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CANDOR & EBB: SEARCHING FOR MY TRUTH THROUGH SOLO  
PERFORMANCE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## **Abstract**

### **CANDOR & EBB: SEARCHING FOR MY TRUTH THROUGH SOLO PERFORMANCE**

By Andrew Ross Wynn, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Major Director: Thesis / Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Associate Professor, Theatre

This thesis is an examination of autobiographical solo performance. It explores the use of personal trauma and illness in the dramatic form. In addition to investigating how other solo performing artists utilize their medical conditions in their work, this thesis gives some historical context to the author's own process and development. The thesis culminates in the author's solo performance script and a desire for its audience to find solace and compassion through the experience of witnessing it being performed.

## **Introduction**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines autobiographical as “(of a written work) dealing with the writer’s own life”(OED). I have ventured into the realm of the autobiography, but mine is not merely a written text. My autobiographical work is meant to be performed and it is done as a solo performance. The solo performer cannot hide. They may inhabit multiple characters. They may incorporate elaborate production values. They may perform the words of another author. But they cannot hide. A solo performer assumes they are enough. This doesn’t mean they won’t mask their vulnerability. They may not be willing to do anything more than stand alone in front of their audience. That may be their only act of bravery or hubris. But they have chosen to stand alone. So if one has made the choice to be that exposed, why not tell the truth? Be as figuratively naked as possible? By doing so the solo performer invites their audience to experience the same freedom. Or at least models what that freedom may look like. I call this living ecstatically. From the OED - Ecstasy: “An overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement. An emotional or religious frenzy or trance-like state, originally one involving an experience of mystic self-transcendence.”(OED) I consider living ecstatically to be in a state of full visceral engagement with the present moment. It is a celebration of being both corporeal and ethereal. It is a fleeting ideal, but one I hope to capture through solo performance.

Solo performers have fascinated me from childhood. Initially, I was obsessed with stand-up comedians. I have a distinct memory of my father introducing me to the classic recordings of the now disgraced Bill Cosby. I was seven or eight and in a mood, being difficult. My father sat me down in front of his turntable and outfitted me with these huge metal headphones. They were

heavy and a little uncomfortable, but I knew how much my dad treasured them, so wearing them felt special. My dad plugged them into the hi-fi. Then he pulled down Bill Cosby's album *200 M.P.H.* The first track, "Mothers and Fathers," came on and my blues melted away. I became hooked on stand-up comedy and, as I absorbed as much stand-up as possible, it began to shape my identity. Again from the OED - Identity: "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is. The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is." (OED) Like a stand-up comic, my identity became one of filtering the world via an ironic lens and commenting on the ridiculousness of life. I thought if I consumed enumerable amounts of comedy I could become funny through osmosis. I would watch certain comedy specials over and over until I memorized every routine. One of my favorites was by Bob Nelson. It was a football bit (a very politically incorrect set today), which my dad also loved. He would have me perform the entire five minute act at parties. Another snippet I committed to memory was from Billy Crystal. It was about going through puberty, dating, and meeting a girl's parents for the first time. I was an adolescent myself when I first heard it, so it rang particularly true. However, it was Richard Pryor's *Live on the Sunset Strip* that really blew my mind. I was in my late teens and struck by Pryor's candor regarding his drug addiction. Here was a man using his private pain as public fodder for comedy. I also marveled at the way he talked about setting himself on fire. It was so raw and honestly funny. Later Richard Pryor would show the same frankness by turning his struggles with multiple sclerosis into stand-up material. The way he revealed his unvarnished self resonated deep within me. I now recognize that Richard Pryor was my Johnny Appleseed, and germinated my nascent thoughts of transforming my personal demons into some sort of performance. Just as Richard Pryor had done, this autobiographical performance would incorporate the humor form of anecdotal comedy. Anecdote: "A short amusing or interesting story about a real incident or



person.”(OED) And Comedy: “Professional entertainment consisting of jokes and sketches, intended to make an audience laugh.”(OED) How else can one make the chaos of life digestible?

I could remain plagued by my demons, or I could put them to work. Over the years I’ve been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, restless legs syndrome, visual-spatial learning disabilities, sleep apnea, Lyme disease and other tick-borne infections. I also had a seizure at just under two years old and a couple of concussions just to keep things interesting. With that much material the show writes itself. With that much material, creating a show started to seem like a necessity. The proceeding pages exist to contextualize and justify my foray into autobiographical solo performance. In Chapter 1. Section 1 I will briefly discuss the concept of the narrated self. We tell stories about ourselves as a means to represent our constructed identity. The interactivity of storyteller and audience provides a prospective narrative shift where that construct can morph and open up new pathways to self development. Chapter 1 Section 2 is a more detailed account of the medical issues I face. Chapter 3 looks at the anecdotal comedy of Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard. All three use their afflictions as material in their comedy. I’ve included Richard Pryor because he changed the way I perceived comedy. To see him convert his trauma into comedy was revelatory to my teenage self. Maria Bamford and Chris Gethard both share much of my own ailments and make profound and insightful use of them in their respective work. That chapter ends with a poignant anecdote from Chris Gethard about performing with Robin Williams that touches on Williams electrifying onstage genius, but also his offstage torment. Chapter 4 Section 1 is a condensed examination of my relationship with Judaism and its impact on my life. Chapter 4 Section 2 delves into my evolution as a performer as well as some notes on the process of putting together my solo performance piece. The last Chapter is the current version of my solo show script tentatively

titled, Two Dots and Some Bars. The title refers to the musical staff symbol for repeat. My obsessive compulsive disorder causes unwanted repetitive thoughts which is partly what the title is meant to reflect. I also see the repeat symbol as representing the cyclical nature of life - birth, death, transformation.

This work was initiated as a way to illuminate living with illness. Mental illness remains a stigma. I've stigmatized myself to myself. I often tell myself I'm broken and defective. By putting my story on stage maybe I can do more than just engender empathy for myself, maybe I can engender empathy for anyone dealing with the same issues. The audience may find that they can destigmatize themselves to themselves. I hope that by bearing witness to me standing in my truth, my audience will be encouraged to embrace their own and the truth of those around them. To see a way forward that isn't clouded by self-judgement or the judgement of others. Lofty goals indeed, but why else should we pursue the communal artistic experience if not for the possibility of transformation? The irony in solo performance is though I may be alone on stage, my wish is for the audience to leave feeling less alone in life.

## Chapter 1. Section 1: Narrating the Self

How can we explain autobiographical narratives' power to transform or construct the self? Almost all answers to this question have relied on the representational power of narrative discourse. Autobiographical narrators represent themselves in recognizable story lines. A narrator might, for instance, represent himself as moving from passive victim to agent of social change. By representing himself as an agent, the narrator might come to think of himself as, and ultimately come to act like, a more active and assertive person. Depending on how it is articulated, this representational account of self-construction in autobiographical narrative can be plausible. But a solely representational account ignores how autobiographical narratives position the narrator in an ongoing dialogue with other speakers. Narrative discourse functions not only to represent characters and events but also to establish relationships between the narrator and the audience in the interactional event of storytelling. (Wortham pg 1)

By telling my story I am both representing a version of myself to my audience while being simultaneously shaped by my audience's interaction with my story. Their reactions may reinforce my self-perceptions or broaden my perspective and present new potentialities yet to be explored. Thereby lies the necessity of telling one's story because it presents the possibility of revelation and transformation for both the teller and the listener. I remember a pivotal moment from my early twenties where the story I was telling myself and then told to someone else created a moment of liberation for me and the listener. It was the summer of 1994 and I had just finished a semester abroad in London and was in the middle of backpacking across Europe with one of my oldest, dearest friends, classmates, and roommates, Dave. Dave and I were in our third week of travel and fourth day in Rhodes, Greece when he decided he needed to cut his trip short and return to the states to be with his girlfriend at the time. We had planned on an additional ten days going to various cities in Italy before flying back home together to Virginia. Now Dave was abandoning our plans and I had to determine whether or not I would continue on by myself or also go home early. For some reason, I was terrified to travel alone. The previous summer I had

accepted an acting gig in Denali National Park, Alaska and went there without knowing a soul. That turned out to be a magical experience. But I had a homebase there with a definitive structure and a specific job to do. Here I was presented, for what felt like the first time, with the possibility of no real schedule, no ties to anyone or anything, singly responsible for my own safety and wellbeing. I was in a panic. I called my parents from a payphone in Athens and sobbed hysterically while talking to my mother. I began to go into competing rambling narratives about myself and my ability to undertake the rest of my trip alone. One story was about somebody who needed the security of a companion in order to successfully navigate the world. The other story about someone who sought out adventure and the deliciousness of new experiences. My mother said there was no shame in coming back early, but that she believed I would be fine on my own. In that instance I chose to believe in the adventurer narrative and spent the next several days discovering Athens, Florence, Venice, and Geneva making various connections with other random explorers along the way. I look at that conversation between my mother and I as instrumental to my development as an adult. She raised me with the expression “roots to grow and wings to fly” and we fulfilled that conviction in that telephone interaction. My mother became the parent who planted well and I became the son who soared. Over the years I have told that story to bolster my belief in myself and foster it in others.

I tell a darker story in my solo performance piece about getting arrested for shoplifting during my sophomore year in undergraduate school. Upon hearing of my arrest my mother exclaimed she had failed in her parenting. The narrative became one of a criminal and a failure. And I internalized that narrative and still wrestle with it regularly. As I say in my solo show, I never shoplifted ever again after being arrested, but I still engage in some forms of stealing. I sneak into second or third movies at the multiplex and I stream content from illegal websites on

the internet. Why do I put this information in my show? Am I looking for exoneration from myself and the audience? Is it a confrontation and intervention to stop committing any further illicit activities? Is it an indictment of myself and those in the audience committing similar infractions? It is for all of those reasons, but mostly because my solo performance piece is about pathology in many ways, and combatting pathology, and not always winning. My belief is that the act of writing and performing the show is a concerted effort to push back against my pathology and by engaging the audience we may fail or succeed together. But the effort to push back goes on every time I perform it and the witnessing of that is itself a victory. Or, by sharing my story with an audience, some of its members are encouraged to push back against their pathologies, or aid those they love in their efforts to push back.

My narration of self is a direct rebuke of shame. In the telling of my story I seek to enfranchise my audience to shake off their own shame and feel validated and whole. My solo performance is about my refusal to be solely defined by my diagnoses. But since I do suffer from several maladies, they must be discussed.

## Chapter 1. Section 2: The Drama of a Diagnosis

The science behind how the brain functions and why it malfunctions is still being charted. “As much as we have discovered, it is clear to us that we are only at the very beginning stages of understanding brain function and behavior. What is thought to be true now is likely to be revised time and time again as neuroscientists continue to learn about the brain” (Amen, 21-22) When it comes to my issues the likelihood is that they aggravate each other. Let’s look at how each issue is defined starting with obsessive compulsive disorder.

### Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* provides the following criteria for diagnosing an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

A. Presence of obsessions, compulsions, or both:

Obsessions are defined by (1) and (2):

1. Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or impulses that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted, and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress.
2. The individual attempts to ignore or suppress such thoughts, urges, or images, or to neutralize them with some other thought or action (i.e., by performing a compulsion).

Compulsions are defined by (1) and (2):

1. Repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly.

2. The behaviors or mental acts are aimed at preventing or reducing anxiety or distress, or preventing some dreaded event or situation; however, these behaviors or mental acts are not connected in a realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent, or are clearly excessive.
  - B. The obsessions or compulsions are time consuming (e.g., take more than 1 hour per day) or cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
  - C. The obsessive-compulsive symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.
  - D. The disturbance is not better explained by the symptoms of another mental disorder (e.g., excessive worries as in generalized anxiety disorder; or preoccupation with appearance, as in body dysmorphic disorder). (DSM-5, 300.3)

In my case, my obsessive thoughts are more prominent than my compulsions. My compulsions tend to be fairly benign. For example, when purchasing a magazine or a paper I like to get the third copy in a stack. When setting an alarm I like the first two or three numbers to add up to the last number (e.g., 10:12am,  $1+0+1=2$ ). I have some minor hoarding tendencies, like keeping used movie ticket stubs in my wallet or having a drawer full of damaged ear buds. Sometimes I need to eat the same kind of food everyday. These all wax and wane and barely interfere with my daily existence. My obsessive thoughts, however, can dominate my state of mind. As referenced in my solo performance piece, these thoughts are preoccupied with every taboo possible, also known as harm obsessions. When I was married I used to lie in bed next to my wife flooded with thoughts of strangling her or suffocating her with a pillow. There's an easy joke to make about marriage in there somewhere, I know, but I was haunted by these thoughts. These intrusive thoughts are constant. If I'm behind a woman in a line at a food counter, my head starts swimming with images of me grabbing her ass or pulling her pants down. If I'm watching a movie or a play, I'm being barraged by ideas to stand up and start screaming obscenities. The two most common forms of treatment for OCD are psychopharmaceuticals and cognitive-

behavioral therapy. I've been on various selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for over two decades now. These medications are believed to help stabilize neurotransmitters (such as serotonin) in the brain. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is about changing the negative thought patterns that affect a person's well being. There's another form of therapy I first learned about while listening to the *Invisibilia* podcast. "The Secret History of Thoughts" is the first episode of *Invisibilia*'s first season. The main story of the episode focuses on a man identified as S who has OCD with harm obsessions. He was bombarded by thoughts of stabbing his wife to death. They become so severe he avoided holding any sharp objects. Eventually he found a therapist, Tom Corboy, MFT, who practiced Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) therapy. The International OCD Foundation website describes ERP as , "exposing yourself to the thoughts, images, objects and situations that make you anxious and/or start your obsessions. While the Response Prevention part of ERP, refers to making a choice not to do a compulsive behavior once the anxiety or obsessions have been 'triggered.'" Corboy will give a patient like S a knife and then have them hold that knife up to his throat for several minutes. This gives the patient tangible proof that their thoughts of cutting someone's throat are just random thoughts and not actual desires. S was finally able to hold a knife up to his wife's neck and it relieved him of much of his anxiety, though his thoughts haven't gone away. Before I heard this podcast, I was practicing ERP without realizing that's what I was doing. I have a dog, Benny, and he's incredibly affectionate and usually in my lap. Like most everything, this triggers my harm ocd and I start envisioning crushing his head or snapping his neck. Instead of moving away from him or putting him down on the floor, I will intentionally start massaging his neck or rubbing his head. I lean in on the contact with Benny to show myself I'm not going to hurt him. This does give me some reassurance that I'm not the monster my thoughts would have me believe I am.



