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### The creation of "A Single Revolution of the Sun," a one-person play

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*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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THE CREATION OF "A SINGLE REVOLUTION OF THE SUN",  
A ONE-PERSON PLAY

A Thesis

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

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
Gregory Leute  
BA, University of Delaware, 1976  
May 2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When it comes to solo theatrical performances, it seems there's inevitably an inverse relationship between the number of people on stage and the number of people necessary to make the endeavor successful. That was certainly the case where this effort was concerned. I am deeply indebted to a very special cadre of professionals that includes our LSU Conservatory mentors Joanna Battles, Molly Buchmann, Nick Erickson, John Fletcher, Terry Parker-Harris, Alan Sikes, and especially George Judy for their guidance, nurture, and occasional "tough love"; visiting geni *ii* Leigh Fondakowski, John Guare, Jennifer Martin, and Olympia Dukakis for the generous gift of their inspiration; and my astonishing MFA colleagues – Jenny Ballard, Jason Bayle, Katrina Despain, Nic Hamel, Hsu Chia-Wen, Jessica Jain, Ben Koucherik, Anthony McMurray, Kristina Sutton, and Donald Watkins – for their talent, inventiveness, warmth, and tireless esprit de corps under some mighty daunting circumstances.

I am blessed to have family and friends who have inspired and supported me every step of my journey – my parents George and Eileen Leute, my sister Marilyn Leute DeLong, my brother George Leute, and their beautiful, brilliant, and loving children. And last but not least, a very special thank-you to my wife Bacot – my editor extraordinaire, my most delightful acting and directing colleague, my toughest critic and my biggest fan, my partner in all things – who deserves my MFA as much as I do.

The men and women of our armed forces, who make unimaginable sacrifices in our behalf, have been and will always be an enormous inspiration to me, as I hope they will be for all our countrymen. I pray for the day when they all come home for good.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis details the process of creating and performing *A Single Revolution of the Sun*, a one-act, one-man play by Gregory Leute. As a primary requirement in fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree at LSU, MFA acting candidates were charged with the task of producing a devised work. I chose as the central premise of my piece the story of a father and his son, both army officers, inspired by a true event. The contemporary tale bore similarities to Matthew Arnold's translation of *Sohrab and Rustum*<sup>1</sup>, derived from the ancient Persian epic poem *Shahnamah*<sup>2</sup>. The thesis includes the sources of inspiration for the piece, an exploration of the development of play, a completed copy of the script, the playwright's personal perceptions about its execution and audience response, and plans for future development of the piece.

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold 73-98

<sup>2</sup>Ferdowsi

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As a primary requirement for the completion of the Master of Fine Arts in Acting at LSU, degree candidates are tasked with submitting a written thesis. In order to make the project of greater relevance to our discipline, MFA Program Head George Judy assigned the additional challenge of devising a one-person, one-act play – a performance piece whose subject matter was close enough to our hearts and whose execution showcased our specific strengths and skill sets sufficiently so that we would want to continue to develop it further down our professional paths.

While performing the piece was not a specific requirement of the university's Graduate School, the process of creating the piece was to become the essential focus of the thesis. This paper, then, addresses the genesis, development, and execution of my one-person play, *A Single Revolution of the Sun*, as well as audience response, "lessons learned", and plans for future development.

We were granted considerable leeway as to the format of the play, and there were no specific guidelines or restrictions. I had for several years been looking for a way to adapt the classic Persian epic poem *Sohrab and Rustum* (a favorite of my family) to a theatrical treatment. While searching for ideas on which to base my thesis, I stumbled upon an NPR© broadcast<sup>3</sup> about a young US Army officer killed in action in Afghanistan. His family name, Brostrum, struck me as remarkably similar to the name Rustum; similar complications in the relationship between both sets of fathers and sons also struck me as more than coincidental. It was then that I thought it might prove an exciting challenge to interweave the two stories in a way that underscored the timelessness of these themes of love and duty, with echoes of one foreshadowing the other. The topicality of the story as well as its timelessness offered two appealing hooks to the work; the challenge would be to integrate them effectively, clearly, and in a way that moved the story forward in an active and engaging way.

The timeline of the creation process for this project presented a series of unique tests. The predictable task of creating a story with words and structure that makes for an engaging and active theatrical experience for an audience (as opposed to simply a vanity piece that allows a performer a "personal expressive experience" while sending little else beyond the footlights) proved a daunting enough undertaking in its own right. The added complications of writing, refining, staging, and executing the piece under strict time constraints – and accomplishing all these processes simultaneously while continually revising the script – presented an uncommon challenge, and opportunity. Unnerving at times, the process ultimately proved richly rewarding. The audience's response was tremendously satisfying, encouraging me to continue developing the piece for production in the near future.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin

## CHAPTER 2: INSPIRATION AND SOURCE MATERIAL

*[Author's Note: the majority of the content that appears below in this chapter was derived from, and originally appeared in, two précis treatments prepared for and submitted to Dr. Alan Sikes, Assistant Professor of Theatre at Louisiana State University, as an assignment in his Performance Theory and Criticism class in the Spring 2012 term.]*

For much of my life, I've been fascinated by the often complicated relationships between fathers and sons. And at an early age, I was introduced to Matthew Arnold's interpretation of *Sohrab and Rustum*, the ancient Persian epic poem about two warriors who meet in single combat, neither one knowing they are father and son. It is no small irony that the poem was introduced to me by my own father, then a high-school English teacher, who perhaps offered it to his then-not-terribly-reflective teenage son as a meditation on the complicated relationships between fathers and sons. I'd kept the poem at arm's length for several decades, feeling it stodgy, dusty, and of little relevance to my own experience – personally, historically, artistically, or culturally. I think now, perhaps, I could not have been more wrong.

The agonizing events of September 11, 2001, galvanized the American zeitgeist in a way unseen since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The national eruption of grief, anger, and thirst for justice (if not wholly unvarnished vengeance), propelled many Americans to a sense of righteous purpose. That sense of righteous purpose – the noble cause, the Good War, the crusade for the necessary triumph of Good over Evil – did not take long to tarnish, as questionable objectives and incomprehensible blundering recklessly squandered scarce resources, moral high ground, and hundreds of thousands of lives.

A number of events and incidents during this “campaign against global terrorism” captured my attention: the political activism of “Gold Star Mothers” such as Cindy Sheehan, who harnessed the grief for their lost sons (and daughters) in order to strip away the bloodless veneer with which the Bush administration had attempted to conceal the ugly realities of the war; the resignations of six high-level Army and Marine Corps generals in protest over the administration's rushed justification for and on-the-cheap conduct of the war in Iraq<sup>4</sup> (an ironic contemporary twist on Knebel and Bailey's *Seven Days in May*<sup>5</sup>). But the story that braced me to full attention was that of a young Army lieutenant killed in action in Afghanistan and the attempts of his father – a retired Army colonel, to hold the Army accountable for what he believed is its culpability for his son's death<sup>6</sup>.

The story of 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Jonathan Brostrum is one that evokes a wide array of compelling issues and emotions in conflict: love, pride, duty, betrayal. But what I find most poignant is the familial competition at the core of his relationship with his father, retired Colonel David Brostrum. In his quest to earn his father's pride and respect by surpassing his accomplishments, he sought continually more dangerous assignments, prolonging his period of

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<sup>4</sup>Cloud, Schmitt

<sup>5</sup>Frankenheimer

<sup>6</sup> Martin

obligated service to complete Infantry, Ranger, and Airborne (parachute) training to assure his placement in harm's way. Against Colonel Brostrum's instincts to keep his son clear of danger, he used his considerable influence to call in markers and get Jonathan assigned to an elite airborne brigade, one of the Army's frontline units.

