
You are the fire burning inside of me
You are my passion for life
She finishes putting away the crayons and organizing the school supplies – the toys stay scattered.

This made my mom feel better. We all have different ways we cope with sadness and that’s how my mom did.

Wait a second…

*She gets an idea, grabs her ukulele, and begins singing new lyrics to the unfinished song.*

Everybody feels lonely sometimes
Everybody is fighting their own uphill battle
Everybody feels helpless sometimes
And everyone could use a little more love.

*She gets stuck again.*

Well, we got a verse! That’s a good start. Where did that even come from? Thanks for listening. I think it’s helping.

Unfortunately, my mom’s struggle with hoarding became too much for her and my siblings and I were put in foster care when I was 16. I was a sophomore in high school.
She pulls out a black trashbag from the backpack.

When we got taken away, the social workers gave us a trash bag to put some of our stuff in. Really. My little brother and I went back into our apartment real quick to grab whatever we could.

She picks up items as she names them.

I grabbed a box full of journals and pictures and my brother grabbed our Nintendo 64 and video games. He and I had saved up when we were little to buy it together with our own money, so it was really special. These were things that inspired us, gave us joy, and where we were headed, joy would be hard to come by. Being one of the oldest, when we were taken away, I felt like it was my next biggest job to try to make my siblings feel better, to be positive for them, and cheer them up.

She sits back on the floor and organizes these items back to the school supplies.

This would be a tough role for me to fill as we were split into two groups because there were so many of us. That was one of the hardest nights of my life. I felt completely abandoned by my mom and was afraid my siblings would feel abandoned by me because I couldn’t keep us all together. Was that my responsibility? No, but I felt like it was and I had no idea if I would ever see my whole family again.
She opens a small box of photos and looks through them.

I have very few pictures of my family and what I have are extremely precious. Looking through them always lifts my spirits. It gives me hope to think about where we were, where we are, and where we’re going.

She lays the pictures out on the ground as well, carefully.

I did see my siblings again. We actually had a lot of really awesome experiences after that first night. One of the coolest was this camp we went to called “Camp to Belong.”

She holds up one of the photos.

It’s a camp for foster siblings to get together for a week and create memories doing awesome things we never got to do before like bicycling, hiking, canoeing, and singing silly camp songs without a care in the world.

She pulls out a birthday hat and puts it on.

They even threw this big birthday party for everyone all at once because in separate foster homes, we didn’t always get to see each other for our birthdays.

She starts looking for something in the backpack.
So, the counselors had all the kids come at different times to choose presents that were laid out on tables in a big room.

*She finds and pulls out a party blower.*

Then we wrapped our gift and brought it to the birthday party later when everyone opened their gifts together and ate cake.

*She blows on the party blower.*

That memory reminds me that when we go through tough times, all we really want is to be loved by the people we love the most.

*She gets an idea, grabs the ukulele, and continues “writing” the song.*

Some of us have been hurt too deeply
Some of us have been completely abandoned
Some of us don’t know where we’re going
All of us just really want to be loved

*She stops.*
I’ve always wanted to inspire others. But too often that meant I put others before myself, like my mom, my siblings, and my friends, to a point where it became toxic.

*She walks over to the suitcase.*

When I got taken away, I eventually ended up without my siblings and was forced to focus on just me for the first time in my life. It took me a long time to learn, but it’s not always selfish to take care of yourself.

*She unlocks the suitcase.*

I spent most of my childhood trying to be positive for others, pouring out for others, protecting and providing for others. Then, I was suddenly given the opportunity to do that for myself.

*She lifts the lid of the suitcase.*

I had a big emptiness inside me from pouring out for years and years, but hardly allowing myself to be poured into. I didn’t know how to love myself because I was so used to loving others first. I didn’t like my own company. I used a lot of things to try to replace the love I needed from myself.

*She pulls out a bible.*
I tried religion and that worked for a long time. I had a community, a belief system, and rules to follow that helped guide me. Eventually though, I learned that I wasn’t truly loving myself and was trying to be more like a god than me.