OCD often has comorbidity with bipolar disorder meaning that many people have both.

## **Bipolar II**

The DSM-5 entry on bipolar II disorder is as follows:

For a diagnosis of bipolar II disorder, it is necessary to meet the following criteria for a current or past hypomanic episode *and* the following criteria for a current or past major depressive episode:

### Hypomanic Episode

- A. A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood and abnormally and persistently increased activity or energy, lasting at least 4 consecutive days and present most of the day, nearly every day.
- B. During the period of mood disturbance and increased energy and activity, three (or more) of the following symptoms have persisted (four if the mood is only irritable), represent a noticeable change from usual behavior, and have been present to a significant degree:
  1. Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity.
  2. Decreased need for sleep (e.g. feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
  3. More talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking.
  4. Flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing.
  5. Distractibility (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant)
  6. Increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work or school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation.
  7. Excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g., engaging in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments).
- C. The episode is associated with an unequivocal change in functioning that is uncharacteristic of the individual when not symptomatic.
- D. The disturbance in mood and the change in functioning are observable by others.
- E. The episode is not severe enough to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning or to necessitate hospitalization.
- F. The episode is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication, or other treatment).

### Major Depressive Episode

- A. Five (or more) of the following symptoms have been present during the same 2-week period and represent a change from previous functioning; at least one of the symptoms is either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.
  1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., feels sad, empty, or hopeless) or observation made by others (e.g., appears tearful).
  2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by either subjective account or observation).
  3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g., a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
  4. Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day.

5. Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others; not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
  6. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
  7. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or guilt about being sick).
  8. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others).
  9. Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, a suicide attempt, or a specific plan for committing suicide.
- B. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- C. The episode is not attributable to the physiological effects or another medical condition.
- (DSM-5 296.89)

There's a genetic component to bipolar disorder and it does run in my family. My dad's older sister has bipolar I, meaning she's had manic episodes with psychotic features that required hospitalization. She currently lives on disability. I have never been hospitalized, but I have had hypomanic episodes where I didn't feel like a rational thinking person. In my solo show I go into some detail about my sophomore year and shoplifting. For several months, I would steal something from most of the places of business I entered. Mostly small things, magazines, gum, but I stole some ridiculous things too, like a kitten from a pet store. I wound up putting the kitten back. I'd steal entire meals from cafeterias. The stealing was accompanied by an overwhelming sensation of elation and invincibility. During that same period, I fell into a deep depression and had a difficult time getting out of bed for several days in a row. I failed two classes because of it and gained a lot of weight. When I was a little older I had another hypomanic episode where I bought music excessively. It was between 1999-2000. I had had a severe panic attack at a rehearsal for a show I was in at Woolly Mammoth Theatre in D.C. and decided to leave the show because of it. While convalescing at my parents house I began spending hours on eBay buying hundreds of dollars worth of Prince VHS tapes, bootlegs, and rare singles. At the same time I was going to record stores multiple times a month and trading, selling, and buying dozens of

CDs. I would get the same rush as when I had shoplifted years earlier. My focus and productivity also increased as I was writing spec scripts for the first time in my life. I would also spend hours multitrack recording barefoot on the basement floor until I had blisters all over my feet. I'm not sure what medications I was on at the time, but they clearly weren't working.

The current neuroscience behind OCD and bipolar disorder concentrate on three different areas of the brain, the anterior cingulate gyrus, the deep limbic system, and the amygdala respectively. Lying within the frontal lobes, the anterior cingulate gyrus allows the brain to switch between different thoughts, to shift gears. When it is not working appropriately the brain becomes stuck in one gear which can lead to obsessions and compulsions. The deep limbic system regulates a person's mood. When it is irritated feelings of negativity overwhelm one's outlook and can send someone into a depression. The amygdala is a part of the temporal lobes. Shaped like an almond, this is a primitive brain structure that processes the most basic of emotional responses. An overactive amygdala can lead to manic episodes. (Amen 26-33)

### **Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Lyme Disease**

A concussion and the effects of a bacterial infection such as Lyme disease further complicates brain function. On an episode of the NPR podcast *Science Friday* titled "Can Just One Concussion Change the Brain?" Steven Flanagan from the Concussion Center at NYU Langone Medical Center states that between 10 and 20 percent of people can develop chronic psychological problems from a single mild traumatic brain injury. When I was under ten years old I fell off of a bike and my forehead slammed into the pavement. I remember being dazed and groggy and I had a bump on my forehead the remnants of which could be seen for years afterwards. At 26 I sustained another blow to the head, this time it was the crown. I was in the world premiere musical adaptation of Judith Viorst's children's classic *Alexander and the*

*Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* at the Kennedy Center. There was a bit where me and a fellow cast member would spring up from underneath this huge wooden set piece made to look like an office copier machine. The cue came and I didn't clear the roof of the structure and banged my skull hard. Another knot lived on the top of my cranium for a spell. Not long after that accident I had the panic attacks that led to me exiting the previously mentioned production at Woolly Mammoth.

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection spread by ticks that can wreak havoc throughout the body. By infiltrating the bloodstream the bacteria, *Borrelia*, can break through the blood-brain barrier and cause inflammation all across neurological tissue. This can either lead to mental health conditions or exacerbate pre-existing ones. If Lyme disease is not treated upon initial contraction through courses of antibiotics, the infection can become chronic. (Horowitz 304-316) It is likely I came down with Lyme disease in middle school. I grew up in Northern Virginia which has its fair share of ticks. Like many kids, I was outside a lot. My dad had built us a treehouse in the backyard and I used to sneak my mom's lingerie catalogs up there to drool over. I can't remember if it was sixth or seventh grade, but I spent one of those years fighting with my parents to get me out of bed. I was pretty debilitated. My family otorhinolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor) thought it was chronic sinus infections and I even had surgery to open my sinus passages which left scar tissue on one side. However, years later, somewhere around 2013, I tested positive for Lyme disease. Having Lyme disease may be the reason why my OCD and bipolar disorders are somewhat resistant to psychotropic medications. The medication protocol for chronic Lyme disease calls for prolonged antibiotic treatment and figuring out the most effective regimen is almost like an art form. The fact that I may already have a compromised anterior cingulate gyrus, deep limbic system, and amygdala are probably magnified by the

incidences of mild TBI and the presence of Lyme disease. It's a potent combination that I'm still struggling to understand and live with. Performing may not be a panacea, but it is a release from wallowing in self pity. Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard have all also chosen to turn their conditions into public displays resilience.

## **Chapter 2: The Mad Genius of Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard**

Is there any link between creativity and mental illness? The American Institute of Medical Education has held an annual conference entitled Creativity and Madness in Sante Fe, New Mexico for the past 29 years. Their website states, “conference presentations focus on the relationships of art and artist to madness, insanity and mental illness.” Brain imaging has shown unusual activity in the prefrontal cortex is present in both schizophrenia and creative thinking. (Sussman) An Icelandic study published in 2015 reported that creative professionals were 25% more likely to have a genetic disposition towards schizophrenia and bipolar disorder than other professions. (Sample) Still, none of the research I found was conclusive and much of it was anecdotal. Van Gogh comes up frequently. He seems to be the definition of a tortured genius. Perhaps a mental disorder enables someone to interpret the world in a unique way. It may provide someone with the ability to make unexpected connections a more functional brain couldn't do. Of course, there is danger in romanticizing mental illness as a pathway to genius. It may prevent someone from seeking treatment. Though for some artists with mental illness, their work may be a form of therapy. Performers like Richard Pryor and Maria Bamford use their struggles to inform their craft and enlighten their audiences in the process.

### **Richard Pryor: The Firebrand**

Richard Pryor was born in Peoria, Illinois. His mother was a prostitute and his father was

a pimp. He was primarily raised by his paternal grandmother who was a madam and ran multiple brothels. In his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions*, Pryor recalls a horrific incident where his mother slashed his father's scrotum with her fingernails. He remembers his father came roaring out of the brothel, bleeding from the crotch, chasing Pryor's mother and threatening to kill her. It's easy to psychoanalyze Richard Pryor and assume he was destined to live a troubled life based on his upbringing alone. Interestingly, despite the conditions of his youth, he started out as a clean comic. He patterned himself after Bill Cosby and avoided controversial material for several years. Eventually he found this stifling and that he lacked his own voice. One night, in the late sixties (there are varying reports on the exact year), Pryor was in front of a sold out house at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas when in the middle of his act he supposedly said, "What the fuck am I doing here?", walked off stage and left the building. He moved to Berkeley, California at the height of the counterculture movement, and was reborn as the truth teller we know him to be. He began talking about race in explicit ways. He talked about dating both white and black women and the differences between them. On stage he would become the various junkies, winos, pimps, and drug dealers he grew up around. I loved all of that, but for me what was most profound was he willingness to reveal his personal weaknesses. Here, from 1979's *Live in Concert* he talks about an altercation with his wife:

And I am really personally happy to see anybody come out and see me, right. Especially as much as I done fucked up this year. I don't want to never see no more police in my life, at my house, taking my ass to jail, for killing my car. And it seemed fair to kill my car to me, right, cause my wife was gonna leave my ass. You know, I said not in this motherfucker you ain't. Un-un, no, un-un, if you leave, you be driving them Hush Puppies you got on. Cause I'm gonna kill this motherfucker here. And I had one of them old Magnums, you know all that noise they make when you shoot something. I shot at the car, it said whoom. The tires said aaahhhh. It got good to me! I shot another one. Boom, aaaahhhh. And that vodka I was drinking said, go ahead, shoot something else. I shot the motor, the motor fell out the motherfucker, right. The motor say, fuck it. And then the police came. I went in the house. Because they got Magnums too. And they don't kill cars, they kill nig-gars!

What's amazing about that routine is he had the ability to make you empathize with him even though the behavior he's talking about is atrocious. He had this wounded little boy quality, this innocence, despite the savagery of his childhood, that made his audience want to take care of him. Here's another bit from *Live in Concert*:

Anyone here ever had a heart attack? Them motherfucker's hurt. I'm not bullshitting, man. I was walking in the front yard, I was just walking along and someone said, "Don't breathe!" I was saying, huh? "Said you heard me, motherfucker, I said don't breathe." Okay, I won't breathe, I won't breathe. "Then shut the fuck up then." Okay, I'll shut up. Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me. "Get on one knee and prove it." I'm one knee, don't kill me, don't kill me. "Thinking about dying now, ain't you" Yeah, I'm thinking about dying, I'm thinking about dying. "You didn't think about that when you was eating all that pork."

With that piece the audience is living it right along with him. It almost feels like their having a heart attack too. It's visceral. He's able to capture the terror of his body turning against him. What really broke my heart is the way he encapsulated the desperation of addiction in 1982's *Live on the Sunset Strip*:

I started out smokin' ....I would have a pipe and sit it down and walk eight feet away from it. Two days later, jack, I would smoke. One time it looked like I had an appendage on my hand. It was the pipe. 'Cause this pipe used to tell me when to go to bed. The pipe would say, "Time to get up. Time for some smoke, Rich. We're not doing anything today. Fuck all your appointments. Me and you are just gonna hang out in this room together." I'd get mad and frustrated. People didn't understand me. The pipe'd say, "Come in the room with me. I got you covered. I know how you feel, Rich. Light me up. Hold me for a couple of days and we'll talk it over." I'm talking a year later, jack. I'm talking about I'm drawn up, fucked up and out of my mind, but I'm not hooked. People are trying to help me. I say, "You're just meddling in my motherfucking business! You just think because I'm having a good....Leave me the fuck alone!" And I'm smokin' my shit, 'cause my pipe would say, "I understand. They don't have a right to fuck with you. Where were they when you needed them? Come in here with me, 'cause I love ya!" And then the pipe starts saying shit like, "You let me get a little low yesterday. I don't like that. Don't let me get low again. Or I'm gonna hurt ya. You promise, keep me full at all times, okay? Come on, Rich. You can do it, 'cause I understand."

Although I've tried illegal substances in the past, I've been fortunate enough not to succumb to drug and alcohol abuse. Even so, Richard Pryor's dialogue with his pipe is so



evocative of what it's like to no longer have control over one's life. I have felt that way before when falling prey to my assundry maladies. His specificity in relaying his battle with addiction becomes universal. He also turns it into theatre by making his freebase pipe a character. I attempt to do the same thing in my solo show with a coat. I would like to think Pryor is a savvy enough writer and performer that creating a scene between him and his pipe was intentionally theatrical, but he also seems so preternaturally gifted that this may all be from instinct. Not to take away from the amount of effort he would put into honing his material by going to the clubs night after night. He took the craft of stand-up seriously, but he had an innate talent. There's one last piece I need to share. In it, Richard Pryor invites his audience to laugh at him for having burned himself almost to death. This is the definition of bleeding for the audience, but it doesn't come across as exploitation or doing anything for the laugh. It plays as a man brave enough to lay bare his own mortality. Again from *Live on the Sunset Strip*:

You know something I found out? When you're on fire and running down the street people will get out of your way. You can tell you fucked up when you get to the hospital and the doctor go...."Holy Shit! Why don't we get some coleslaw and serve this up?" I was laying in the hospital with tubes and shit up my nose....an I.V. in my arm....and a brother come in wanting an autograph. I mean steam and shit was still comin' off me. Brother come in, "Hey Rich. Hey hom. Can I get an autograph? Come on. Let me have this last autograph."