To be sure, it is a tale of a breach of faith between senior officers and the men in the fields well as a betrayal of these soldiers by an administration attempting to meet vaguely defined objectives with the most meager of resources. But more than anything (again, in my perception), it is the story of a father who feels responsible for the death of his son, who feels betrayed by the Army he served for a quarter of century and who is now deeply conflicted about his "service to the king".

Myth is very much alive and vital in American culture today, though sadly, not always actuating the most desirable of results. I remember the impact made on me by the 1974 film *Hearts and Minds*<sup>7</sup>, Peter Davis's documentary about the Vietnam War, which among other things detailed the tapestry of American myth and the cultural mindset that made involvement in that conflict easy and palatable for the American people. Myth was very much called into play for the First and Second Gulf Wars as well, not so much in the sense of a current and active mythology allowing the conflict to evolve effortlessly and inevitably, but in the sense of a dormant myth of American supremacy and manifest destiny being resurrected and retooled to justify a murky agenda of petro-politics and nation-building. Additionally, it is my assertion that the resurgence of fundamentalist Christianity and its growing influence on American culture and policymaking have been responsible for a disturbing undercurrent of apocalyptic thinking: to the minds of an alarming plurality, Armageddon is real and imminent; our fate awaits us in the desert, where our virility and virtue are to be affirmed.

In reflecting on our readings for Professor Sikes's Performance Theory class, I felt hard-pressed to identify a particular reading, author, or grand master who had influenced my choice of treatment for this material (which I had been considering long before we embarked on this course). Constantin Stanislavski, of course, is an easy fit for most of us, since we've been living and working by some version or other of his teachings for most of the lifespan of our craft. The systematic work he details for creating and expressing the inner life of the characters we portray has taken on the status of the "self-evident truth" of our performance tradition<sup>8</sup>.

Since I had spent some extra "quality time" with Jerzy Grotowski (preparing a seminar for Performance Theory), I felt that his ideas on the responsibilities of an actor to increase and expand his capabilities for precision and discipline were vital to the successful execution of this piece. The peculiar requirements of solo performance add a far greater multi-dimensional demand on an actor; the greater burden on a lone actor to flesh out a world with minimal properties speaks for itself, and it's incumbent on the actor to cultivate and marshal all the personal resources at his disposal<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>Davis

<sup>8</sup>Stanislavski

<sup>9</sup>Grotowski



Though I'd taking his comments out of context, perhaps, there was something resonant for me about Michel Foucault's discussion of a rupture of systems<sup>10</sup>. The mythology – in the case of my prospective piece, the belief system of the elder Brostrum archetype – had been shattered, ripped to shreds, and he would need to rise from the ruins of his own existence to survive and to fight his battle.

Thematically and philosophically, there was much in our discussions of the transition from modernity into post-modernity that speaks to this loss of faith as well; faith in truth and in essential human (and innately noble, perhaps) qualities to serve progress might no longer valid in this world<sup>11</sup>.

Ideas may stimulate us, of course, but they are not the primary engines of theatre. I saw great emotional and theatrical capital in the exploration of this complicated relationship. As far as performance was concerned, I was not yet certain if I would want simply to play the father, the father and son, or even introduce a third character – possibly the son's commanding officer, who became the convenient scapegoat shouldering the blame for the tragedy and deflecting attention from superiors in the chain of command. There were good arguments for all three possibilities – practicality being a large determinant.

The parallels of this real-life relationship to the mythic tale of *Sohrab and Rustum* provided an interesting mirroring effect that I could see employed in a similar fashion to Jules Dassin's *A Dream of Passion*<sup>12</sup>. The film tells the story of a Greek actress's return home after the restoration of democracy in 1974 to play *Medea* as a triumphant celebration of her homecoming (Melina Mercouri playing herself, essentially). She begins a relationship with an American woman imprisoned in Athens for having committed a Medea-like murder of her own children. The film features scenes of their meetings intercut with scenes of the production in rehearsal. At this stage of my project brainstorming, I foresaw using a similar juxtaposition of the mythic reality with the contemporary reality, quickening the interval between the two realities as the performance reached its climax.

Just how all this would play out was still very much in question, and I hoped by the third or fourth draft I would have something that passed the straight-face test.

Continuing research and exploration in support of my performance thesis, explored in the second phase of my research, had provided me with a double-edged sword: while I'd come across ever-widening possibilities for a performance concept or central theme, I found it didn't help narrow or clarify the path, at least at that point in the process. This was a realization that would ordinarily hurl me into "procedural paralysis". Thankfully, however, a visit to our class from Michael Perlman (a colleague of Voice Professor Joanna Battles' from Brown who directed *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*), who had had, by his own account, considerable experience with devised works – and specifically one-person shows – helped to neutralize those anxieties somewhat. His advice: write away; brainstorm; collect as much raw data, impulse,

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault

<sup>11</sup> Hassan 146

<sup>12</sup> Dassin

diverse and disparate material as will flow out of your psyche and through your fingertips and worry about giving it shape later.

### **The Names Rustum and Brostrom: More than Coincidence**

I had read a brief story online a while ago about Jonathan Brostrom's posthumous awarding of the Silver Star for his valor in the Battle of Wanat in Afghanistan in 2008, though the name did not stick with me at the time. Earlier this year, I came across an article in the December 2011 issue of *Vanity Fair* ("Echoes of a Distant Battlefield"<sup>13</sup>, which told in greater detail of the battle itself and of Jonathan's relationship with his father David. A number of previous stories of father-and-son warriors had spoken to me in the past. The first was the true-life story of ADM Elmo Zumwalt, Chief of Naval Operations during the Vietnam War, whose authorization of the use of Agent Orange in the Mekong River valley led directly to the death of his own son, the skipper of a riverine patrol squadron operating on the Mekong<sup>14</sup>. Another, the film *In the Valley of Elah*<sup>15</sup> (a fictionalized recounting of a true event), tells the story of a retired soldier's efforts to learn the truth behind the death of his son, who disappeared and died shortly after his return from frontline duty in Iraq. These stories had initially planted the germ of the idea about a father's guilt for the death of his warrior son and the theme's reflection in *Sohrab and Rustum*. But it was not until after I had read the VF article that I was struck by the parallels: not just for the all-too-perfect similarity of the names, but for the sense of competition between the father and son, who in many respects really may not have known each other very well at all – not unlike the antagonists in *Sohrab and Rustum*.

I had considered using Ossian's similar Celtic tale of *Carthou*<sup>16</sup> instead, since I thought it might have more resonance with an American audience (after all, who of us doesn't claim to be at least a little Irish?). But the symmetry of the Brostrom/Rustum apposition was far too powerful and laden with promising theatrical potential to discard.

### **Sohrab and Rustum within the Context of the Shahnameh**

I did some initial – i.e., very preliminary, very lightweight – investigation into the Persian epic of *The Shahnameh*<sup>17</sup>, the source from which the story of *Sohrab and Rustum* derives. The epic is rather expansive and sweeping, to say the least, and I was not yet certain how much of it or how many of its individual stories would be useful to my efforts. But the recurring themes of love and honor, war and grief, fathers and sons, and of the constancy of fathers' mistakes, resonate throughout the epic, so it certainly merited some deeper exploration.