*She pulls out a wedding ring.*

I married someone who shared my beliefs and who liked a lot of the same things I did. That also worked for a while. But one day, I realized that I had once again compromised and lost sight of my own dreams for the sake of the person I married.

*She stands.*

All the things that happened to me and that I chose brought me here, to this moment, looking for the right words to complete a song that hasn’t been finished yet. I’ve hurt others, I’ve been hurt, said things I wish I could change and done things that I’m not proud of, *(crossing to the ukulele)* but love keeps on happening and I have learned to let some of that love come my way.

*She grabs her ukulele, discovering the lyrics as she goes.*

Well I’m through with waiting for someone to save me.

I’m gonna treat my wounds and get back up again.
She stops, crosses back to her things, brings her ukulele with her, and starts to pack up her things inside the suitcase.

I love to sing, tell stories, act them out, play with, and inspire people. I hope someday to inspire lots of young people and tell them “you deserve to be loved. No matter what you’ve been through, you deserve to be loved. No matter what you’ve said or done, you deserve to be loved. No matter where you’re from, who your family is, or (improvise a list of things until everything is put away) OR WHATEVER - you deserve to be loved.” You do. And that can start by loving yourself.

She closes the suitcase and sits on it.

Someone once told me that we place so much weight on trying to be happy when really, all we really want is a sense of peace. Real, deep, feel-it-in-your-bones kind of peace. I think they’re on to something. Feeling seen and heard by you, and valued by myself sharing this story, I feel closer to that peace.

She picks up her Ukulele and “writes” the chorus.

I’m gonna love myself
Like nobody else
I’ve been my biggest critic for too long
And now it’s time to sing a different song
And I hope you’ll sing along

Hey! We did it! You helped me write a song and overcome my writer’s block! Thank you for listening! Let’s hear how it sounds all put together. When I get to the chorus, feel free to sing along if you want.

_She plays and sings._

Everybody feels lonely sometimes.

Everyone is fighting their own uphill battle.

Everybody feels helpless sometimes.

And everyone could use a little more love.

Well I’m through with waiting for someone to save me.

I’m gonna treat my wounds and get back up again.

I’m gonna love myself

Like nobody else

I’ve been my biggest critic for too long

And now it’s time to sing a different song

And I hope you’ll sing along

Some of us have been hurt too deeply
Some of us have been completely abandoned
Some of us don’t know where we’re going
All of us just really want to be loved

Well I’m through with waiting for someone to save me.
I’m gonna treat my wounds and get back up again.

She stands.

I’m gonna love myself
Like nobody else
I’ve been my biggest critic for too long
And now it’s time to sing a different song
And I hope you’ll sing along

She slowly stands, picks up her suitcase, and exits throughout the last chorus.

I’m gonna love myself
Like nobody else
I’ve been my biggest critic for too long
And now it’s time to sing a different song
And I hope you’ll sing along

End of play.
V. Discoveries and Insights

During the staging and rehearsal process, I experienced discoveries and insights that made my work more specific and the final product more unified. I knew early on that I wanted to share this play with more than just the LSU community and in order to do that, it needed to be simple and concise in design so that I could tour it to schools and events for young audiences. Technical demands were limited to those essential to the story and never beyond what the text called for.

As I previously mentioned, studying Moment Work influenced my thesis greatly: I incorporated props that would support telling my story in a way that was active rather than passive. Removing objects from my backpack as I talked about them rather than simply describing them gave my audience a strong visual component that enhanced the images in my story. Allowing the elements to devise a story rather than starting with one already formed is intriguing to me, and I believe there is great potential in exploring this devised piece through this technique. To that end, in future development cycles I want to incorporate more Moment Work.