The pain in the above is palpable, but there's more to the audience's laughter than just schadenfreude. Pryor goes on telling the story of his first bath post having burned himself. In explicit detail he reenacts the excruciating sensation of a sponge being dragged across his burnt flesh. He offers up this bit of real life misery for the delectation of his audience. The audience has been let in and Richard Pryor gives them permission to laugh. They laugh along with him because he's telling them the truth. Maria Bamford tells the truth too.

## **Maria Bamford: Institutionalized Comedy**

Maria Bamford grew up in Duluth, Minnesota. She, like me, has been diagnosed with OCD and bipolar II. She dramatizes her struggles with both conditions through her stand-up act and her Netflix series *Lady Dynamite*. Bamford has the same OCD symptoms that I do which she refers to as “unwanted thoughts syndrome.” In an interview with Terry Gross on the NPR broadcast *Fresh Air*, Bamford illustrates this with the following:

Have you ever not wanted to go to a religious institution ‘cause you worried you’d lose control, run up on the altar, take a crap and yell, “I am a promise keeper?” Have you ever not wanted to go to SeaWorld ‘cause you’re worried if you’re left alone with a baby starfish, you’d try to kiss its poop hole? Have you ever not wanted to spend time with friends or family ‘cause you worry you’d chop them up into chunks and bits and have sex with the chunks and bits and put the chunks and bits on a Cobb salad and feed it to your parents?

My first reaction to hearing her express our mutual affliction in this way was jealousy. I felt some relief too. It’s always comforting to know I’m not alone in my “unwanted thoughts.” But I was envious of her ability to craft such elaborate examples of these mental obsessions. I do something similar in my solo performance piece, but it’s in a more direct way. I say “I’m walking my dog and he stops to do his business and my brain goes, ‘Eat the dog shit. Pop it in your mouth like a buttermilk shit biscuit.’ or I’m shaving - ‘Rake the razor over your penis! Mutilate your penis.’” It’s a much more blunt take on the same issue. Since my default is self-loathing and deprecation, I immediately jumped to my way being inferior to Bamford’s interpretation. Then I began thinking about our differing performance intentions. She’s a stand-up comic constructing a joke out of these ailments. Part of the art of writing a joke is exploiting the premise to its furthest degree. The comic stretches it and stretches it to ludicrous proportions. Maybe for my purposes, which is an eventual theatrical piece, a more straightforward approach is more impactful. Regardless, it’s about me finding my unique voice whilst being inspired by

other artists with similar issues. Unlike myself, Maria Bamford has been hospitalized due to her disorders. She details the experience in her Netflix comedy special *Old Baby*:

Uh, I had to take a break from work 'cause, uh, I went mental. And, uh...my friend told me, "Hey, you're talking a little too fast, having a lot of shit ideas. Uh, why don't you get in my Ford Flex, and I'll, uh, motor you over to the public storage." And, uh...I went into a psychiatric facility, which, if you haven't been, uh, don't feel bad if you go, and uh...they're uniformly awful. You're not at the wrong one. They're all bad, they're all bad. Uh...It's as if an art director came in and said, "Okay, I want to break five more chairs, and then we need...uh, at least three pieces taken out of every puzzle. And...the big screen TV, let's have it playing Ultimate Fighting Championships at maximum volume, lose the remote." They sat me down with the - the psych guy, and he said, you know, the usual questions. "Why are you here?" "Oh, I have...explicit plans to kill myself. "Okay, great. Uh, pretty common. What, uh, are the circumstances?" "Every moment is unbearable." "Uh, what kind of work do you do?" "I'm a comedian" No response. Felt...so relieved. And he went back to his little laptop, um, and some music came out of it, and I was like, well that's kind of weird. He turned the laptop around, and he said, "Is this you?" And I said, "Yes, clearly it's me, with more make-up and better material. And, uh...he said, "I had to YouTube you because I was concerned that you were delusional." Since when is it grandiose psychosis to claim that in any way you're involved in the entertainment industry? It is simple courtesy to wait until someone has left the room to IMDB them. And it's not like I said I was Richard Pryor. And had I claimed to be one of the finest comedians of our past century and been able to perform anything from his quintessential 1979 Long Beach stand-up special, or, perhaps, more weirdly, uh been able to quote some of his lesser-known material about the difference between beating white women and black women. Uh, doesn't age well. But the joke was on me, uh, because, uh, the psychiatrist then put me on a mood stabilizer whose primary side effects are cognitive, making it almost impossible to think or talk. Ho on! Or should I say, "Oh no."

There's a lot in there that hits home for me. First off, when I had my breakdown and had to leave *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi* at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in 1999, I didn't know what was happening to me. I started having these paranoid thoughts that everyone in the show hated me and that I was a terrible actor who didn't deserve to be there. I would go into the bathroom and cry uncontrollably. I didn't feel safe at the theater. I needed to leave and I thought I may have to be hospitalized. Instead, I spent a little over a year convalescing at my parent's house. I thought I'd never work again. Washington D.C. is a small theatre town and I worried I'd get a reputation for being unstable and a hiring risk. Thankfully, within two years, I was rehired by Woolly Mammoth, working with the same director, and made

it through the world premiere of *Spain* by Jim Knable without incident.

I was afraid of going to a mental hospital for some of the very reasons Maria Bamford brings up. I imagined they were poorly funded, pitiful places filled with over medicated zombies and apathetic staff. Their depictions in most media definitely influenced my vision of psychwards, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Twelve Monkeys*, etc., but I also got these opinions from hearing my mother talk about mental institutions. My mom is a therapist and she began her career working in state and county facilities and she painted a very unflattering picture of her time there. Therefore, I was incredibly grateful to have the womb of my childhood home where I could get well. Like Bamford, I had suicidal thoughts and feelings that “every moment was unbearable.” My mother immediately set up an appointment with her colleague, a neurobehavioral psychiatrist, and so began an ever-evolving cocktail of sweet sweet psychotropics. Due to the complexities of biochemistry, I too, had some negative side effects to the various pills and potions prescribed to me. On one medication, Desoxyn (which is used to treat ADHD, but in my case, was prescribed for excessive daytime sleepiness due to frequent insomnia), I called a store clerk I barely knew and professed my love to her. Then I ran down to my folk's basement and spent six hours making her multiple mix tapes. I later found out that Desoxyn is prescription methamphetamine. The drug Abilify, which I was taking for bipolar disorder, made me so agitated I felt like pulling my skin off. Ambien was a doozy my ex-wife demanded I stop taking after she found me on the floor of the living room naked from the waist down, devouring a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream, completely oblivious to an ongoing fire drill. Finding the right drug combination took a while, and my current doctor is still tweaking doses and considering other options.

In the above Bamford material, she seems apprehensive about telling the psychiatrist that

she's a comedian or at least relieved that he appeared not to comment upon hearing of her chosen profession. I wonder if this has to do with a stereotype about comedians being miserable people. There's even a 2015 documentary called *Misery Loves Comedy* by comedian and actor Kevin Pollak that tries to tackle whether or not one has to be troubled to be funny. According to Variety's Geoff Berkshire, the film is fairly superficial, but it's enough of a commonly held belief that Pollak felt compelled to make a movie about it. There seems to be a hesitancy by many performers to admit that they're performers. I'm not sure if that's because the inevitable follow up question tends to be, "Have I seen you in anything?" or the statement "That's a rough business." Maybe it's the pressure of possibly being put on the spot to prove one's ability - to be the monkey or clown for instant amusement. It reminds me of meeting one of my favorite stand-ups, Richard Jeni, after his set at the Washington, D.C. Improv many years ago. I was waiting in a line just to tell him how much I loved his stuff. I never ask celebrities for autographs and rarely ask to have a picture taken with them. The only thing I do if I happen to cross paths with a performer I admire is tell them that I like their work. When I worked in D.C. I had a few encounters with people who had seen me on stage and told me they enjoyed my performance and I was always humbled and grateful to be recognized in that way. I ran into Andy Richter from *Conan* back when I lived in Los Angeles and told him he made me laugh. Then I doubled back and asked him if he felt that I encroached on his privacy by stopping and giving him a compliment. He said no and that those who were rude to a fan for giving a quick, "Hello. I like your work!" were assholes. Not that Andy Richter speaks for everyone in the public eye, but I found it validating. Anyway, back to Richard Jeni - I'm waiting to speak to him and the guy in front of me tells Richard Jeni a joke and then says, "You can use that." I was flabbergasted by this fan's presumptuousness and realized this must happen all the time. Yet, Jeni chose to hang

out after his set leaving him available to be approached by his audience. I'm very familiar with this kind of neediness, so much so, that I now usually avoid seeing anybody after I do a show. My ego is so fragile that I'm either breathlessly waiting for someone to tell me how great I was or I don't believe them if they do offer me praise, so I just avoid the whole wasp's nest altogether. Richard Jeni succumbed to his fragility. In 2007, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. He never talked about his depression in his act. I wonder if it would have made a difference for him in the way it seems to have made a difference for Maria Bamford. Bamford and I are exorcising our demons on stage, and maybe that helps to keep them at bay.

It's fascinating to me that Maria Bamford chooses to bring up Richard Pryor in this routine. The premise makes sense - it would be delusional for her to claim she was Richard Pryor. Obviously, part of the comedy comes from her picking someone that is the extreme opposite of her physical type. But did she also pick Richard Pryor for the same reasons I chose to focus on him? Does she see herself as following in his self-excavating footsteps? The author Scott Saul, who wrote *Becoming Richard Pryor* had this to say in an interview with the website Salon:

On the level of technique I think Pryor had so much in the way of chops as a comedian that it's hard to find a comedian who couldn't learn from him. He can be incredibly experimental, and comedians like Maria Bamford could be seen as following the line of Pryor in really questioning the line between comedy and drama.

Richard Pryor and Maria Bamford are both unflinching in their depiction of themselves as flawed human beings. They both shapeshift into various characters creating playlets and monologues that stretch the boundaries of traditional stand-up comedy. And, obviously, I find them both incredibly inspiring.

## Chris Gethard: Suicidal Tendencies

The final performer I'd like to examine is Chris Gethard. Gethard is from West Orange, New Jersey. By his account he had a relatively happy childhood. His parents, like mine, have been together for over forty years and he claims they are still in love. I believe mine are as well. Even though his homelife seemed free of trauma, he suffered crippling depression. He began talking about his clinical depression and subsequent suicidal thoughts in his work as a comedian which culminated in an off-broadway show called *Career Suicide*. In the following excerpt from that show, Gethard is relaying a session he had with his first psychiatrist where he's contemplating the events that might have been the catalyst for his anxiety and depression.

I'm telling him about my childhood. I'm like, "Parents, great, no complaints there." But I did grow up in this town, West Orange, odd place at times, kind of violent and like a lot of bullying and stuff, and like no real consequences for it even. My older brother, when he was 12 years old, he got beat up by a bully so bad, this kid broke my brother's shoulder, broke his collarbone in a fight. This happened at Edison Middle School. The kid didn't even get into any trouble for that. I'm a few years younger than my brother. I see that, I'm like, "Okay, I guess...I guess the world's, like, violent and aggressive and nobody's really going to help you out so, keep your guard up, man. Like, don't let anybody in." It really messed me up. It did. And oddly enough...I mean, this doesn't really matter, it's neither here nor there...but oddly enough that bully happened to be a little person. A dwarf broke my brother's shoulder. My childhood may as well have just been directed by David Lynch. It made no sense. It made no sense.

I was bullied growing up and it shaped who I am in a lot of ways. I also faced apathy from authority figures who I trusted to help stop me from being bullied. I was a sensitive kid who would cry without much provocation. The teacher would call on me to answer a math question and I would start crying. I was also overweight back then too and taller than most of my fellow classmates, so I was both an easy and big target. There was a kid who rode the same bus as me, Jamie, who used to chant, "Andy Wynn the wimp. Andy wimp the wynn." In fourth grade I was handed a note with a survey inside, "Check here if you like Andy Wynn. Check here if you hate Andy Wynn.", and all the checks were in the hate column. Seth Folsom stood up in our 7th

grade english class and in front of everyone, including the teacher, called me a “Jewish bag-baby” which, to this day, I have no idea what that means, but I assumed it wasn’t a term of endearment. The teacher did nothing. I would get beat up sometimes. Gethard’s mention that his brother’s bully was a little person reminded me that one of my worst bullies was Bill Johnson. He was 5’4” and I was 6’4”. I could have squashed the diminutive creep, but I let him get to me. The gist is the old saw horse of kids can be cruel and the general advice, as always, was to ignore them. But I couldn’t ignore them. It got so bad by the time I got to middle school that my mom decided to have me see a colleague of hers, Nolan Bailey, who practiced hypnotherapy. He gave me permission and post-hypnotic suggestions to stand up for myself. Subsequently, I punched Paul Thorsen in the face for tripping me down the hall. Things got better after that. But, ultimately, being bullied helped me develop my sense of humor. I realized that by becoming the class clown I could deflect a lot of the ugliness that was directed towards me. I could turn bullies into allies. Chris Rock has said in interviews that being bullied made him who he is today. It required him to think quickly and fueled his drive to succeed. I kept refining my aptitude for comedy and by my senior year of highschool I received the superlative “funniest student”. Now, I was homeschooled, but still.... Actually, not so humble brag, there were 400 students in my graduating class and I had been in school with many of them since first grade. So I had won my peers over and it set me on the path to being a performer. However, I believe being bullied also fed my yearning for approval and acceptance and when I face rejection I crash hard.