While *The Shahnameh* offered an "embarrassment of riches" as far as source material was concerned – of such enormous scope as to seem overwhelming at times – the manner in which it is structured provided an appealing construct that I thought might serve this undertaking. The story of Persia's history and prehistory is told from the beginning of the world until poet Ferdowsi's present, and presented in three parts or domains: the Mythical, the

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<sup>13</sup> Bowden 214

<sup>14</sup> Zumwalt

<sup>15</sup> Haggis

<sup>16</sup> Crowell

<sup>17</sup> Ferdowsi

Heroic, and the Historical. As Professor Sikes pointed out in our discussions, the invasion of Persia from the West by the Macedonians may be seen as the “hinge” that divides the legend from history (or perhaps the “bridge” that joins them together), with Alexander himself as the myth becoming historically human<sup>18</sup>.

### **The Myth and History of Fathers and Sons**

Professor Sikes suggested I examine additional literary antecedents of fathers sending their sons into battle. While I had done some initial and superficial research into Pierre Corneille<sup>19</sup>, his work remained unexplored territory for me as of this writing. But certainly examples abound, even in popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, from *Taras Bulba*<sup>20</sup> to *Star Wars*<sup>21</sup>.

### **Additional Readings and Source Materials**

One of my favorite nightstand reads is a collection of historical essays entitled *What If?*,<sup>22</sup> a compilation of counterfactual scenarios written by some of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s foremost military historians. Of particular interest to me, even before undertaking this project, have been the essays dealing with conflicts between West and East, Europe and the Muslim (or pre-Muslim) world. The Greeks and Persians at Salamis in 480 BC<sup>23</sup>, Alexander and the Persians at Granicus River in 323 BC<sup>24</sup>, the Franks and Muslims at Poitiers in 732 AD<sup>25</sup>, not to mention the Crusades – all of these underscore the depth and breadth of animosity and mistrust between our cultures that seems at times irreconcilably embedded in our DNA. There seems as well an expectation among some of the more fundamentalist ideologues in our cultures that Armageddon is nigh, and it is to be found in West Asia; and it is my conjecture that this thinking has insinuated itself into US national policy-making to a far greater degree than any of us would care to imagine.

This circumstance might perhaps come across as grandiose and overarching as a plot point to such an ultimately intimate story, but I thought it had some merit both as an enormous obstacle to overcome and a counterpoint to the intimate story.

### **Additional Staging Possibilities and Considerations**

Our readings of essays by John Fletcher<sup>26</sup>, Leigh Clemons<sup>27</sup>, and Lisa Peschel and Alan Sikes<sup>28</sup> have piqued my interest about performance phenomena which, though arguably not of a professional theatrical quality or intent, nonetheless are effective because of their specific

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<sup>18</sup> Abbott

<sup>19</sup> Corneille

<sup>20</sup> Thompson

<sup>21</sup> Lucas

<sup>22</sup> Crowley

<sup>23</sup> Hanson 53

<sup>24</sup> Ober 37

<sup>25</sup> Strauss 71

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher 313

<sup>27</sup> Clemons 148

<sup>28</sup> Peschel, Sikes 161

non-artistic intent to affect and change an audience, to move us to action, to effect change. One possible performance scenario I had envisioned for this project was to have the slain warrior's father (now an instructor of the classics at a service academy such as West Point or Annapolis) at some point deliver a reading of selected portions of *Sohrab and Rustum* as a way to communicate his manifesto and express his grief. It might make for an effective device at the conclusion of the piece, particularly if accompanied by a collage of projected images.

The expansion of our Summer 2012 term and the inclusion of THTR 8000 (our thesis-specific seminar geared toward laying the groundwork for our creative process) offered an additional opportunity to focus on and review the essential elements of storytelling and how best to apply them to the stories we each wanted to tell. We were all anxious to put our ideas into play and on their feet to see if they could be as effective as we hoped they would be.

It was during the summer session that I decided on the title *A Single Revolution of the Sun*, inspired by Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>29</sup>. In his definitive discussion of Tragedy, Aristotle admonishes writers that the events of a tragedy should always transpire within the confines of a single day, i.e., "a single revolution of the sun". The play on words was too good to pass up; the son's obstinate, even rebellious, insistence on his own defiant choices – though quite likely the result of his father's influence – and the tragedy that resulted evolve and unfold for the viewer within the events of one day.

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle

### CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPING THE PLAY

As I began the process of creating this piece, I found myself awash in a bewildering flood of structural and thematic questions. What I felt I was certain of at this point in the play's evolution was that the Father character's journey would begin at a place of moral, ethical, and emotional certainty; this certainty would be tested, warped, broken, and ultimately replaced with a new understanding as a result of the death of his soldier son. I knew that I wanted the events of the contemporary story and excerpts from the classical tale of *Sohrab and Rustum* to counterpoint one another, but beyond that, I was unclear how next to proceed.

I had what amounted to a garbage can full of scenes, retooled recollections, and half-formulated ideas, and not a clue as to how to shape or assemble them. Michael Perelman's timely visit to our class last spring to discuss his own experience with devised works was extremely helpful and welcome at this point. I probably wasn't the only one of our ensemble who felt as if he were attempting to illuminate a cave with a dim flashlight, though nearly everyone admitted to feeling a little "at sea" and alone in his or her artistic angst. Mr. Perleman's recommendation to overcoming creative inertia was a simple one: simply write. Allow every impulse its voice, consider everything, and discount nothing. Don't be unduly concerned about structure, about making everything fit or work from the outset. Write out what wants to be written, and array these scenes, moments, and ideas before you like pieces of a puzzle. Ultimately, an order or structure would present itself. These words proved comforting and illuminating, to a point. But flashlights need new batteries from time to time.

Following my initial readings of the first few trial scenes, several of my colleagues complimented how capably I had used my writing facility to tell a story, delineate a character, and create a voice and a point of view. I was now confident that I could accomplish those objectives without too much difficulty. But I had a tendency to sound more "writerly" in my writing rather than conversational, creating text that lived in the mind rather than finding life as playable action on stage (another manifestation of a challenge that has colored my recent acting work as well). And the still-larger problem remained: what was the story I wanted to tell? There were so many things I wanted to voice from my own experiences, my perceptions of our trajectory as a culture, and my thoughts on American foreign policy that the text began to balloon without finding forward momentum. Complicating matters was the feeling that a surge of recent fiction and non-fiction books, current events, and popular-culture/entertainment treatments of the recent wars was threatening to overwhelm what I had written and render it no longer current, relevant, or valid. Now what?

Enter Professor George Judy. In spite of my ongoing adjustments, Professor Judy was still concerned that the piece lacked a central focus and playable action. With his guidance and at his suggestion (and his contribution of a transitional scene), I rewrote and reordered several scenes, and repositioned several of the *Sohrab and Rustum* excerpts as transitional devices between scenes. We now had a main dramatic event – a senior officer instructing younger officers on how to become effective grief counselors – interspersed with flashback scenes with his son Patrick from Patrick's early youth until his death, with classical textual excerpts facilitating and foreshadowing events to follow.