Working with my husband, Chris Gilly-Forrer, on the final drafts, I discovered how to overcome my consistent struggle as an actor of "performing" rather than being truthful and authentic. In this piece, that often meant I was patronizing to the audience. Chris watched my recorded drafts, then scheduled one-on-one Zoom rehearsals to point out specific moments and lines of text that could be changed. He helped me find ways to say some things more clearly and directly without talking down to the audience, which I did not realize I was doing until it was pointed out. It was in these sessions that the title of my show changed from The Power of Listening to Love, Yourself.
VI. Performing During a Pandemic

The performance experience for the thesis project was an echo of the experience I have had in graduate school since March 2020. When Covid-19 launched the world into a global pandemic for the first time in over a hundred years, everything became more challenging in our graduate program. The thesis project, which was intended to be a live theatrical performance, was adjusted by the Graduate School faculty, who determined it would be filmed instead of performed live before an audience.

Since my original desire was to tour this show, and with the knowledge in mind that a tour would still be possible after the pandemic ended, I remained steadfast in creating a very theatrical piece. I practiced the show many times as if it were a play before a live audience, rehearsing in my living room, which worked sufficiently as I knew we would not have a great deal of space in which to film. After an eight by eight foot square was set up by a film team in the Studio Theatre of the College of Music and Dramatic Arts building on LSU’s campus, I practiced twice in the space without any trouble and it led to a very successful final shoot.

On filming day, I captured a strong performance in one take without any notable errors or need for reshoots. Working with George Judy in the summer of 2020, I learned that running through a performance at least once, sometimes twice, was an adequate warm up to giving a strong first performance. I warmed up at home, ran through the show once as a practice run, and experienced no mistakes with my text, movement, or technology on the first take. This was a goal I had set for myself beforehand and in the end, my hard work paid off: it took me less than a half hour overall to complete the shoot.
VII. Postproduction Experience

After filming I began post-production work on the project. As I mentioned earlier, I stayed committed to creating a theatrical presentation, which made editing simple. When I saw that the look of each lens and camera was starkly different, I realized I did not have the desire to color-correct or change brightness levels in order to make it more uniform. I chose to keep my work simple and straightforward without any gimmicks or tricks. All of the focus in this Thesis was about the story, not about the technology or trying to do something clever. I added a few fades, titles, and a credits screen, and also adjusted the audio as it was often quite loud.

After editing, I hosted a viewing party on YouTube live for my family and friends with a short talkback after to discuss the process and answer questions. This was an opportunity for me to reflect on many things, because nobody came, which was richly ironic considering my show is about self-love and perseverance. That evening while I watched my own show in an empty Zoom meeting, I had to practice that self-love I had been singing about in my show. I remained proud of the work I had done and thankful that the performance component of my thesis was successfully completed.

Following the failed attempt to host my own viewing party, my colleague Alan R. White hosted a viewing party for our whole cohort before the end of finals week in April 2021. Almost the entire cohort came together to watch each other's' work and this event was exceptionally rewarding. I was impressed by and proud of my colleagues. I also received positive feedback from my colleagues that encouraged me to continue my work on this play in the future.
VIII. Relevant Feedback

After completing the show, I defended my thesis with a committee of faculty that agreed to watch and offer feedback on my show. I presented a Powerpoint slideshow outlining the steps I took to research the play’s content, how it was assembled, and what I learned and gained from the experience. This document is a thorough elaboration on the content within that slideshow presentation. Prior to that defense, I had contact with a number of other colleagues who offered pertinent feedback on the play both on the page and in performance.

From the beginning of the process, I sought advice from my mentor at Bag & Baggage Productions, Artistic Director Cassie Greer. We had a few email correspondences wherein she connected me with Jenny Newbry who wrote the solo show *Cinnamon and Cigarettes.* Cassie had also directed me prior to working on my thesis, both in solo and ensemble work. Additionally, she offered guidance on how to begin the process, primarily encouraging me to “just start writing” and not to worry about the final product when beginning.