Gethard discusses his experience with seeking validation in this excerpt from *Career*

*Suicide:*

Turns out, I have a two-week guest writer contract at SNL. Next thing I know, I’m at 30 Rockefeller Center. I’m staying up all night working on sketches with the cast and writers, it’s like so hands-on. It’s so fun. Then the two weeks is up, and it goes away. They’re like, “Yeah, we like what you do, you know. It’s not a great match. This job’s not for you.” And man, does the



bottom fall out. And I want to be clear. I'm not trying to stand up here in front of you guys, going, "Oh poor me. I didn't get a cool job." That's not the issue. The issue actually is...that I did get the job and nothing changed. Nothing. I spent my whole adult life chasing jobs, that's just what I did, and I always figured you get one of those jobs everybody's trying to grab onto. You've got to feel so validated, right. Like everyone has to recognize how amazing you are. That didn't happen, and I knew in my heart, I knew even if that had worked out long term, that was never going to happen. No job can change the fact that I don't have it together enough to have a functioning stove. Comedy does not exist to fix me. Maybe, just maybe, banking my entire emotional health on a successful career in the arts wasn't a good idea.

I'm still wrestling with that final sentiment. I read every review and if I find the one that pans me, that's the one I believe. I'm so dependent on other people's assessment of me to define my self worth. This is most likely aggravated by my obsessive thoughts. Besides the harm obsessions, I have automatic negative thoughts about myself cycling through my head. Once again, these are combated by medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Chris Gethard is able to address these issues in *Career Suicide* without the whole piece devolving into self-indulgence and self-pity. I intend to keep honing my show and emulate Gethard's ability to make the specific universal without spiraling into public self-flagellation and solipsism.

Chris Gethard wrote a column for the pop culture website, *Vulture*, after Robin Williams died. It sums up how I feel about Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Gethard. In it he writes about improvising with Williams one night at the Upright Citizens Brigade.

At the intermission, we are in the green room, everyone jabbering a mile a minute because there is so much energy in the theater that night. Except for Robin Williams. He is standing quietly against a wall, a look of discomfort etched on his face. Onstage, you couldn't take your eyes off him. He was relentless. It was impossible to not feel his impact. Offstage, he is Boo Radley - hugging the corner, hidden, uncomfortable. I make eye contact with him. He glances down to the floor, towards a cooler kept backstage filled with drinks for the cast. Bottles of various brands of beers jut through the ice and poke over the edge of the cooler. "You guys sure don't make it easy, huh?" he asks me, quietly, with a small smile on his face and a deep real pain in his eyes. And I understand that all the rumors I ever heard about his demons and struggles are true. And I realize, comedy is his drug now. Making other people feel better is his way of feeling better. And I think about being depressed on a foam couch watching him in a movie almost a decade prior and I wonder, "Who makes him laugh when he feels this way?" And I'm typing these words as a way to sort out the feeling I have in my gut, and that feeling roughly translates to: I didn't know Robin Williams well, or at all, really. But I stood on stage conversing

with him in front of a crowd, and I got to feel a monstrous energy emanate from him, a runaway train that remained positive and inviting and intriguing: and I got to feel a crowd respond to it and when I think about what I learned that night, as a performer and a fan and a guy, I realize it's Robin Williams made people laugh for all the right reasons. He was funny as shit. But he could make shit funny. Not shit meaning "stuff" - shit meaning darkness and awful situations and separated families and cancer-stricken kids and even aliens who feel alone in the world because no one else will ever truly know what it is to be him. And because of that, even more so than his talent, he's one of the ones the rest of us will be chasing from now on.

Here, Chris Gethard is struck by the fragility of one of his comedy idols and heartened by Williams generosity of spirit despite his personal turmoil. Williams stands as a guidepost for both Gethard and myself as someone who believed that comedy and performance has the power to heal and unite, to emancipate and transcend suffering. I know I'll be chasing after the precedent set by Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard. All of whom, I believe, are getting in front of people and telling their stories for the right reasons - to let us know we're not alone and that we shouldn't take ourselves or life too seriously. Mel Brooks said, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." I'm grateful to Pryor, Bamford, and Gethard for being willing to fall down the sewer, and I hope I'm brave enough to jump in after them.

### **Chapter 3. Section 1: Process - Some Thoughts On Being Jewish**

The expression, “It’s funny because it’s true” implies that honesty may be inherently comedic. The observational ability of the comedian to draw attention to life’s absurdities seems to inspire laughter of recognition. But what of the oppressed peoples whose lives exist in a magnified absurdity due to the cruel whims of a hegemonic society? How can their truth be even remotely funny? Or is a gallows sense of humor the only way such a people survive? Isn’t that the romantic notion of oppression? That it breeds a deeper mirth, a richer culture, borne out of a desperate need to believe life is still worth living despite of or, maybe more accurately, in spite of the injustices faced, the inhumanity placed upon them day after day. And Jews, among others of the disenfranchised, find themselves at the center of this notion. And as a card carrying member of the tribe, I want to believe my Jewishness has made me endemically funny, but has it made me systemically truthful? I grew up hearing about orthodox Jews who would spend their days buried in the Torah, arguing with their brethren over this passage and that passage, and writing essays about their meanings. What were they searching for? The truth of god’s word? Proof of his very existence? I had images of hundreds of Jewish scholars haggling over the substance of a single sentence, sucking it dry to get to the marrow of its verity. Unlocking the key to all certitude, verifiable evidence that we are the chosen people. But chosen for what? Persecution? Not that Jews have the patent on persecution, I mean, Jews can assimilate. And isn’t assimilation a kind of mendacity? So some Jews spend their entire lives seeking a divine truth while others hide who they are or simply adopt a new identity. Assimilation - is it confirmation against a systemic

Jewish truthiness? And where does that leave me, a reformed Jew who doesn't go to shul, and has had a penchant for telling whoppers to get himself out of different situations. Once, when I was an undergraduate, I made the granddaddy of karmic no-no lies, claiming my parents had gotten into a serious car wreck, in order to be released from a tech rehearsal. So how does a Hebraic borderline pathological liar expect to tell the truth through his art? Partially through laughter. In his essay, *The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor*, Elliott Oring offers this explanation:

Humor is transcendent when it reflects the unwillingness of the individual to surrender to the impossible conditions of existence and attempts to achieve a measure of liberation from social, political, economic, and even cosmic forces that remain beyond one's control. Jewish humor is thus conceptualized as transcending the conditions of despair and consequently is distinctive in its reflection of an unperturable optimism and zest for living. (Oring pp 268)

Under Oring's hypothesis, by using humor in my solo performance to discuss the medical issues that impact my life, I'm engaging in a Jewish humor tradition of turning adversity into a comic declaration. My solo performance piece would be a slog without the humor and, regardless of its sincerity, would probably fall on a disengaged audience. Besides, the only way to address the absurdity of some of my intrusive thoughts is through humor. The truth is they're bizarre, and that strangeness can only be understood or accepted by using the remove of humor. Other Jews understand this inclination. As Nathan Ausubel, a Jewish folklore historian puts it, "By laughing at the absurdities and cruelties of life they (the Jews) draw much of the sting from them." So, like many of my Jewish forebears, I continue to put one clown shoe in front of the other on a never ending march towards clarity and hilarity.

While I may inevitably be marching forwards, the creation of my solo performance show required me to look backwards. My sense of humor developed as a defense mechanism. It was

my way to deflect the bullying I received from my peers. The chief rabbi of London from 1893, Hermann Adler, characterized this Jewish tendency as a “weapon...whereby the Jews have been able to survive in the fierce struggle for existence.” Trust me, my developing facility with humor kept me alive in elementary and middle school. But I was a nascent storyteller, and my humor was servicing a need to conceal rather than reveal myself. By deciding to embark on an autobiographical theatrical pilgrimage, I guess it’s my responsibility to trace where the transition from class clown to teller of tales happened. I suppose it’s too reductive to say it comes with middle age. A living memoir trying to make dramaturgical sense of the fragments. Jews look to the stories of Passover and see a direct line of our exodus eventually leading to a home in Israel. Am I similarly freed from bondage and brought to the cradle by acting out my story in front of strangers? I know that in the telling of my story I feel in control of my conditions in ways I never did before compiling these accounts. I imagine it’s akin to the addict admitting their addiction and committing to their sobriety. That’s not to say an addict is defined by their addiction. In telling my story I become more than a compendium of my afflictions, more than a Jew, more than an actor - I become human. A synthesized whole in a six foot four inch frame. My solo performance has given me the opportunity to reveal all of myself, where before I often displayed only those elements which seemed particularly pleasing or even misleading. It’s like the difference between Woody Allen’s (a distinctively Jewish storyteller if there ever was one) *Take the Money and Run* and his latter film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. *Take the Money and Run* is purely a ridiculous spoof, a joke-a-minute delivery machine of one ludicrous sketch after another. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is an existentialist examination of relationships, growing older, and the futility of human connection. Both exhibit Woody Allen’s genius for comedy, but only *Crimes and Misdemeanors* truly delves into the ugly underneath, the whole messy truth of

life. In my early life I was all *Take the Money and Run* and with my solo show I've become more *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, but hopefully not as bleak.

I also recognize my evolution into a demonstrative storyteller was probably inevitable. Jews have been telling stories since before the old testament. What is the old testament but a collection of Jewish tales? Further on in history came the stories from Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Neil Simon, and that wisest of sages Yakov Smirnoff. In my family the great schmoozer and raconteur was my maternal grandmother who would set up shop on the boardwalk of Atlantic City and kibitz with every passerby. If I can embody her indomitable spirit and that of the Jewish people while still remaining faithful to my own specific voice, I may be able to join the pantheon. At the very least I'll be amidst the strivers and survivors like Tevye the dairyman - watching the sun rise and set with a robust L'chaim "To Life!" Schmaltzy, yes, but what do you want from me, I'm Jewish.

Being Jewish may separate me from the three artists I've chosen for review. Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard, I suspect, have never davened. I'm no expert davener myself, seeing that I'm a secular humanist - but culturally I'm 100% kosher beef. I'm also culturally an American, as are Pryor, Bamford, and Gethard. All four of us have been inundated with the American Dream and American exceptionalism. Ours is a country that espouses freedom and equality for all, but often fails to follow through on that promise. I believe the tension that disparity creates has fueled all of our work. Our circumstances are very different, especially Pryor and Bamford. Obviously, I do not know what it is like to be a person of color or a woman, but I know what it is like to wrestle with the idea of America and the daily reality. Even from my perch of privilege, I feel the ache of what she could be. We're the grand social experiment and that also makes us a bunch of mixed nuts. In some ways, the American identity is no identity at

all. We're a nation of rebels, opportunists, the displaced, and the unwanted. And the artist is at least three of those things. Now, I'm not a contemporary of the late genius Richard Pryor, but I am of the same generation as Bamford. We're Gen Xers. I think we're in the unique position to have been born after all of the progressive movements of the 60's and see them somewhat regress during the greed of the 80's. Ours is also the generation to see the divorce rate become equal to those couples who stayed married. The ideal of the nuclear family disintegrated before our eyes. I think this made us more cynical and pragmatic than the boomers. There's an edge of skepticism in both of our work. Chris Gethard and I are white males so life comes easier for us. In fact, we expect life to work out for us, and when it hasn't, we're a bit dumbfounded. Gethard talks about this in his off-Broadway show when he tells the story of being let go from the writer's room at Saturday Night Live. He thought he made it. Instead he had to create his own luck by launching his own talk show which has brought him the success he sought at SNL. I'm crafting this solo performance and perhaps it will shepard in a new era of prosperity for me too. But that's not the underlying motivation. Like Pryor, Bamford, and Gethard, I'm a troubadour. We're all Scheherazade, figuratively saving our lives by telling tales, hoping we're lucky enough to do it for at least one thousand and one nights.

### Chapter 3. Section 2: Process - The Anecdote

I will now attempt to track my evolution as a creative entity and then delve into some of the specifics behind the creation of my solo piece. I will also begin to explore specific aspects of both Jewish and African American humor as a lens into the structure of both my culturally charged use of humor and , secondly, how my use of humor utilizes styles from both cultural styles of narrative. I say attempt because I've often condemned myself for the lack of a creative process or for not employing the rigor necessary to grow as an artist. Nor have I reflected much on who I am as an artist. For the most part, I've subscribed to the acting advice credited to either Noel Coward, Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, or Spencer Tracy - "Know your lines and don't bump into the furniture." Additionally, I do pride myself for the ability to take notes and adjustments. Primarily, I've relied on the words of the play, the input of the director, hopefully being present enough to listen and respond to my scene partners, and whatever gut instinct or impulse emerges in the moment. Yet, as I contemplate on my development towards becoming a professional performer, a more complex story begins to appear. Just as my various maladies may have a genetic component, there's a nature versus nurture argument to be made for me being an actor.