Creating a moment of confrontation with the military hierarchy, a moment of “speaking truth to power”, as it were, presented some challenges, and I chose to address the challenge by borrowing a passage from Mark Bowden’s Vanity Fair article. He presents a distillation of the moment when the Army brass present the findings of the board of inquiry to the grieving families of the fallen soldiers. As it was the author’s recollection of an actual proceeding, I felt I could best honor the families and the author’s intentions by preserving the passage as much intact as possible, while taking creative license to best serve the flow of the story I chose to tell<sup>30</sup>.

I felt certain that at some point, I would want to include projected images and a sound plot of some sort, even if only incidental, transitional, or preshow music were involved. There have been a number of musicians and pieces whose work seemed to be especially appropriate for this endeavor. One in particular, Melissa Etheridge’s “This War Is Over”<sup>31</sup>, had an especially haunting and unexpected quality that I thought might suggest an alternative prospective or point of view to the audience (reminiscent of The Doors’ “The End”<sup>32</sup> employed in a climactic moment in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*<sup>33</sup>). The song speaks in the voice of a fallen warrior coming home; its lyrics had a decidedly classical flavor, but the reference is unmistakably contemporary. Last spring, I happened to hear a musician performing in a Baton Rouge venue whose music literally turned me around in my seat. It resonated with me instantly, and I felt I had to incorporate its inspiration. The musician was Sean Bruce, and the song, “Daytime Hopes”<sup>34</sup>, expressed a childlike reminiscence of innocent love. Though it was obvious the song was intended as a romantic love ballad, I felt that selectively edited, it might easily be adapted to express the love between a parent and a child. I knew at that point that this would be the soundtrack for a final slideshow collage: images of warriors, grieving families, and a joyful picture of a little boy riding atop his father’s shoulders for the play’s final moment.

The rehearsal process was unlike any I’d experienced before in terms of its free-form flexibility. The continual rewriting of the script throughout the rehearsal schedule contributed to a “seat-of-the-pants” sensation of uncertainty. The effort to retain text and set physical actions under these circumstances was a daunting challenge that required enormous focus. The outcome itself was far from certain.

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<sup>30</sup> Bowden 252-256

<sup>31</sup> Etheridge

<sup>32</sup> The Doors

<sup>33</sup> Coppola

<sup>34</sup> Bruce

## CHAPTER 4: THE FINAL SCRIPT

### A Single Revolution of the Sun

**\*(All Sohrab and Rustum passages done as Voice-Over, except as noted)**

*"O Sohrab, an unquiet heart is thine!*

*"Canst thou not rest among the Tartar chiefs,*

*And share the battle's common chance° with us*

*Who love thee, but must press for ever first,*

*In single fight incurring single risk,*

*To find a father thou hast never seen?"*

### Scene 1 - The Mighty Fishermen

FATHER

(Giggles) What ya doin' little man? Easy...easy, buddy... Now, don't fidget so much. You're gonna scare these old fish away! *(Pause)* That's it. When I was your age – a little older – we used to come here in the summer. I learned to swim right here. Yup; just like you are! Your grandpa and aunt and uncle were sneaky little so-and-so's – you didn't dare step out on this dock unless you were prepared to go in the water. I didn't matter if you were dressed for Mass, either. *(Beat)* That's how I got to be such a good swimmer. *(Beat)* Runner, too.

*(Pause)* There you go. Let me show you something, honey. You can just let the line hang there, or work it *ju-u-u-u-st* a bit. Back and forth, there you go...and just crank in the reel ever so gently... You wanna make that bait move like a tasty little fish treat. Make 'im chase her 'til she catches him. Just like girls are gonna do to you. *(Beat)* Hmm? Oh, never mind, pal - we can talk about that when you're a little older I guess.

What do you mean? Well, sure it takes a little work. It's not like buying one in the grocery store. And those little guys are not just gonna jump up into a frying pan just cause you got your old man's good looks and charm. You like it when your momma or I fry up or bake a fresh-caught

fish, don't ya? (Nods) Uh-huh! Well, I'll let you in on a little secret, buddy: anything good is worth waiting for. And the better it is, the more you have to be patient and work for it. You've got to be patient (*tickles*) and smart (*tickles*) and not afraid to get your hands dirty! (*Tickle fest!*) What's that? Yeah? How about that. I'll let you in on another little secret: I don't really care if we catch one either.

*"That were far best, my son, to stay with us  
Unmurmuring; in our tents, while it is war,  
And when 'tis truce, then in Afrasiab's towns.  
But, if this one desire indeed rules all,  
To seek out Rustum—seek him not through fight!  
Seek him in peace, and carry to his arms,  
O Sohrab, carry an unwounded son!"*

## **Scene 2– A Classroom at the Academy, OR LECTURE HALL...SURVIVAL TRAINING IN GRIEF)**

"A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths a statistic." Josef Stalin. Sounds a rather enlightened comment from someone who cleared minefields by marching troops into them. But Comrade Joe brings up an interesting point: at what point do we become unable to grasp the magnitude of human suffering? From Antietam to Rwanda, we've seen a legacy of suffering and brutality that horrifies, shocks, and ultimately numbs us. US casualties during World War II were far less than those of any other combatant nation – 406,000 – and yet those numbers are staggering compared to all of our combined casualties from Korea to Afghanistan. The sad fact is, for most Americans not directly affected, those are just abstract numbers. Americans have a conflicted relationship with their warriors. Our countrymen expect us to wear a lot of different hats. But first, and foremost, we're expected to accept death dispassionately as a constant companion, perpetually tugging at our sleeve. How is *that* to be done? When there's danger, a major crisis, they can't do enough for them. And when the danger's past, we prefer to tuck them away quietly in the attic with other things that no longer fit into our lives. And then two or three times a year, we trot out the flags and banners and dust off the platitudes and convince ourselves how much we appreciate them. The rest of the year, though, they become



reminders of things we want to forget, and we'd just as soon forget about them, too. Don't you think they'd love to forget... But forgetting is a luxury for them, one very few of them ever get to enjoy. For the rest of us, forgetting is second nature.

Now, I hope that pisses you off. Does it? Good! We don't do nearly enough for the men and women we put in harm's way. The good news is that you and I have something to say about that. The bad news is that we have to cause additional suffering in order to do it.

"C.A.C.O. ... Casualty Assistance Calls Officer" – that's you. One day soon, you will become the author of the worst day in someone's life. You are going to tell them that their loved one was killed in battle. And in doing so, you'll become a part of that person's life for reasons you'd rather not. It's probably the hardest job you'll ever have – and the most important. Mentors and more experienced comrades will tell you about compartmentalizing – putting your feelings in a box to sift through once the job is done. (Smiles) Okay...good luck with that. So—Why are we here..? To see if we can both truly SEE and SERVE the suffering we have to communicate.

I am going to share my story, but each of you will need to make your own discoveries, face individual journeys of your own. Thoughts, prayers, good intentions, the wishes of a grateful nation – over time and distance, they dissipate in power, as at the end of the day, at the far end of the world or here at home, all we have is our own truth, and each other.

Needless to say I had more than a few mixed feelings when my son Patrick told me he wanted to sign up. All of us are drawn to serve for our own reasons. Some are naïve, some self-serving, most are well intentioned and idealistic, but ALL call for enormous sacrifice.

I never really thought of Pat as the military type – he was always a bit of a free spirit, flighty, creative, interested in a lot of things – but not real big on finding a bunch of guys who dress alike and follow each other around, if you know what I mean. Not what I'd call a real combative kid, either but not one to shy away from a scrap. I wish I could say that about all other kinds of trouble that crossed his path.