Chris Gilly-Forrer, my husband and colleague, helped me edit drafts of my play, offered direction and advice on rewrites, and gave critical feedback throughout the production’s various drafts and iterations. My colleague Alan R. White read my play aloud in Dr. Euba’s playwriting class, offering helpful critical comments on what was working and what could be improved. As was previously mentioned, Alan also listened to my story so that I could record a transcript early on in the research and development stage. Alan remained in constant dialogue with me throughout the process, and their work ethic and constant accountability inspired me to continue to aim high and create some of my best work.
During my thesis defense, my committee offered some great feedback that I plan to apply to the show as I continue to develop it into a sixty-minute version. One offering from Dr. John Fletcher was to involve the audience. Many Theatre for Young Audiences pieces ask questions and get real reactions from the children in the audience. Even for a group of teenagers, this can be very engaging and make the show different every time. For example: rather than using the same set of predetermined lyrics for every performance, I could allow the verses to change based on what the audience offers while keeping the chorus consistent.

Another key piece of advice given by all of my committee members was to consider an older audience. Initially, I had written the piece for grade school children. However, as the story changed and the drafts developed, the central character became my current thirty-one-year-old self in strong relation to my teenage self, marked by the traumatic event of being placed in foster care. This advice is helpful not only for connecting to the central character, but also moving away from the trap of pandering to audiences of young people. If I imagine the audience as older, I can more easily avoid talking down to them, which would ultimately engage grade school children more effectively as well.
IX. Looking ahead: A Not-so-solo Play

The future of *Love, Yourself* is what I call “a not-solo play:” a piece performed by one person that incorporates the stories of multiple people outside of my own. My next step with this show is to develop it into a sixty-minute collection of stories about other foster kids who have become successful, stable adults. This coincides with my life-long goal to inspire young people in foster care or other opportunity youth to have faith in themselves and persevere through their unfair and challenging life circumstances.

In order to make this show’s development possible, I have set realistic, tangible goals for the year following the first performance of this thesis (Summer 2021-Summer 2022):

- **Summer:** Research and network with organizations connected to foster youth who have “aged out” of the system, starting in my present community; schedule and conduct interviews with willing participants.
- **Fall:** Continue and wrap up interviews; begin devising story-monologues using notes; continue devising process through December.
- **Winter:** Continue devising into Sequencing to find through-line/arc/Unifying Principle and determine what Elinor Fuchs would call the “social world of this planet” (Fuchs, pp.7); begin recording written drafts; complete scripting and creation of “not-solo” show by March; begin searching for a space to use for performances.
- **Spring:** If possible, assemble a production team to begin work in a rehearsal space. If not, begin rehearsals in space and design various elements on my own; perform the show in May in a blackbox space somewhere in North Carolina or Chicago.
X. Reflections

The process of writing, devising, and creating this thesis went smoothly overall. I plan well, so this project never felt off-track or out of my capability to handle. Dr. Rockford Sansom, who was the cohort’s direct point of contact for the thesis project, supported us with a clearly outlined set of deadlines and goals. He remained flexible and helpful throughout the process even though he was not on my committee. Support from my committee members Sonya Cooke, Dr. John Fletcher, and Nicholas Erickson offered their notes and suggestions throughout the process and strongly contributed to the final product.

The filming week was a stressful and challenging experience. Communication between the MFA Actors and the filming team was poor and affected my cohort negatively, which led to much stress. It was a challenge to maintain mental and emotional boundaries collaborating with all the people involved while stressful and negative energy bogged many of my colleagues down. A greater obstacle was not having an audience to perform for. Given the theatrical nature of the piece, it strongly called for an audience, which was a difficult hurdle to overcome. I question whether it truly is theatre if there is no audience, though in the end I suppose I did have an audience of one: a student who supported the project on the day of filming.

In the end, my thesis allowed me to utilize many aspects of my graduate school training. I utilized my voice training from Voice and Speech classes with Dr. Sansom as well as singing lessons with Terry Patrick Harris. I used Moment Work, a devising technique that helped me make narrative use of props and music to form the story. I also exercised my playwriting skills in developing the show’s script and learned what I consider to be the greatest lesson from the entire
LSU MFA Acting program: to start from my truthful, honest self and to build my characters from there.