I come from a long line of frustrated performers. My paternal grandfather acted throughout his youth and wanted to pursue it as a career. We're related to George Cukor, winner of the Academy Award for directing *My Fair Lady*, and my Pop Pop tried to contact him for help in breaking into the film industry. As I understand it, my great grandfather reached out to Cukor



first and asked him to refuse assisting my grandfather in any way. My great grandfather had a very low opinion of actors, in part because he knew Dracula. My great grandfather was a dentist in New York and had some famous actors as patients including Bela Lugosi. Lugosi supposedly never had money to pay his dental bills and looked and smelled like a vagrant due to his morphine addiction. Therefore, no son of my great grandfather was ever going to be a degenerate actor. My grandfather did try to rebel, went to Hollywood, and played a native in the Abbott and Costello movie *Africa Screams*, but the lack of parental support and probably the lack of work proved too much for him. He came back to New York and sold insurance. I know he was bitter about it, because he would regale us with stories of his former glories. My paternal grandmother was on her way to becoming a professional opera singer who once sang at the Metropolitan Opera House. She was pressured by her parents to get married and start a family. According to my father, it kind of broke her spirit. My dad and his sisters, in turn, also performed. My aunts have beautiful voices in their own right and my dad was the lead in his high school musicals. My dad was too scared to pursue performing professionally. His older sister, as previously mentioned, is bipolar and her illness got in the way of any long term aspirations. His younger sister had a bit of success as a wedding singer, but family obligations kept her sidelined. On my mother's side, her maternal grandmother was a singer and her father and brother were both drummers. My mom took modern dance from the ages of 4 or 5 to 19. I give this family history to contextualize the primacy of performance within my household growing up and the overriding theme of a dream suspended, snuffed out either due to circumstances beyond their control or a shortage of courage or both. Once I showed an interest and an aptitude for performing, I often felt like both a repository for all this familial creative energy, and a vessel to bring their dreams to fruition. It was a lot of pressure.

I formally got the acting bug around the 4th or 5th grade, but I was performing around the house long before that. It started by emulating my dad. My dad is naturally funny. He would do impressions of Crazy Guggenheim from *The Jackie Gleason Show*. He would record himself singing Elvis Presley songs on this old reel to reel he had set up in the family room. Sometimes he would let me sing too. My favorite song was Elvis' *Can't Help Falling in Love*. I would mimic my dad and that would get a big reaction from both my parents. I became obsessed with mimics and mimicry. I would watch impressionist Rich Little, how he altered both his physicality and his voice for each imitation. I got to know Richard Nixon, Johnny Carson, Groucho Marx, and dozens of others through Rich Little. I listened to the Earl Doud produced album *The First Family Rides Again* starring Little over and over again. I was nine years old and had no idea about Ronald Reagan other than that he was the president, but I thought Little's bit on Reaganomics was so funny I started doing it around the house. I was so wrapped up in being a junior impressionist my third grade teacher would give me a few minutes at the end of class to entertain the troops. There I was doing James Cagney, Jimmy Durante, Groucho Marx, and Ronald Reagan for a bunch of eight and nine year olds and the only one laughing was Mrs. Eadie. I guess my burgeoning, yet subconscious, process was purely imitative. That started to change when I was nudged into my first actual play.

I was fairly uncoordinated, so sports were a challenge for me. I was also hypersensitive and mercurial, which in retrospect seem like symptoms of my disorders. Both my parents and teachers didn't know what to do with all of my temperamental energy. Then a lovely lady in charge of the elementary school play suggested I audition for the role of the villain. The play was called *Noddy* and I was cast as Duke Earl leader of the nefarious Grobs. Opening night came and I brought the house down. All of the schtick I had absorbed from my father and the other

entertainers who inspired me got filtered down that evening into a chubby little Jewish boy gobbling up the scenery as if it were my mom's noodle kugel. I didn't just do an imitation as the loutish Duke, I improvised and riffed, and generally did all the things a Hebrew hyena would do after being unleashed. I finally had the positive attention I craved and my parents were elated to see their difficult child seem to find his element. They enrolled me in a performing arts day camp immediately. At Dance Etc. I was surrounded by other spastic kids feeling their way through the world of performance. While there, I was introduced to ballet, tap, and modern and learned that dancing would not be my forte. Camp Follow Spot came soon after with my first taste of doing live musical theatre. The three weeks culminated in a performance of *I Sing the Body Electric* from the movie *Fame*. But I really came into my own at the sleepaway Camp Ballibay when I was thirteen. This was my first time doing Shakespeare. I did Act 2 Scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Wrapping my mouth around those delicious double entendres and finding the screwball physicality was an awakening to a more precise and disciplined performance style. This is not to say I was instantly transformed into a diligent actor with a penchant for self-restraint. I was still a messy impulsive performer in the pupa stage, but I had a taste of the more sophisticated delights to come.

A more transformative moment came to me during a class at the Virginia Governor's School for the Arts summer program at Radford University. By this time I was sixteen and already deeply entrenched in my high school drama department having landed the lead role in *Twelve Angry Jurors* when I was a freshman. It's odd that my confidence level as a teenager far surpasses my confidence level as a middle aged man. I wonder if I was experiencing some hypomania in my high school years that influenced my feelings of invincibility or if that was just the natural default of adolescence. Either way I entered the Governor's School convinced of my

own greatness. I left somewhat humbled by being cast as ensemble for our final performance. However, the revelation that changed my perspective on acting grew out of an exercise on discomfort. Our instructor would have us walk around the room making extreme gestures with our whole body. Then he would yell freeze and we had to hold whatever position we were in until he released us. He would have us hold these positions for what felt like five to ten minutes. Sweat was pouring down my face and my muscles began to cramp. I was not enjoying this exercise. He told us while we were frozen to sit in our pain and see if we could breathe through it. He said that there will be times in our careers as actors, if we were lucky enough to have careers, where we will be uncomfortable. We may be asked to swim in a frigid body of water or play someone who murders their children, and we'll have to have the fortitude to do the work. This was the first time I realized that performing was more than a joyful release, more than just a means to amass praise, performing could often be arduous. I was reminded of this lesson several times in my career, most directly on the occasions when I had to wear heavy prosthetics and severe makeup. In those instances I relied on my experience and training in ways that were readily apparent to myself. I couldn't focus solely on the suffocating effect of the makeup, I was forced to be present. I had to use my body and voice in more specific ways to compensate for the limitations of my facial expressions. At the same time I found the radical change in my appearance liberating and the details of the character manifesting itself more organically. I haven't done any traditional mask work or training, but I assume the same epiphanies and dependence on craft come forth in that modality.

An even greater lesson was learned years later in 2001 after having begun my professional career as an Equity actor. I was in *As You Like It* directed by Aaron Posner at the Folger Shakespeare Library. I was playing multiple characters including Charles the Wrestler,

Amiens, and Audrey. Aaron had given me some creative license to improvise at specific moments in the show as long it wasn't anachronistic. At that stage of my career that was not the wisest decision. I took too many liberties. For instance, the play ended with the entire ensemble on stage while Rosalind delivered the epilogue. I was still dressed as Audrey and when Rosalind got to the line, "What a case am I in then, that am neither a good epilogue nor cannot insinuate with you in the behalf of a good play!" I, as Audrey, would interject something to the effect of, "I thought we did pretty good." But sometimes I would say things like, "I thought we got jiggy with it." It got back to me that some of the cast were upset by my grandstanding, particularly because it was serving me and my ego and not necessarily the play. Instead of becoming defensive and then doubling down on milking my bits, which I may have been guilty of in the past, I started to set everything that was already working and fully commit to it every night and it killed. Besides being self indulgent, I had been working against the comedy. I was interrupting the rhythm and mathematics behind the comedy. That show taught me that there is just as much skill involved in nailing the same comic beats night after night as there is in reinventing everything on the fly. Or, more accurately, that's what technique and craft is all about. This insight changed my entire approach to performing in comedic plays. The appearance of spontaneity in rehearsed material is the magic trick all performers are shooting for and I got closer to it after that run of *As You Like It*.

There's an invisible part of my process that is a direct result of my OCD and whatever abnormal synaptic firings accompany a brain with my sundry biochemical mishegas. Part of my obsessions and compulsions evince themselves in a life long TV addiction or should I say content addiction. I'll binge two thirteen hour shows in a weekend. I currently follow over 40 programs and I watch as many movies as possible. The addiction is partially about self

medicating. When I watch TV my mind quiets down and focuses on the story playing out in front of me. Often just watching TV isn't enough and I'll simultaneously play games, like *Angry Birds*, on my phone to further palliate my restless mind. I absorb all this content and it gets filed away in the recesses of my cranium to be repurposed later. At times I've made lightning fast connections that I believe may not have been possible without my irregular wiring. An early example of this happened while I was playing Fagin in the musical *Oliver* amid my senior year of high school. I was wearing a fake mustache perilously perched above my upper lip. My sweat had bled through the spirit gum and I knew I was in a losing battle with gravity. Sure enough the mustache slid off my face and fluttered down to the floor of the stage. I held for a beat and then said, "Something must have crawled upon my face and died." The house roared and Fagin continued on teaching street urchins how to pick pockets. The thing was I had heard that line years before on one of my favorite shows *Three's Company*. In the episode "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow", Jack (John Ritter) buys a false mustache because he thinks it will make him more attractive to women. Janet (Joyce DeWitt) sees him with the phony stache and says, "It looks like something crawled on your face and died." That episode aired in 1983 and my affair with the wayward lip toupee happened in 1989. There is a new theory that memory retention may be related to OCD. New Science Magazine published an article in April of 2016 about this possibility. From the article:

"The OCD idea fits," says Tracy Alloway at the University of North Florida, Jacksonville. She says that the neural pathways we use to recall memories are like garden paths: if we don't keep them organised, they become overgrown and blocked. "If you're habitually recalling memories then you're keeping those pathways clear, so you're more likely to be able to retrieve that information faster at a later date."

Although I'm not necessarily proud of my content addiction, I may have my OCD to thank for my recall and ability to make quick connections. These traits have been invaluable to my creative

process. In the *Addams Family* musical, Fester has a segment in the number “One Normal Night” where he’s doing the same rhyme lyric after lyric and for the final rhyme I was given free reign to come up with my own line. Straightaway, I had over a dozen punchlines including, “Was Jersey right for Bruce Springsteen?”, “Was Kermit right for Bein’ Green?” and “Was Abba right for Dancing Queen?” Who’s to say whether my agility and facility would be the same without my beleaguered, batty, and bewildered brain.

Yet, my addled brain has made it difficult for me to follow through on self generated projects in the past. I tried my hand at stand-up many years ago (we’re talking three open mics here) when I lived in Los Angeles, but it was too jokey, crude, and cheap. I hadn’t really found my authentic voice or, more honestly, was hiding behind hacky material. Still, there are traces of my preoccupations with sex and religion in the slight five minutes I put together, which have remained and are repurposed in my solo show. It’s evidence of how my obsessive thinking can lead to riffing or exaggerating on a piece of stimulus. Here’s how I spun out an item of unwanted email spam I received into some stand-up:

There’s a fair amount of porn on the internet. That’s an understatement. There’s a lot of porn on my internet...browser history. And there’s a lot of porn spam in my inbox - which, by the way is a pretty good movie - My Inbox. So what disturbs me about this porn spam are the subject lines. Here’s my favorite - Farm Girls Will Take Farm Cock For Free. I gotta say I was relieved because I have a warehouse full of farm cock and I have no idea what to do with it. And now these generous ladies, excuse me, girls, are going to take this farm cock off my hands for free. So I jumped into my Ford 150, backed that sucker up, and filled it to the brim with farm cock...and when I got to the farm these girls just beamed with the breast milk of human kindness, and they showered me and the farm cock with kisses. And I got it all on video, I’ll send you the link after my set.

That chunk, in addition to being sophomoric, was the result of me actually getting the spam email about farm cock and not being able to get it out of my head. So instead of being plagued by the phrase farm cock and the images it conjured up, this was a case where I exorcised the demons through writing about them and the places my mind took me. The stuff on religion was

more conceptual which reflected the odd connections I sometimes find myself making:

You all know Lunchables, right? How about Communionables? You got a vacuum sealed package of wafers and a little vial of church wine - Let's say you got a big test before second period, you down a little body and blood of Christ - You're at least getting a B, B-, depending on how recently you've sinned. I have another idea - God In A Box - you order God In A Box and a divine looking box is delivered to your doorstep. You open it and the only thing inside is a little slip of paper that reads "God is everywhere." Wow, mind blow, you feel at one with the universe, you now know, with all your heart and soul, that the Kingdom of Heaven is truly within, and I just sold your ass an empty box for \$20.00.

This hunk was representative of my skepticism regarding the commodification of organized religion and my ever wavering belief in a higher power. Ultimately, I had neither the discipline nor the drive to pursue stand-up. I respect the medium entirely too much to half ass my way through it. I would have had to hit open mics several times a week to even be passably competent. Besides, in many ways, a stand-up comic is as much of a writer as a performer and my brain makes it hard for me to stay on task or be consistent. I was more drawn to improvisation for this reason. All of the various performing arts programs I participated in had some array of short form theater games as a part of their instruction. I found improvisation emancipating. It circumnavigated my OCD and thrust me into the now. At the same time it gave my propensity towards unexpected associations a place to flower. I lean on the tenets of improvisation in all of my performance work - say yes, make offers, go for bold choices and characterizations, take care of the other person - I'm not always successful at it, but it serves as a solid launching pad. Improvisation provided some relief from the ongoing loop playing inside my head, but I still had a desire for more structure. Even though my focus can be challenged, I still had a strong desire to write.