**Scene 2a - Shift of time/light as he walks into an exterior space speaking to his son:**

Patrick! If you want some respect then you have to take responsibility for your life. You earn respect. Nobody is entitled to it, you win it. You can't talk to me; to your mother like that. You can't talk to anyone like that. I don't care if we "push your buttons"; you need to demonstrate some mental toughness. Look at me, son! Being tough doesn't mean playground-bully tough or taking-stupid-risks-to-impress-your-friends tough. That's not really tough. Being tough is your grandpa working several jobs to provide for his family and put us all through school when it'd be a whole lot easier not to. It's all the things your mother does for you, no matter how tired she is. And me being away so much. It's about standing your ground and doing what's right, no matter what anybody else says, whatever it costs you, You earn the respect you want by treating other people the way you want to be treated; by showing them the respect you want paid to you.

**(He holds this moment as the Voice-over begins...connected to the image of his son...then moves back into the classroom as the lights shift again)**

*For very young he seem'd, tenderly rear'd  
Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,  
Which in a queen's secluded garden throws  
Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf,  
By midnight, to a bubbling fountain's sound—  
So slender Sohrab seem'd, so softly rear'd*

**Scene 2b Back to Classroom:**

After years of not really giving a damn what I thought or said, Pat decided that the military was what he wanted to do. The turnaround surprised me, but I don't question its sincerity. It's not so much out of a desire to please me – I don't think it is – but more like a desire to prove something, to show he's a better man. I went aviation, flew helicopters my entire career, never saw combat...not really...though I think I did get shot at a couple of times near Beirut...And he

loves to give me guff about it, in an in-your-face kind of way. Loves the idea of being a ground-pounder, a special operator, a REAL warrior. What do they like to say? “A rootin’, tootin’, parachutin’, fightin’, fuckin’ frogman”? Yeah, cocky, for sure. Confidence is one thing. But fear keeps people alive. There’s no shame in honoring that little voice.

**(Lights shift again as he walks into the kitchen space in mid conversation with his son.)**

### **Scene 3 - Kitchen**

Wow...You’re really serious about this, then? (Beat) Special warfare? (Pause) You know? I always thought I’d know exactly what to say. I rehearsed this one right down to a gnat’s ass, just like the Birds-and-the-Bees speech. Yeah, we remember how that one went, don’t we? Step into my office, lad.

Let me just start by saying that I love you, and I’m proud of you – I’d be proud of you no matter what you decided to do with your life, as long as you committed to it fully, were happy doing it. But I don’t want you exchanging one form of reckless behavior with another. Look--My experience? “It was the best of times, it was the shittiest of times.” Without exception...no (thinks a minute)...okay, with few exceptions, the best and worst experiences in my life happened in the service. I don’t think I really grew up until I put on the uniform, maybe not even until a couple of years after that. I was very lucky. I got a chance to learn what I was made of. I had a chance to be on the edge of history, the pointy end of the spear. I made life-long friends who are like a family to me. And I was very proud to serve my country.

(Beat) But you’re going to be tested in ways you’ve never dreamed of – see things, experience things, that no one and nothing has prepared you for. You’re going to be forced to make hard decisions on the spot, in the blink of an eye, and there’s no walking away from them to think about overnight. And you’re going to have to live with the consequences of those decisions. I know you are pissed off about the attacks last fall...and yes, it was a horrible thing that happened – thousands of good, innocent folks randomly slaughtered. It’s natural to want to get some payback. But revenge is a poor basis for choosing a career..and this conflict....There’s

something about the rhetoric in the air, less about justice than...revenge.

And...opportunity.*(Pause. Shakes his head)* I don't know...

They'll tell you there are three essential habits of mind: "Be polite. Be Professional. Have a plan to kill everyone you meet." It's dangerous and it's especially ugly. Are you sure you want that in your head?

I didn't even make a dent, did I? Just keep your head on a swivel, kid. Keep your wits about you.

Habits of mind? I can do better than that: "Conduct yourself honorably. Keep your sense of humor. And stay alive."

**(He holds this moment on the image of his son as the Voice-over begins...then moves again into the classroom space as lights shift)**

*"Who art thou then, that canst so touch my soul?*

*Boy as I am, I have seen battles too—*

*Have waded foremost in their bloody waves,*

*And heard their hollow roar of dying men;*

*But never was my heart thus touch'd before.*

*Are they from Heaven, these softenings of the heart?"*

#### **Scene 4 – CACO Classroom**

Nothing you've ever done in your life has prepared you for this mission, am I right? What can you possibly compare it to? A lot of civilian professionals - doctors, lawyers, brokers, contractors - get to deliver bad news, life and death news. But a lot of the time, they're the authors of the grief, and their need to cover their own asses supersedes the priority to comfort. But not for you. For you, it's all about comforting...serving... on levels you can't even imagine. Your presence, in your crisp dress blues with your crisp dress manners and strength and composure, will bring a quiet dignity and reassurance to someone who's lost their dearest joy. A few will want to shoot the messenger, lash out in anger at you. But most won't. And your own grief, for your brother in arms, will spill out despite your best efforts to keep it together.

They'll see that too, and your own sorrow and pain will be a comfort to them as well – maybe even the greatest comfort. You'll need to learn to strike a balance between empathy and self-insulation; that goes without saying. As much as I'd like to, I can't tell you how to do that – you're going to have to figure that out on your own.

**(He moves into the exterior space as the lights shift...in mid conversation with his son)**

### **Scene 5 – The Home Fires: At the Mountain Retreat**

You've become a helluva soldier, Pat, a fine officer with a lot of potential for the long haul – I can see that in you already. Granted, you want to be careful about over-identifying with your men. You need to distance yourself from them, because you'll need to make hard decisions that affect them, and you don't want anything to cloud your ability to do that. I'm not worried about that; I know in time you'll make the right choices. The next thing you need to do for your career is... find yourself a good woman! No, no...Being a dedicated monk is okay for now, you want to keep things simple – I get that. But believe it or not, it is possible to be a warrior and a fully actualized human being in the same lifetime. Not that I'm a sterling example. But your mother changed everything for me. She, salvaged my career, set me straight. From day one, she really picked up on this experience. She *got* it. She enjoyed the cocky, jockish banter, in which she became fluent, and she could hold her own with anybody. No shrinking violet she. She and I even started to speak in aircrew jargon, and thought of ourselves as a crew. We were pretty wild and crazy in our young junior officer days, lots of booming. If I ended up in the bag and hanging in the straps, your mom would take the controls. She had this habit of driving with one eye closed when she was tired so she could see better - you know, because of her astigmatism. It just so happened it was her right eye, so I couldn't help the uneasy feeling that maybe, just maybe, the other eye was closed, too. I'm seeing this (right eye open and left eye closed) and imagining this (both eyes closed). Two scenarios occur to me: I'm either witnessing a miracle of night navigation or my imminent death in 5 seconds. Used to drive - me - *crazy*!

Anyway, we survived those youthful indiscretions, and a lot of other rough weather on the way, and we got to be a really good team. To see a top-drawer military wife in action is to see an artist in motion. You've seen her in action: she's really good with people one-on-one AND she

can work a crowd. But her real gift is how to make people feel special, like they're the most important person in the room.

She used to say, "The key to this business is sincerity, once you learn to fake that, you've got it licked." But she was the genuine article, a real lady. Still is. She saved my life. I hope you find one just like her.