Throughout my training, I have often received the note that I “push.” What directors and teachers mean by this is that I struggle to authentically connect to emotion or the text of a character because I am forcing it rather than allowing it to happen organically. My undergraduate professor, Rhett Luedtke, often told me to trust myself. I never really knew what he meant by that until I started working on this show and rediscovered what it felt like to share my own story. Being part of the University Players in my undergraduate training was a similar experience, but it was short-lived, and at the time I was still learning foundational acting skills and who my true self was. Not fully knowing and loving myself as a human being kept me from being able to authentically connect to many of the characters I was playing at the time.

Assimilating a much more in-depth training experience in graduate school with the experience of telling my own stories connected me to authenticity I had previously struggled to understand. Being a more fully developed person and having gained great confidence in myself also empowered my self-trust. I pulled back, simply allowed myself to experience a feeling rather than to show the feeling, and ultimately experienced a revelation in releasing the need to “perform.” After discovering this, my thesis became much less patronizing and my other scene work in classes or readings with artistic colleagues was more grounded, truthful, and connected. I learned the lesson behind my own show: that inspiration, discovery, and great art cannot be fabricated, it must start from a place of self-acceptance and love.
Conclusion

Completing the process of writing, producing, and performing my solo thesis performance synthesized much of the training I gained during my two years in graduate school. It gave me the opportunity to consider how I could create art that is completely original, has a lifespan beyond its initial performance dates, and useful to a specific audience. Performance art does not have to follow any particular rules to be performance art, it is simply an expression of story, perspective, and impulse. However, I firmly believe that the best performance art (perhaps all art) illuminates humanity in some way. My thesis is an attempt to do that. What it sheds light on is the power of self-love, self-acceptance, and being heard by others.

Famous philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau once wrote “I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different.” This quote encourages me to remember that all our own experiences are just that: our own, and that no one is quite like us. We are each uniquely molded by our own experiences and stories. A small set of those stories has pervaded the entertainment industry and kept many stories out of the metaphorical and literal limelight.

Mine is a story that is rare and must be shared. Stories of foster kids who have achieved success as adults are less common than those who do not, and one way to change our perception as a collective humanity is to amplify voices that have been quieted for far too long. Through the research, development, writing, and completing of this thesis, I have found a way to develop a more impactful piece than I originally imagined. Empowered with the knowledge and practice of the process, I will be able to write and produce my own theatrical work again in the future.
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Vita

Tiffany Gilly-Forrer, originally from Portland, Oregon, U.S.A., will complete her MFA in Acting at Louisiana State University in August 2021. She graduated from George Fox University 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts in theatre performance and design. Tiffany is a certified instructor of Seven Pillars Acting, a technique she learned from the creator Sonya Cooke, and has taught two undergraduate acting classes to theatre majors and non-majors. She is a Voice/Dialect Coach and Intimacy Coordinator, Marketing and Outreach associate for the Swine Palace Productions and Baton Rouge Improv Festival, and experienced playwright.

Recent acting credits include: Andrea in The Lab Meeting, a new play in the Brighton Fringe Festival, Alicia in Small Mouth Sounds at the Swine Palace, Cecily in The Importance of Being Earnest Radio Play at on the KLSU Radio Station, Louise Heindbedder in The Fox on the Fairway at Theatre Baton Rouge, and Ani/Sasha/Callie in Gloria at the Swine Palace. Other favorite acting credits include Juliet (Romeo & Juliet; OPS Fest Portland), Lotte Grimm (Lotte Grimm’s Cinderella; Bag & Baggage Productions), Helena (A Midsummer Night’s Dream; OPS Fest Portland), Hermia (A Midsummer Night’s Dream; Outer East Arthouse), Shelby (Steel Magnolias; George Fox University), and Katherine (Taming of the Shrew; George Fox University). www.tiffanygilly.com.