I've always written in dribs and drabs, a screenplay, some sitcom spec scripts, a couple ten minute plays, comedy sketches, lots of songs, but my inconsistency has gotten the better of



me. For years my parents have been telling me to write a solo show about our dysfunctional family. I think I previously resisted it because I was ashamed of my issues, and wasn't confident that I could pull it off. In 2013, I endeavored to write a thinly veiled autobiographical novel. I only got two pages in before stopping. I recently reread it after several years of neglect. I was awestruck by its parallels to my solo piece. I had not revisited it at all while constructing my solo show. It must have been floating around in my subconscious all this time, which is a testament to the tight grip my obsessions have over my mind. Here's how I interpreted my intrusive thoughts into narrative fiction back in 2013:

How many nights had Roy laid awake beside his wife thinking of ways to kill her? This had less to do with an actual desire and more to do with his OCD. Any thought deemed inappropriate, Roy's mind made a meal of. "Crush the cat's head with your hand. Yes, the one you're using to stroke it with. Crush that kitty's head!" This was something Roy would never do. He knew this deep within himself, but he felt the emotional anguish as if he'd already done it. Tonight the thought was neck breakage. How hard would he have to torque Regina's neck to break it? Did he have enough upper body strength to get it done? Was that even the key to it? Was it more of an angle and leverage thing? Would she wake up before he could break it or sleep right on through? And so on the torture continued until, as usual, he got out of bed.

Writing in the third person protected me from truly being vulnerable. It also came across as more sensationalistic. It was exploiting my very real condition for the purposes of what I hoped was gripping fiction. This remove is antithetical to what I want from my solo show, so the evolution from proposed novel to autobiographical theater piece is a significant one. My aim for the solo performance is to beget empathy for individuals who share my struggles and destigmatize mental illness not capitalize on it or trivialize it in the service of plot intrigue. The book, as mentioned previously, was abandoned, and an alternative means to artistically express these subjects was not explored until I enrolled in the Virginia Commonwealth University theatre department's course Advanced Studio: Solo Performance taught by professor Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D.

I decided to take Solo Performance because my itch to write still persisted, but I knew I needed a structure with firm deadlines in order to execute anything. I had previously taken Dr. Pettiford-Wates' Introduction To Applied Theatre course and was struck by her warmth, incisive intelligence, and forthright nature. I trusted that she would be a compassionate guide through the devising process. I had also seen the solo pieces that culminated from the undergraduate level of the course. These pieces were raw, often funny, shockingly candid. I was a tad concerned, not only because the endeavor looked to be galvanizing, I call it excavating one's soul, but also because I found many of the pieces to be portentous and solipsistic. Granted, these are students barely out of adolescence, and the pieces are works in progress (as mine still is), but it was a stark example of the pitfalls of autobiographical writing and performance. I'm still not sure if I've conquered or reconciled these traps the way I believe Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford and Chris Gethard have done. Therein lies the skill of an artist, but what was impressed on me was the agency and empowerment on display. Dr. Pettiford-Wates calls this (and I'm paraphrasing) "covering the ground on which you stand." I was ready to cover my ground.

I began Solo Performance during the Spring semester of 2017. Dr. Pettiford-Wates (hereby to be referred to as Dr. T) conducts the course using her own methodology known as Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum (RPD).

The Use of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum is designed to facilitate self-actualization and empowerment through an exploration of "rite of passage journey" and the lived experiences that expose the emotional blocks, and psychological barriers we build that often inhibit our innate creative nature from engaging in the fullness of its potency and/or purpose. It asks each person to become an active and conscious advocate and ally - to begin the process of empowerment and healing through self knowledge and self discovery, taking responsibility for the impact a transformative process can have on the progression of learning, (re) membering legacy, and envisioning the future. The methodology of RPD is immersed in the power and impact of telling our own stories. We must Sankofa, go back and retrieve what has been lost, stolen, or forgotten. It is in the process of (re) membering ourselves finding our power and our purpose as creative artists (Pettiford-Wates pp6-7)

I entered the process knowing that I'd address my intrusive thoughts at some point within my solo show, but other than that I had no predetermined ideas about content. Dr. T was adamant that we let the RPD practice dictate the story/ies of our show, so I gave over to it. We kept a journal close at hand so we could free write after every exercise. I'm not great at taking detailed notes about any process or organizing my thoughts to show some sort of progression from a to b, and as I flipped through my Solo Performance class journal for the purposes of this thesis I saw few traces or seeds that led to specific passages that wound up in my show. However, there was one guided meditation, called the River Journey, which induced a memory that became the catalyst to writing my entire piece. In the River Journey one imagines they are a great bird flying over a vast varied terrain which represents different transformative experiences in their life. We fly over a dry period, a fertile period, a period of turmoil, and an impassable moment and with each stop along the way we physicalize and give voice to whatever we are experiencing in these respective places. Afterwards we are asked to draw a map of the terrain in our journals and given four writing prompts to spur our experience into words. One of those writing prompts, "And she came to tell me," elicited the following:

And she came to tell me to stop stealing shit. You're embarrassing me and yourself. And what do we think about that and you, what do you expect to receive by stealing all that shit. You stole gum as a kid.

I think, though my memory is foggy, this was inspired by the period of turmoil in the guided meditation. I had no intention to write about my shoplifting phase when I started the class. The story was impelled and revealed to me through a part of the RPD process and it cracked open the floodgates and from there the piece began pouring out of me. As I mentioned, I was already certain I wanted to talk about my OCD in the show, but I hadn't yet made the connection between my OCD and my former shoplifting. As a result of the River Journey

unearthing my shoplifting days and me seeing the connection between that and my OCD, a melody fomented in my mind. Part of using RPD as a model is to incorporate music and movement into the performance, so I was excited to put my songwriting and rudimentary musicianship to the test. I employed my falsetto to a funky roundelay of “Obsession and Compulsion and Obsession oooo Compulsion”. Now I had a theme song I could thread through the whole show. After that, the story about my shoplifting coat came to me and I finally had my first real component to the show. Dr. T has an unpacking process after each class member makes a *submission*, a *submission* being a performed section of their show for the community. The postmortem has four parts, saying what we appreciated and valued in the submission, what we found challenging, questions that we had, and finally offering suggestions if the performer is interested in hearing them. For my first submission, which was the shoplifting coat story, I received some valuable questions and suggestions which ushered in brand new story elements. Some of the questions asked were about my mom’s reaction and who else was involved and I was given suggestions to include other characters like the shopkeeper and security guard. All of which made me flesh out this section and became a part of my piece.

I knew I wanted to play my guitar and ukulele in the show. Even though I only consider myself an advanced beginner on both, I thought I should showcase every talent I had. Plus, I’ve been writing songs since I was eight or nine and have rarely performed them for an audience. This seemed like an ideal opportunity to craft some original music. The ukulele song came first. I usually start by finding a chord progression that sounds pleasing to my ear. I know no music theory. I’m basically self taught and I often forget what chords I’ve used for any given composition. Though I do remember the progression to my uke song. So the chords come first. With this song, I knew I wanted to write lyrics that had to do with my OCD, so I start playing

around with the concept of cyclical thoughts. Once I got the first line, in this case it was, “What do you do when your brain keeps cycling through every awful thought you have?”, I try out different rhyme schemes which usually helps me nail down the proceeding couplets. The melody happens almost subconsciously, like its been living in the recesses of my brain since I was born. I play it through a dozen or so times, then I record myself playing it and listen back to the recording another dozen or so times and I then usually leave it alone. Most of my songs exist in unfinished fragments that I’ve forgotten how to play. Having my solo show as a structure has helped me to keep the three original compositions I wrote for them alive.

The end song was inspired by the part of my show that deals with faith. I was raised a reformed Jew, went to Hebrew school until I was sixteen, and I’m still circumcised. Yet, very early on, I had doubts about the existence of a higher power. It may be because my parents aren’t particularly devout. Although we went to synagogue on high holidays and usually observed the sabbath, these were more cultural remnants that tied us to tradition, rather than a need to show fealty to Adonai. I couldn’t wrap my head around a god who gave my mom Crohn’s disease and damned some people to hell for not believing in him. But I also ache for the clarity that orthodoxy provides. These sentiments were behind the lyrics in my final song. The chorus lyrics and melody came to me at the same time. Sometimes I just compose in my head and then try to find the chords later to match the melody I’m hearing. The line, “That mumbo jumbo jumbles up my mind.” kept rolling around. Mumbo jumbo is meant to encapsulate all my mixed feelings about religion. Then, once again, I follow a rhyme scheme and try to extend the theme in the next lyric, “Do I leave sanctuary far behind.” And it goes on from there. What I mostly struggle with when writing lyrics is feeling like I’m just expressing the same thought line after line without any story being told. Just like an intrusive thought caught in a loop. Once I realized this last song

was about wrestling with my faith I invoked Yahweh and Jehovah in the verses. I peppered in Bathsheba and sitting shiva too, all with a hint of irreverence to indicate my halting relationship with the big G-O-D.

The rest of my show developed through reflecting on my various obsessions and incorporating the stories it dredged up. It still feels very piecemeal and is definitely a work in progress. At the end of spring semester 2017 I was able to perform the initial twenty minute version as a part of the course's Solo Performance showcase. Surprisingly, I wasn't anxious about exposing my ugly thoughts to an audience, I was nervous I wouldn't remember my show. I also hoped people would feel that it was okay to laugh and that I had created something that earned their laughter. I was concerned that I wouldn't allow myself to truly be vulnerable, or that my piece didn't go deep enough, but I was the first one up so I didn't have too much time to stew. The crowd was very friendly and they gave me a few big laughs. Everyone got a standing ovation. But I knew I held back. I could have embodied the other characters more fully. I could have been more available and present. But, ultimately, I was just relieved to have gotten through it and that it wasn't terrible. We had a brief talk back after the showcase ended. The only question I remember someone asking was, "Is that all true?", to which I responded with an emphatic "Yes!" After the talk-back I got a few hugs from some of my students and fellow classmates. One of my students looked me in the eye and said, "Thank you." I wish I had followed up with him on why he said that. If it was because he's had similar struggles and seeing someone freely theatricalize them gave him some solace, then I feel that this piece is worth something. I know I'm not the genius that is Richard Pryor. And I know my show, at this point, is not as fully realized as the work of Maria Bamford and Chris Gethard. But I believe I have something to say about living with illness, both mental and physical, and do so in a cheeky yet

tender way without being too precious. And I do it on stage as a performer because, in some ways, it's all I know, but also because I've been in the audience under the thrall of someone telling their story with such alacrity and delicacy and candor that I felt less alone and that's all I really want to do with this show - help someone feel less alone.

## **Conclusion**

An affecting solo performance is like a magic trick. The solo performer creates an entire world before the audience's eyes, often with only their face, voice, and body. I know that I've been transfixed by the warlock powers of Bill Cosby, Billy Crystal, Richard Pryor, and Robin Williams among others. In my pursuit to emulate them, I've become more confident in my ability to conjure up an engaging theatrical reality. For this theatrical reality to be truly resonant it must be foundationally true. I've spent this process digging into and chronicling my truth in order to enrich my narration of self. However, the narration is dependent on its audience and only through that dialogue can a spell be providentially cast.

The audience is not necessarily privy to all of the details of my various illnesses. Cataloging them for the purposes of this work has provided me with some empirical distance as to not confuse the nature of my character with the symptoms of these disorders. Subsequently, by reconciling with that tension in my solo performance piece I may give my audience a window into their own interior struggles. Everyone confronts their own experiences with madness in one way or another. Richard Pryor, Maria Bamford, and Chris Gethard stand as exemplary models of a cathartic and transcendent way of doing so. Jews have had to transcend millenia of oppression and use the potency of storytelling to carry them through. I follow in that tradition and am humbled by the weight of that history.

My immediate family history is responsible for turning me into a thespian. After years of encouragement from my parents I've finally begun to translate that support into a piece of autobiographical theater. The inchoate bullied ham has transformed into a somewhat weary but



wiser player. The rough edges are still there, but I'm nimbler in circumventing them. In the final analysis, life to me is all about the execution. Everyone has at least one or two good ideas, but their inconsequential if they are never acted upon. By finally dramatizing my story I'm actualizing the promise that started back when I stole the show as Duke Earl in elementary school.

Storytelling allows the teller to give order and shape to events that can seem chaotic and erratic. My ongoing conflict with mental and physical illness is made flesh through the oral tradition. On stage I wield control over the bugaboos that seek to run roughshod over my daily existence. I mold them into songs, give them characterizations, and, for however briefly, take away their power. My narrative is imbued with the people who have come before me. All the performers in my own family line and the ones who I have sought out and studied are the brick and mortar of my creative identity. I share this vivid and explicit expression in order to enlighten, entertain, and ennoble a receptive audience or make a not so receptive audience a little more sanguine. This is my story. It is messy and Jewish and toish and froish and most definitely concerned with putting a human face on unsettling conditions. Life is full of unsettling conditions and if I can provide 45 minutes to an hour of reprieve and reflection, of humor and heart than I will be fulfilling my life's purpose.

## Chapter 4. Two Dots and Some Bars

*In the dark we hear the beginning of Aretha Franklin's song "Precious Lord, Take My Hand/You've Got a Friend" from the album Amazing Grace. Lights slowly fade up. Downstage left is a table with a tie-dyed cloth draped over it. On the table are three objects, a black metal tongue drum, a small box, and a Tibetan singing bowl with a dowel rod place inside of it. Upstage slightly right of center is a coat rack with a large and long winter coat hanging on it. There are two black blocks slightly off center stage. One chair is situated upstage of the table. A guitar, in its case, is upstage center. A ukulele, in its case, sits next to the guitar. A man enters from the stage right wings carrying a ukulele. He goes down center as the music fades out. He begins to strum the ukulele and the starts to sing.*

Andy (singing): What do you do

When your brain keeps cycling through  
Every awful thought you have?  
Round and round it goes  
And where it stops my conscience knows.  
Feeling guilty for no reason  
'Cause everyday is thinking season.  
The meds don't work.  
The cat's away.  
So the mental mice come out to play.