(Pause) Now, I need you to hear what I'm about to say. The real reason I brought you up here. Against my better judgment, I called in a boatload of markers, pulled strings for you and got the assignment you asked for. And now it's time for you to repay that debt – you owe us. You owe your mother, your brother and sister. After this mission, you can rotate out of frontline duty; get into a training command billet, a staff tour. You've served your tour in the field. You've been in the shit; you've proven yourself, and there's nothing left to prove. Let someone else pick up the baton and run with it. It's time to come home.

**(He holds this moment in relationship to his son as the Voice-over begins, then as lights shift he moves back into the classroom)**

*"We are all, like swimmers in the sea,  
Poised on the top of a huge wave of fate,  
And whether it will heave us up to land,  
Or out to sea, to the deep waves of death,  
We know not, and no search will make us know;  
Only the event will teach us in its hour."*

#### **Scene 6– Death's Face (Back at the Classroom/Lecture Hall)**

When my grandfather died - I guess I was maybe 21 – I was lucky enough to be there with him. I didn't think so at the time, I was even a little bit in shock when I walked into the room, and I had to sit down 'til I got my shit together. "Sit by him", my father said. "Talk to him. He'll know you're here." So I sat by him and took his hand. Up until this moment, he looked surreal, certainly not like himself. But he responded to my touch – his head moved, he seemed to look

around the room a bit, and there was even a spike in the monitor hookup to register his vitals. His passing was imminent – he should have been gone by now – but he hung on long enough for the rest of the family to arrive. And then something foreign to my experience kicked in, something...transformational. He began to look around the room in an animated way, almost agitated. I had the feeling the room was filling up with loved ones from the other side. And I felt a rush of energy pass through me, almost as if part of him - his soul or spirit or essence or whatever – came through me on its way out of this world.

And then he was gone. I like to think I told him all the right things: that I was there, that I loved him, that it was okay to let go – but that's wishful thinking. But *what I do know*, what I keep with me to this very day – is the feeling of peace and love and stillness that filled the room when he left it. That was his gift to us. Yes, it was sad. It was hard, sorrowful. But it felt *natural*, the way it's supposed to be. And more than anything - and this still seems a strange word to put to it – it was beautiful. That's about as good as it gets.

Some of these kids in combat are younger than I was when they first meet Death face to face. And he's not wearing his handsome mask or his Sunday best, either. It's the human savagery, the butchery, where the real horror lives. War *is* the Beast. Death's really only the third leg of battlefield triage: after the corpsman, the chaplain, he's the gentle usher who ends the suffering. If you can successfully convey that to the bereaved, you've gone a long way toward doing your job.

**(He walks into the kitchen space as the Voice-over plays and the lights shift)**

**[HOLD FOR VOICE-OVER]**

*"Yet my heart forebodes  
Danger or death awaits thee on this field.  
Go, I will grant thee what thy heart desires."  
There would be then no talk of fighting more.  
Or else thy bones shall strew this sand, till winds  
Or summer's Oxus wash them all away."*

**(Sitting at kitchen table, reading letter aloud)**

Dear Dad,

I hope you don't mind that I addressed this one just to you – I thought it best not to upset Mom with the things I wanted to share with you. I know I risk upsetting you, too, for different reasons, and for that I'm truly sorry. But I can no longer be silent about what's happening here.

**(He walks out of the kitchen to an external pool of light and BECOMES Patrick talking to his DAD) As Patrick:**

PATRICK

Dad, you know I have always maintained faith in the mission, both in the greater, theater-wide big-picture sense as well as the day-to-day tactical and community operations. I feel as if we'd been making headway, doing good things, helping the locals overcome the terror and oppression that is the sole legacy of the militant fundamentalists. We've enjoyed successes restoring infrastructure – in many cases introducing it for the first time! – rebuilding schools and homes, rebuilding a sense of community, and restoring some human values and dignity. Lately, though, I look around me and I see the crumbling infrastructure of a half-hearted war effort, and dwindling support from the command. We are put in the thankless position of making promises and assurances to the families, community leaders, and mullahs that we can't keep. It's no wonder that some of them give us smiles in the daytime and at night give the militants arms and intel. Our current command outpost is a result of that declining relationship – virtually indefensible with multiple vulnerabilities. I hate to say this to you, Dad, but if this pattern continues, it's just a matter of time before we're overrun.

If that should happen, I want you to know that we have kept faith with our purpose and with each other. Whatever happens, I want you all to know that...

**(He walks back into the kitchen light as the scene continues with CACO officer)**



## Scene 7

FATHER

What's that? My wife? She went upstairs. No, she's alright now, I think. Well, "alright..." Our friend gave her something so she'll rest. I appreciate your coming here, Colonel, and I hope you'll be patient with my questions. I'm just a little... (*shakes his head and laughs out of nervous exhaustion*). You see, the thing is... I used to do what you do, so I know this is no easy day for you, either. I just...I'm just trying to understand how... What it sounds like is that they really didn't have any idea what was going on out there at all, did they? And I know, I'm sorry; you're just the bearer of incomplete information... but what I'm hearing is they were out there without the resources, the manpower, support, no real time info on the threat, locals whose loyalties were always suspect. What was this, Operation Shoestring? Who were they saving it for: contractors, for crissake? I mean how does that *FUCKING HAPPEN??* (Pause) NO, GODDAMN IT, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW I FEEL! Don't you DARE fuckin' say that to me again! (Silence) My God. (Beat) I'm sorry; you don't deserve this. (Pause) But someone does. Your willful negligence didn't kill him. Someone owes us some answers. Some heads are gonna roll, I can guaran-goddamn-fucking-tee it.

**(He walks out of the kitchen into the classroom as lights shift)**

## Scene 8

FATHER

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So all the families went to Washington where we heard Brigadier General Ian Pedersson present the findings of the board of inquiry.

**(Lights shift to podium isolation - as Pedersson)**

PEDERSSON

"Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon. I'm Brigadier Ian Pedersson, Deputy Adjutant, ISAF Coalition Forces Southern Theater. I'm here today to present the findings of the board of

inquiry into events surrounding the Battle of Hanat, in which the command post was overrun, resulting in the deaths of 11 coalition troops and the wounding of 29. It is our finding that the chain of command, in particular LTC Gerald Hanratty and CPT John Townley, were to blame for the losses sustained that day. Their desultory efforts betrayed negligence, complacency, and dereliction of duty, performance in a manner not in keeping with the highest standards and traditions of the service. It is as well our recommendation that the officers in question be issued Letters of Reprimand, which will effectively end their military careers. I have met with many of you, and I share your grief. Nothing will fill the holes left in your lives, of course, but take some assurance that those responsible will pay the price. Your sons' and husbands' brave sacrifice has shown itself against impossible odds. It is our duty to see that it will be remembered." I yield the floor to Lt. Gen Allen Knorr.

**(As Lt Gen Allen Knorr)**

KNORR

"Again let me say to you all how sorry I am for your loss. You have been asked to pay a great price, and endure sorrows no family should ever have to bear. Regrettably, this as well will be another difficult day. While we appreciate and respect the concerns of the Coalition

Panel...(clears his throat, puts on his reading glasses, and reads prepared text)

"Upon reviewing the findings of the board of inquiry, we find that the actions of the commanders in question were in no way improper, derelict, lacking in procedural efficacy, or in any other manner deficient." The officers discussed in this report exercised due care in the performance of their duties. They did not kill your sons. The Taliban did. "Accordingly, under the authority granted by the Joints Chiefs of Staff, we hereby reverse the findings of the board, and remove the pall of culpability from these accomplished officers, whose careers have been models of exemplary leadership and which we hope will continue to provide that same quality of leadership to future generations of servicemen and women. Thank you."

**(Lights shift back to full classroom)**

FATHER

Then he thanked us. I told the General I felt the battalion CO not only led our sons to slaughter, he personally set back the American effort in that part of Afghanistan by two or three years. I thought General Knorr's assessment of his leadership was nonsense – that he was a narcissist, a war-lover, and a coward - and what was worse, I thought this guy would do it again. You're probably wondering why I am still here after popping off like that. That, as the man said, is the rest...of the story. We kept at it, contacting any potentially sympathetic ear in the Pentagon, the press, but by this time we had to compete with a general weariness that had set in. Everyone was saturated with the news of the wars, how the government had waged them on the cheap, short-changed wounded vets on treatment and compensation, accused them of malingering when they tried to get recognition of and treatment for PTSD and TMI. I lost countless hours of sleep, did God-knows what harm to my health, but still managed to keep it together for Angela and our other kids.

**(He walks out of the classroom space as lights shift to exterior space)**

**Scene 9 – The Favorite Spot**

FATHER

More times than I can count, Pat, I dream of a summer – I can't remember which one – I only remember making a wish that I could somehow create it as a permanent place, a memory that I could visit whenever I called on it simply by breathing a name I no longer recall. Isn't that ridiculous? It was a time when you kids were all young, the mountain air was refreshingly cool and the sun was warm. It was one of the last times we all spent the summer together as a family. It was a time without...gravity. I return to that dream and I'm relieved that we're all together again and none of the grave events of our lives ever happened.

Lately, though, the dream has changed. Everything is perfect, until I realize I can't find you anywhere. I'm near panic. I call out to you – you don't answer. I run through the woods frantically searching for you. And then I find you, in what was one of our favorite spots. You're in the river, where you learned to swim, and you're trying to show me how much you've

surpassed my instruction. But you're in trouble – you call out to me and I can't get to you – I watch helplessly as you struggle until your muscles fail you. It's clear I've lost you. Then I wake up (Beat). And I trade one nightmare for another.

**(Holds this moment as Voiceover begins, then as lights shift, he walks back into the classroom space)**

*“What should I do with slaying anymore?  
For would that all that I have ever slain  
Might be once more alive; my bitterest foes,  
And I were nothing but a common man,  
So thou mightest live too, my son, my son!  
Or rather would that I, even I myself,  
Might now be lying on this bloody sand,  
Near death, and by an ignorant stroke of thine,  
Not thou of mine! and I might die, not thou;”*

#### FATHER

After months of struggle, finally one morning, the bottom dropped out. I was standing in line at the credit union when I saw this young man, a strapping fellow in shorts and a T-shirt with a Navy SEALs emblem...and a prosthetic leg from below the knee, on the side away from me. When he turned slightly, I could see that he'd lost his arm on the same side; and when he turned still farther, I could see severe shrapnel scars that covered the entire side of his face. I wanted so much walk up to him and thank him, thank him for his service, his sacrifice. God damn it, I wanted to hug the kid. But I didn't want to cause a scene and embarrass him – he looked so accepting of his condition, so...PROUD...as if the price had been worth it; Luckily, I wrapped up my business shortly after he did, and I thought “Thank God, there's time to catch him, time to tell him things I wish I had said to my own son. I struggled to find him in the hot haze, and finally caught a glimpse of him about 50 yards away as he was climbing into a van. I ran as hard as I could to catch him, but the van pulled away just as I was a few yards from catching it. At that moment, it all fell on me, the weight of the past several weeks, the

emotional exhaustion of the effort to find answers, the sheer physical exertion of the run. I fell to the ground sobbing, gasping for air, unable to get to my feet. I don't remember anything, except waking up in the hospital two days later. Angela and the kids were there, as was a stricken Brigadier Gen. Pedersson, looking ashen, his cheeks streaked with tears. I remember saying something to him – God knows what - that made him laugh or cry, I couldn't tell which. I felt really bad for him, and remember thinking that I hoped I didn't look as bad as he did.

*But the majestic river floated on,  
Into the frosty starlight, and there moved,  
Under the solitary moon;—he flow'd  
Brimming, and bright, and large; then sands begin  
To hem his watery march, and dam his streams,  
And split his currents; that for many a league  
The shorn and parcell'd Oxus strains along*

#### **Scene 10 – CLASSROOM**

FATHER

I used to like to think of this life as a river. There's something compelling, even romantic, about the idea of a swift flowing movement in which we're all swept up. If you catch its friendly currents, you can sail smoothly to beautiful and ever-changing destinations downstream, with a friendly panorama of life unfolding on its banks. Or, you can be swirled into a back eddy and spin inertly, forever trapped in a ridiculous little whirlpool. Worse yet, you can be dashed mercilessly against the unforgiving rocks and destroyed, or viciously mangled into a lingering near-death. I guess I always found that metaphor comforting; no matter what the outcome, I can understand a river and accept its rules.

I suppose it's rather fitting, then, that we now find ourselves at war in places so...inhospitable. We seem to seek affirmation in this mythic place, where we gain God's favor by spilling the blood of our sons in the hot, indifferent sands. Why do we insist on throwing ourselves into a blistering sandstorm, fueled by our own bombast; an intemperate wind that flays the skin from

us until there's nothing left to fight with, or for? Thus are God and nations served. So... what? "At the end of the day"... (Smiles) "A glib expression often used by pedantic types to preface their immutable truth." Horseshit. For most of us, "the end of the day" is really just the beginning of another long road, one that begins with a steep, uphill climb. This is my truth; and *at the end of the day, to our credit, it is one I've been encouraged to share with you.* You are about to encounter hundreds of parents and loved ones with my kind of pain, but with their own unique story... and each one will be a battle for which it is impossible to prepare. For every person facing monumental loss there's a debris field to sift through. The Archaeology of Private Memory. Charred, crumpling artifacts destroyed or damaged beyond repair, and the loss of certainty is the most bitter. But my story and the fact I am here to share it can at least be something to consider; an experience you can use as a point of reference.... My truth? You take the time to grieve, you pick through the wreckage for what you can use, you pack it up, and you keep marching on. You get out of bed every morning and remember to breathe. Small, measured steps will come to you in time, your rhythm will return, and one day, you wake up and things... are just a little bit better. They say we're always preparing to fight the previous war – it's true: the battles that define us are never the ones we prepare for, but it is our duty – and our HONOR – to try.

## Scene 12

**(A rocky promontory in the Great Smoky Mountains, the family's Sacred Place)**

*"Oh rather would that I, even I myself,  
Might now be lying on this bloody sand,  
Near death, and by an ignorant stroke of thine,  
Not thou of mine! And I might die, not thou;  
But now in blood and battles was my youth,  
And full of blood and battles is my age,  
And I shall never end this life of blood."*

## FATHER

God, what a beautiful day! I sent your mom, your brother and sister down ahead of me. I thought maybe you and I could spend a little extra time together. (Pauses, looks around). Tennessee's a little hazy today – to the North more so than the West. South Carolina's lookin' mighty sweet. I swear I can see Lake Jocassee from here. And if you squint hard, you can almost see Georgia – I know, but who the fuck wants to, right? At this altitude, most of the leaves are gone, but below in the valley floor, the forest is ablaze with color. And the smell of the balsams? Ahhhh...