### **Intrusive Thoughts**

*Speaking* And there's no resolution, because there's no resolution, because there is no resolution. I have what are called intrusive thoughts related to my obsessive compulsive disorder. *Puts ukulele in its case.* Anything can trigger them. I'm walking my dog Ben. He stops to doo doo, my brain says, "Eat his shit! Eat the dog shit! Pop it in your mouth like a buttermilk shit biscuit! Do it!" Or I'm in the bathroom, shaving, "Rake the razor over your penis. Do it! Mutilate your penis." Or I'm cuddling up with Benny in bed, I've got his little head in my hands, "Hey my Benny Boo, Benzo, I love you buddy. You're the bestest boy ever..." My brain's working overtime, "Crush his head! Snap his neck! Do it!" Playing with my four year old nephew Zach, "Push him into oncoming traffic. Do! It!" And I can't dump them. I can't make them stop. Or push them out. Actually, trying to shut them down makes them mad and they redouble their efforts. And I know, I KNOW, I don't really want to do these things. And I will NOT do them, but my guilt and anxiety are activated anyway, as if I have done these things, or will do them.

*Singing* Obsession and Compulsion.

### **Penis Time**

*Speaking* "Whip your dick out!" that's a fun one. My intrusive thoughts love to focus on me exposing my penis. Which reminds me of one of my favorite jokes. Three little old ladies are sitting on a park bench. A man comes over and flashes them. The first little old lady has a stroke. The second little old lady has a stroke. The third little old lady didn't touch it at all. Hands off approach to life. Ahhhh, missed opportunities. But back to my penis. I'm in the middle of teaching a public speaking class - "Whip it out!" What? "Whip your dick out and start stroking it!" "Yeah, whip me out! Let a guy breathe. Meet the people. Mingle. I'll make a persuasive speech." Shut up! I'm not whipping anything out! But sometimes it's all I can think about.

*Singing to the tune of "My Girl" by The Temptations doing The Temptations walk* "My cock. My

cock. My cock. It's all about my cock. My cock." Everything turns into cock. But I didn't always love my pecker. My dad likes to remind me that when I was little I asked him if I could cut it off. I told him that it was ugly and I'd like to have it removed. Like a third nipple. It must have heard me and got pissed. I remember Robin Williams calling it the One-Eyed Wonder Worm - like it's a little Popeye down there. But that's not an eye hole. Un uh. That's an ear hole and it heard me. "You want to cut me off. Well now I own you, fucker! For life!" And I wish I could tell you that's led to a life of orgiastic debauchery with twin sisters Syphilis and Gonorrhea - but instead it led to me leaving my high school math class to go masturbate in the bathroom stall. *Singing* Obsession and Compulsion. *Speaking* Thankfully, the compulsive part of my OCD has never led me to flashing my schlong to little old ladies on park benches - but I feel like a pervert anyway. Changing the lyrics to every song so that they're about sucking balls and eating ass will make you feel like a pervert. *Singing to the tune of "The Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston* "I believe my penis is the future. Suck it well and let it cum all day." It's the dirty Mad Libs of my mind. I called a sex hotline once. Immediately she started asking me if I was stroking it. No foreplay. No - What's your name, honey? Just right into, "Are you stroking it? Stroke it, baby, stroke it!" I was fully clothed, but I said, "Yeah, I'm stroking it!" and then I hung up. I felt bad. I wanted her to think she was good at her job. I was good at my job of jerking off. Robin the Rat taught me how to do it. His name was Robin, but he wanted everyone to call him Rat. We went to Hebrew school together - Temple Beth El. I had no idea that you could give yourself an orgasm. It was 7th grade and my parents had signed me up for a sex education workshop at Beth El and Rat was in it with me and the lady who ran the workshop said you could give yourself an orgasm. This was better than Chanukah. Hearing you could spin your own dreidel and that it would land on gimel everytime. I had heard about orgasms through watching TV and movies.

And it seemed like they were this magical thing that someone had to give you. But now Rat was going to sleep over and he said he'd show me how to do it. I had discovered my dad's Playboy and porn stash a few years earlier so we had the ammunition and as soon as my parents were out of the house it was going down. The next day in the family room we popped *Inside Seka* into the VCR and dropped trow. Rat was in my mom's favorite rocking chair. I was on the ottoman to my dad's lounge chair. Rat said, "Do what I do." I watched him rub himself so I rubbed myself. And when he came he said, "Whee!" So this is like a ride. We're supposed to kick our legs and cry "Whee!". And boy did I "Whee" with my wee wee. My brain would goad and chastise me, "You gotta jerk off. Now! You jerk off too much, you sick pervert!" And at times it became a compulsion. *Singing Obsession and Compulsion. Speaking* One time I was making out with my first real girlfriend, the one I lost my virginity to. And we're outside her house and I leave her without having any sort of release. So I'm driving back to my house and my brain says, "Let's whack off!" And I'm like, "Yeah, I can multitask." So I get down to business and everything's going great. I'm defensive driving and offensively driving at the same time. And I climax. Okay. Now I need to clean up. There's some dry cleaning that's sitting on the passenger seat. I reach over and grab one of my mom's blouses and begin mopping up. And bang! I rear end somebody in front of me. Not just anybody, but the girl I took to my sophomore homecoming dance and now my pants are around my ankles and she's wondering why I'm not getting out of the car. Somehow I dressed myself before getting spotted naked and pulled off the exchange of information without anyone being the wiser. But upon hearing of my humiliating exploits my friends coined a new warning - Don't Jerk and Drive. *Singing Obsession and Compulsion.*

### **Animal Magnetism**

Maybe if Benny had been in the car I would have stroked him instead. Not his little doggy dick.

People shouldn't fuck animals because you can't get any surety of consent from an animal. Until there's empirical proof that scientists have cracked the code to interspecies communication - no matter your desire - no matter the comeliness of that goat - the luxurious lashes on that sheep - no fucking should commence. And yet my greatest love affairs have been with my companion animals. They've been sexually platonic. Nothing beyond heavy petting. Some licking on their part. But no peanut butter on the balls games. *Beat*. Staring into the eyes of my dog Benny, or some of the cats I've known, is pure mutual adoration. It's unguarded, without pretense or hidden agendas. Cassie, this plump tuxedo rescue cat, would sit on my chest, look into my eyes and purr liberally while I brushed her behind the ears with a half-eaten wooden comb. My ex-wife never did that. It's an uncomplicated romance. You provide a little food, a litter water, shelter, and yes you have to deal with some actual piss and shit, but the overhead is low for the return on investment. Benny never passed one word of judgement on me when I binged the entire third season of "Grace and Frankie" in one afternoon sitting in my ripped boxer briefs devouring my third bowl of Honey Nut Chex. *Beat*. I shoplifted a kitten once. Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. *Singing Obsession and Compulsion*.

### **The Shoplifter**

One time, when I was studying abroad in London, all the students were gathered into the drawing room of the hostel *As Chaperone* "Everyone, Stephanie's been robbed. Someone has stolen a bunch of stuff from her room..." *As Stephanie* "Listen guys, somebody stole all my CDs and my per diem. They got all my Prince CDs - "Purple Rain", and the Tokyo concert bootleg I just bought at Camden Market. I don't care who did it. Just return my stuff to my room. That's all I care about..." And I was ready to confess. I didn't do it. But my brain didn't care, "You know you did it. You've stolen from everybody in this house, you criminal piece of shit!" Because

there was a time...

*Starts a syncopated rhythm by clapping his hands and snapping his fingers. Can you all do that? Keeping the rhythm going until the audience is doing some semblance of it. Singing Obsession and Compulsion and Obsession Oooooo Compulsion....Goes upstage to the coat rack and grabs the winter coat. Turns to the audience and signals them to stop the rhythm.*

There was a time I couldn't leave a store without stealing something from it. Sophomore year of college - The Year of the Shoplifter. My mom bought me this big winter coat, super puffy. I looked like the monolith from "2001 a Space Odyssey" in this coat. *Stands on one of the black boxes and starts singing the "sprach Zarathustra". Turns around so his back is to the audience while he puts the coat on. Finishes with a flourish and steps off the box.* It was like my Inspector Gadget coat or my Harpo Marx coat. But instead of pulling things out of it, I'm stuffing things into it. I could fit an entire aisle in this thing. I didn't have to steal anything substantial - a single watermelon Jolly Rancher would suffice. Just don't leave empty handed or empty pocketed. Mr. Coat, Mr. Coat. I love you, Mr. Coat. *As Mr. Coat singing, "Feed me, Andy, feed me all night long!"* So one day I come across the glittering prize - The Walt Disney's Masterpiece "Fantasia" Deluxe Commemorative Edition VHS Box Set. It's got limited edition lithographs. It's got the remastered double CD soundtrack. It's got Sorcerer's Apprentice Mickey on the cover...*Starts moving his arms as if he was Mickey controlling the waves. As Mickey, "Oh boy, five finger discount!"* Over a few visits to the mall, I scope out this store. *Singing Obsession and Compulsion. Speaking while walking around the stage as if it were the store.* Alright, there's only one sales counter. And it faces away from the entrance - It doesn't look like there are any security sensors at the door. And it looks like Mickey's free of any security tags. This is going to happen! It's finally lift day. So there I am in my "2001 A Space Odyssey" coat. A coat that should have

it's own wanted poster. A coat that would be picked out of a police lineup. And I'm walking in as if a six foot four slab of Jew can be invisible. But somehow it's off the shelf, under my coat, and I'm out. *Singing*. Compulsion. *Speaking*. I would get such a rush from shoplifting. My heart would start racing. My cheeks would get hot. Palms start to sweating. And I'm sure my pupils dilated. And, man, I cherished that "Fantasia" box set. Just looking at it and the euphoria would come roaring back. *Singing*. Obsession. *Speaking*. But I wasn't so lucky at...*Singing the T.J. Maxx jingle*, "La la la la la la la la, T.J. Maxx. No it's never ever the same place twice. And I'm never ever..." *Speaking*...allowed back at a T.J. Maxx. Legally, I've been banned for life after stealing cologne from a Maxx out in Harrisonburg, Virginia. I thought I was so slick as a thief I started taking orders from my friends at school. They were great enablers too. My friend, Ceeko, said, *Mimes smoking from a bong. As Ceeko*. "Get me some Aramis." *Back to smoking from the bong*. None of that Cool Water shit for Ceeko. I was wearing Cool Water and Drakkar Noir for sure. But Ceeko asked for Aramis. Now my other enabler, Shannon, decides to go with me to see the master at work. *Roaming around the stage as if it's the T.J. Maxx*. So I'm in the T.J. Maxx with Shannon and all I see is off-brand shit. Shannon tries to get me to leave, but I'm on a mission! *Singing* Ooooo Compulsion. *Speaking*. So I filch two small bottles under my shirt. Unbeknownst to me there's a plain clothes security guard who clocked me and now he's tailing me around T.J.s, and once I cross the threshold of the exit, he comes out *As the security guard*. "Give me the cologne under your shirt." *As me*. "What cologne? I don't know what you're talking about." *As security guard*. "I saw you." I eye the parking lot. *As security guard*. "You run. I'm just gonna chase you." And I acquiesce. I wanted to get caught. I wanted it to end. As much as I reveled in the high, I felt some deep shame over stealing. Bipolar is a bitch. Hypomania shake hands with Kleptomania. So I'm brought into the manager's office. "I'm so sorry. I'm so



embarrassed. It's pledge week and I was dared by my fraternity TKE..." That was Ceeko's fraternity. I was never in a fraternity. *As the manager*. "I don't care why you did what you did. You're taking food out of my family's mouth. I work hard, and you're stealing from me. You're not just stealing from the store. You're stealing from me and my children..." Well, shit. And she calls the police and I'm arrested. And Shannon goes home to tell Ceeko he'll have to get his own Aramis. *As me*. "Mom. Dad. I got arrested for shoplifting." *As my mom*. "We failed! We failed! What will it say in the paper. Local optometrist and therapist's son - a criminal!" *As my dad* "I think what your mother is trying to say is you fucked up, because maybe you have a fuck up complex. Your grandfather has a fuck up complex. And like him, you want to see if you fuck up, will we still love you? And I'm here to tell you....maybe." *As me*. "This has nothing to do with you! I did this! Not you! I've been stealing shit all semester, but now I've been caught, so I'll stop!" And I did. After I got arrested, I stopped. I never stole from any merchant ever again. *Beat*. Except I still sneak into movies. I look at that first ticket as an all day pass - like a theme park, you pay the entrance fee and then you get to ride all the rides. But theaters have gotten smarter. They stopped putting the movie titles and showtimes outside the individual theater marquees - so now you have to play a game of musical doors where you hope you've stumbled into your preferred next feature attraction. But I digress. *Singing* Obsession and Compulsion. *Speaking*. And I stream TV and movies from illegal websites - but I'm not proud of it, because I belong to SAG/AFTRA and I'm stealing from myself and my union brothers and sisters. But I digress.

### **Family**

Being told by your parents that you have a fuck up complex and that they've failed at parenting by raising you is no bueno. It does not feel good. It actually made me mad, and when I get mad I

turn into a snarling werewolf. “Are you fucking kidding me?!? You’re calling me a fuck up?!? You failed as parents, so that means I’m a failure!?! Maybe I should just drop out of school, and start shooting smack, and die in a ditch of a drug overdose, if I’m such a failure!” *Snarls and howls*. And I come by this rage honestly, because my mother turns into Margaret Hamilton when she’s fed up. *As the Wicked Witch of the West*. “I’ll get you, my pretty! You and your little werewolf too!” Mom gets mad and we all have to leave the house for three months until she calms down and the roof’s been replaced. Because when mama ain’t happy....But despite all the melodramatics and Jewish guiltings, my folks are my rock. And now my obsessive thoughts and anxieties are focused on their eventual passing. Losing them - I’ll be unmoored. I mean, look at me I’m a middle aged man-child. Unlike my baby brother who actually seems like a man-man to me. I love my brother so much. Jason. He’s my only sibling. He’s four years younger than me and he’s one of my closest friends. But boy did we fight when we were younger. As I’ve established, I can have a volcanic temper and my fuse was far shorter pre-meds. And I was the sorest of losers. And Jason would taunt the shit out of me. We’d play Mortal Kombat and he’d kick my ass every time and as he was beating me to a pulp I would press reset. Reset. Reset. Reset. And Jason would laugh and call me pathetic and I’d throw my joystick at the TV. Jason would come into the family room and randomly smack me in the head and I’d get up and start to chase him and he’d be shouting, *As my brother* “You’re sick. You’re going to beat your wife and kids. You’re an animal!” Then one of us would grab a chef’s knife from the cutlery draw and we’d run into the dining room and chase each other around the giant rectangular table. My mom has tchotchkes everywhere so there was a minefield of bric a brac that we would inevitably break with our rough housing. Dad is the king of superglue and there are some treasured pieces that he’s essentially shellacked with the stuff due to our antics. Like these Lladro hippie dog band

porcelain figurines - those little bastards look like they were in the Buddy Holly plane - The day the super glue dried. I convinced my brother that he wanted a boa constrictor for his birthday. As you now know, my love for companion animals knows no bounds and my parents indulged that love endlessly. We had turtles, a dog, a parakeet, an iguana and my folks finally cut me off from expanding my menagerie. But I wanted a boa constrictor. *Singing Obsession. Speaking.* So I began a campaign of mind controlling my brother so he would demand a boa for his 9th birthday. It worked. My brother from the same mother. I just want us to tell each other how much we love each other and mean to each other all the time, but my brother isn't always or usually that effusive or free with his feelings or I guess he assumes it's implied. I wish every conversation with him was filled with uncontrollable laughter and epiphanies - new realizations and fond remembrances, but they're often just small talk. The smallest of talk. At least now we always have his kids to discuss, which feels substantial. Talking about the next generation he's brought into the world ties me to a future where my family line continues. I used to make my brother laugh on a regular basis. He'd laugh so hard at the dinner table that he'd throw up sometimes, but now he's the one to make me laugh - I think he's become funnier than me or I've lost my mojo. That's an ANT - Automatic Negative Thought. I can denigrate myself in 31 different flavors, like Baskin Robbins. It's a less flamboyant kind of narcissism, but equally obnoxious. I think - who gives a shit? People who get things done - who execute - they're the ones living their fullest life while I sit making excuses to keep on with the same bullshit. See? I'm failing to realize that I am up here talking to you. How much do I owe you for this session? Is my hour up yet? Anyway, my Jaydog gets up and keeps going using his law degree to keep McCormick spices in your goulash while I watch another season of the Great British Baking Show.

### **Pop Culture, Food, and Faces**

I'm getting dumber. I've been addicted to television since childhood, it's a wondrous distraction from all my obsessive thoughts, and now I can only think in terms of what I most recently binge watched. Yes Grace and Frankie - organic edible yam based vaginal lube sounds like something I need in bulk. Yes Game of Thrones I need to see Khaleesi versus the Ice Dragon. Spoilers. My original thoughts are filtered through the think pieces I've read on The Last Jedi definitively making the force egalitarian. I used to play what I called Adventure Games where I created whole worlds with my friends. Now my imagination has been co-opted by every sliver of pop culture I've crammed into it. And my waistline has been contending with every carb I cram into my face. *Singing* Obsession and Compulsion. *Speaking*. Obsession with food is deeply genetically ingrained. My grandmother would write letters to my mother - the richest details would always be whatever she and my grandfather had for dinner. *As my grandmother*. "Your father had the filet of sole with green beans. He said it was flaky and buttery and tasted fresh enough, though the beans were overcooked and a little mushy. I had the salisbury steak . The gravy had too much flour and they weren't particularly generous with the portions.. I said to the waiter, 'Can you spare it?' He was not amused. The steak itself was room temperature and a little chewy. The sweet potato pie, however, was manna from heaven. And you know why? They got the nutmeg right!" Did it mention the purpose of their visit - to see the Grand Canyon? No. Arizona sweet potato pie, that's a destination. I'm often in a reverie dreaming of what to eat next. *Singing*. Obsession. *Speaking*. Consume, baby, consume! Pac Man fantasies of life laid out as rows and rows of veggie tempura, cake pops, hush puppies, and scoops of coconut gelato. I'll often mark time by what I just ate and when I'm going to eat next. My dad's older sister, my Aunt Judy, who has her own serious mishegas bipolar action going on, would leave extended voice messages listing all the food she wanted to eat. *As my aunt*. "I'll have a pint of sour cream,

three key lime pies, a pound of beef brisket, pulled pork barbecue with extra bourbon molasses sauce.” Consumption! Consummation. And often the consummation between me and a meal is far more satisfying than any other kind of consummation. Using the Grub Hub delivery app is not unlike Tinder. Swiping through the different dining menu options, judging them based on the way they describe their Tom Kha Kai - Oooooo galangal and lemongrass, I see you. Waiting in anticipation of the first meeting. First bite. Could this be a match? And if this order winds up being a bust, what’s really been lost. *Singing*. Obsession. *Speaking*. When it comes to food, like Jimmy Carter, I’ve got lots of lust in my heart. When it comes to women, I get lost in their faces. I’ve been a sucker for a pretty face since I could distinguish between faces. My mom’s pretty, so does it all get reduced to simple Oedipal complexities? I’ll make all kinds of assumptions if I think you’re beautiful. Beauty equates interest, depth, travel unto exotic lands - each face a country to be explored. Dropping anchor by her lips. I’m a shallow aesthete. I get hung up on the imperfections too. Lopsided eyes, unibrows, moles. I love moles - they’re like constellations. I’m always looking for the little dippers. Stephen Sondheim has a lyric in *Pretty Women* from *Sweeney Todd*, “Proof of heaven as you’re living...” Maybe. But I don’t believe in heaven.

### **Faith**

*Singing* “*Papa Can You Hear Me*” from *Yentl*. “Papa can you hear me? Papa can you see me?” No. Because there is no big papa. I’m all alone out here. And yet nothing makes me feel as good as *Singing*. “Oh happy day! Oh happy day! When Jesus washed. When Jesus washed. When he washed . He washed my sins away.” And I’m Jewish. And the Jewish equivalent to “Oh Happy Day.” is *Singing and dancing like Tevya*. “Bim bam bim bim bam bim bim bim bim bam.” Which is great for someone with OCD, because you can sit in a padded room, rock back and forth, and sing “Bim Bam” all day long! In my restless pursuit of an identity - a personality

that I can point to and definitively say this is me. This is who I am. I fall into the identity politics trap of claiming my Judaism as an establishing trait. Tribalism is so intoxicating. I'd like to take ownership for all Jewish contributions to our culture. Jews created the film industry. We shaped American comedy. We made bagels and cream cheese a thing. But what is being a Jew all about? Essentially, we're credited for monotheism. I Googled it and this is under some contention, but let's say Jews popularized monotheism. And in a great many Hebraic households the one true god is the Jewish mother. She rules the shtetl with her homemade kugel and a dollop of fresh guilt on the side. It's a cliché because it's true - in my house at least. My dad forfeited his brain to my mother long ago. For example, everyone in my family is always trying to eat healthier and lose weight - although we tend to lose the battle to be healthier, we consistently attempt nonetheless. So my mom had bought some new reduced fat chia seed flax filled cracker and my dad breaks open the package, puts one in his mouth and promptly spits it back out into his hand. *As my dad*. "Disgusting!" Then my mom takes one, pops it in her mouth and says, *As my mom*. "I think it tastes pretty good." Immediately my dad puts the spit up cracker back in his mouth and says, *As my dad* "You know you're right. It's not bad!" Why trust your own senses when you have the Jewish mother to do it for you. The Jewish Mother and Yahweh equally formidable. My mom's a therapist. I know what you're thinking, "That explains everything!" Yes, I'm over psychoanalyzed and overdiagnosed and I'll psychoanalyze and diagnose you too. Growing up I would talk to my mom for hours about human behavior - How much of it was dictated by nature and how much lied with nurture. More thoughts to obsess over. Like is prejudice learned or innate. I experienced some anti-semitism growing up. A baby sitter who told my brother and I that we killed christ and are most likely going to hell. It's made me hypersensitive to the ugliness of implicit bias. So it's particularly disturbing to me that some of my most stubborn intrusive

thoughts are racial epithets. When I'm talking to anyone of any ethnicity my brain starts roiling and screaming every slander it can think of - conversing with someone of Asian origin, on a loop my brain's singing, "Me Chinese. Me play joke. Me put pee pee in your coke." or a friend who's African American - inside it's yelling, "N word. N word. N word." And it's torturous and distracting. Especially when it comes to interacting with people of African descent because I have such an affinity and feel such a connection to black American culture. Related Sidebar. Stories of my dad being mistaken for black have become legend in my family. There was an African American senator from Virginia who slightly resembled my father and at one social gathering a gentleman approached my father and said, "Hello Senator Lambert." and my dad said, "No, I'm white." and the man says, "My mistake Senator White." Or the time the school board was looking to have a distinguished black professional dedicate the opening of a new high school and someone nominated my father. Or when a family friend overheard two people gossiping about my father. *As gossip #1* "Did you know that Dr. Wynn is married to a white woman?" *As gossip #2* "I think Dr. Wynn is white." I grew up with an African American housekeeper, Barbara, and she'd tell my dad that she had cousins lighter than him. My dad used to wear his hair, when he had it, in a mighty Jew-fro. I remember he had hair picks. My Pop Pop Jimmy, my dad's dad, said you could trace our line all the way back to the Queen of Sheba - that means I'm Ethiopian. I think all this racial ambiguity seeped into my subconscious. But my feelings are complicated by my liberal white male guilt and the knowledge of the insidiousness of systemic bias. And I wrote a blues song about it. *Taking out a harmonica from pant's pocket. Playing a blues riff.*

Appropriation Blues! Appropriation Blues!

Have You heard the news?

I've appropriated blues.

I've appropriated tap.

I've appropriated rap.

Fetishized Nubian sisters.

Gave their badonks a slap.

I've appropriated so much culture

You can call me the vulture.

Appropriation blues!

### **Peace?**

And my vulturedom feels particularly egregious in my communion with black gospel music.

Because when I sing "Oh Happy Day" I'm never testifying. At least not to a god, I don't think, because I'm agnostic or atheistic depending on the day. But Aretha Franklin's "Amazing Grace" album makes me want to believe in Jesus. I want him to be my friend. I want the serenity faith claims to provide. But I just don't believe in an anthropomorphic conception of god, or in god really. But I believe in gospel. *Singing*. "I said I wasn't gonna tell nobody, but I just can't keep it to myself. No I just can't keep it to myself. But I just can't keep it to myself, what the lord has done for me!" But the lord hasn't done anything for me, but given me this damn OCD. *Singing*. Obsession and Compulsion. *Speaking*. And maybe I could manage this damn OCD better if I could just get some sleep. Sleep is elusive. I supposedly also have chronic Lyme disease. I say supposedly because I doubt any outward non-willful explanation for my being a lazy piece of shit - more ANTs there. But I have had blood tests come back with me testing positive for Lyme disease. Now Lyme disease will fuck your head all up. It will lay you flat and shit on your brain. I'm sorry for all the medical terminology. Babesia, which is another bacteria spread by ticks



that's become my unwanted companion, magnifies anxiety which messes with your sleep. I still have memories of the grand tranquility of the drift - that last moment where you're still conscious and aware that you're about to fall asleep and I would finally feel that sweet peaceful release. But sleep has mostly been the shadow I can barely see out of the corner of my eye. It's a phantom or the lack of it has turned me into a phantom. I'm in a fog most days. A hangover haze of sleep debt. I can't remember the last time I had a dream. I'm lucky if I can get three or four hours of sleep in a row. If I sleep at all. But I got some sleep last night. And I'm here with you, which is a little piece of alright. I've searched for solace, ways to quiet my mind. *Walks over to the table with the three objects and picks up the metal tongue drum.* I got this. *Playing the drum.* Because I thought it sounded cool as shit. *Plays some more.* But that's about all I can do with it, so now it's an expensive paper weight. *Puts drum back on table and opens up the little box and takes out the two metal balls inside.* I got these. *Rolling the balls around in one hand.* But I read they're not supposed to collide, so every time I hear them clang together I think that means I'm doomed to a life of disharmony and they go back in the box. *Puts the balls back in the box.* And then, of course, I reached out to the mecca of inner peace, Tibet. *Picks up the Tibetan singing bowl and begins playing it.* But, ultimately, it all felt like masturbation without the orgasm. *Striking the bowl with the dowel rod.* There's the orgasm. *Puts the bowl back on the table.* So I don't know where that leaves me. *Goes upstage and gets the guitar and brings it downstage. Playing and singing.*

Yahweh, are you going my way?

Or you sitting shiva with Bathsheba on the highway?

Jehova, are you coming over?

Or you knocking on doors somewhere out in Dover?

I contemplate my navel.

I contemplate the moon.

After all this contemplation, are the answers coming soon?

Or should I just sing a merry tune?

That mumbo jumbo jumbles up my mind.

Do I leave sanctuary far behind?

Do I have the grace to cross that bridge?

Do I have a god to grant me that privilege?

Or is this just a simple case of mumbo jumbo time?

Is this a simple case of mumbo jumbo time?

If I take stock in anything, it's that I'll judge myself on my actions and not my thoughts. And that's something.

**End**

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