I hope you don't mind...I saved a little of you for myself. (Pulls out plastic container). Don't laugh; it's the only way I could sneak you out of the house. If your mother finds out, I'll be joining you very soon... (Spreads the last handful of ashes) I'm only able to see what I can because I sit on YOUR shoulders. Welcome home, pal.

***(Steps down and turns back to audience, and sits on rock. Photo collage plays out, accompanied by music – ending with image of little boy on his father's shoulders)***

**[Lights and final image fade to black. End of Play.]**

## CHAPTER 5: EXECUTION AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The technical rehearsal process alone for our class's thesis performances was an epic adventure, worthy of a thesis treatment in its own right. The Monday before dress rehearsals began, we ran all 11 shows back-to-back in a marathon session from 8:30 a.m. to nearly midnight, inspiring my erudite friend and colleague Nic Hamel to coin the expression "Ironman Theatre". The esprit de corps engendered by that circling of the wagons was a remarkable thing to witness, and may be one of the greatest lessons and gifts of this entire – and entirely unique –thesis season.

For the first performance – the dress rehearsal/preview show – I made a decision (at Professor Judy's recommendation) to perform the piece book-in-hand, as a staged reading. Revisions to the script continued right up until the technical rehearsal "marathon", and the challenge to keep the text clear and structured in my mind became an increasingly daunting challenge. Professor Judy's feeling was that all the work we had done to establish the rhythms of the play might be undermined by a heroic-yet-unnecessary compulsion to "gut it out", that it was more important to maintain an ease and confidence that would allow the words to do their work. That approach appeared to do the trick; the confidence in knowing the words were there for me – words that it was important for me to trust – allowed me to connect with them in a way that audience members with whom I spoke said they perceived as a grounded, connected, and honest performance. It was gratifying to hear people say that the presence of the script was not in any way detraction or distraction. Moreover, their observation (and my own) that I rarely looked at the script at all convinced me that the words were there and lodged in my body. At that point I had considered, though not yet decided, that I would ride this beast bareback, so to speak, for the final performance. To do so would represent a great personal triumph for me and a significant growth milestone. But that decision would not be made until an hour before the final performance.

Up until the preview performance, I had no idea how the piece would play out or be received. My focus was on making active choices, executing a solid physical preparation prior to entering the first moment of the life of the play, pursuing objectives clearly from moment to moment, and – last but not least – remembering where the hell I was on the map.

I was surprised how readily I was able to take measure of the audience response and to adjust my performance accordingly. There were surprising moments when the audience responded to humorous checkpoints that I hadn't anticipated, and I added impromptu text based on the response I received to accentuate the humorous counterpoint to the otherwise gravitas-laden script. This was especially gratifying for several reasons: it was reassuring to know that my radar was intact and my instincts still sound, and that I could adjust my delivery to adapt to the audience chemistry on a given night; that I had a reflexive ability to inject appropriate moments of humorous decompression to allow the audience to recover before mounting another rising-action incline.

Up until the last minute, I kept open the possibility of performing the piece book-in-hand, as I had for the preview. But I finally decided otherwise; it was important to take this



journey where it needed to go – all the way home. It turned out to be the right choice. In spite of my perceptions that the performance had been mechanical, focusing more on the precision of technical execution than on living truthfully in the moment, it was a relief to hear my perceptions were not shared by the audience.

I was pleased, too, at the favorable response to my use of images and music at the end of the piece. Though I was excited about the potential emotional power of the slideshow, I was concerned at first that it might diffuse (as well as defuse) the impact of the final moment of the piece. It appears my misgivings were unfounded, and my original instinct to include the slideshow a sound one.

I admit with some embarrassment my delight in hearing a rising wave of sobs about two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through the performance (and the ejaculation of laughter closely on the heels of one such moment at the play's climax). I was worried that what I had written and executed might have overstepped the acceptable bounds of realism, topicality, taste, and theatrical truth. I've learned, too, to be skeptical of audience and critical response to anything I've ever done – we are, after all, never as good or as bad as anyone says we are. But the effusive and generous response to the performance convinced me that I may not have strayed too far from the intended target. The warmth of the post-show commentary suggested to me that this was a story lurking at least on the edges of people's psyches, and that they needed to be reassured that their conflicted feelings about these issues had been given a voice and that they were entitled to their feelings. I was awed, humbled, and gratified by the feedback I received – enough to convince me that it was important to continue to rework and develop this script for opportunities downstream.

## CHAPTER 6: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY

The incarnation of *A Single Revolution of the Sun* that was mounted on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of January, and the response of the audience and my mentors, convinced me that this piece showed some promise as a saleable property that had potential for production downrange. While many elements of the production proved successful, it became apparent to me that several aspects of the performance and the script itself would need retooling for any follow-up efforts in the future.

Before remounting the play, I will need to consider how to address the lack of specificity in uniform and service branch. I had a difficult time deciding in what branch of the military I would put the father and son. In the original story from which I drew the play's events, the men were members of the US Army, and I felt a certain obligation to honor that circumstance and those individuals. Yet because of my own military experience, I was far more knowledgeable about the Navy and Marine Corps worlds, and felt I could speak more authentically about them. Contributing to the uncertainty was the issue of the costume/uniform: what would blend most fluidly from scene to scene, past to present, reality to reality? I answered these questions, essentially, by avoiding them.

The solution was an easy one, occurring by default: I had a set of navy-blue US Coast Guard Battle Dress Utility fatigues (BDUs) that fit me; they were recognizable as military fatigues, but unfamiliar enough to be unusual, curiosity-provoking, and to provide easy transition between the play's discrete realities. Whether or not this was an effective choice (or non-choice) remains to be seen, and will require some careful deliberation.

The first and most obvious area for performance improvement was a need to enhance the specificity of the physicalizations and vocal colorations of the additional characters. I felt the choices I had made, though expedient, were perhaps hasty and not thoroughly thought out or developed. I knew, for instance, that for the son Patrick, I wanted a younger, higher voice placement; freer, more lifted energy than for his father, and showing the "coltishness" of his youth with an overlay of premature world-weariness. Greater precision in the execution of those elements, together with a higher level of physical fitness of the actor, will undoubtedly improve the next iteration. Lieutenant General Knorr's physicality and dialect, as well, were not clearly defined. I had a preliminary image of General Stanley McChrystal, former Commander of US and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, as my model for Knorr: tall, rangy, clipped, and just a bit abrasive. But clearer, more specific execution in the future would definitely be warranted – a clearer history, clearer objectives, clearer obstacles.

My recollections of British Army officers interviewed on ABC's Nightline© during the Falklands War left a strong impression on me. Unlike their American counterparts, these officers seemed the products of a well-rounded classical education, possessed of a comprehensive grasp of military history, modern tactical doctrine, and an uncommon gift for articulation that spoke of a thoughtful consideration and perspective of world affairs. It was natural, then, for me to cast Brigadier Ian Pedersson in their image: a sympathetic character with a balanced perspective whose stewardship of the Board of Inquiry in this story displayed a

wisdom, compassion, and sense of duty to honor the sacrifice of soldiers and their families as well as “the needs of the service”. My facility with a modified, modern variant of RP English made this a comfortable choice; it may not, however, be an accurate story device. What role a non-American NATO officer would play in a disciplinary proceeding of this sort might prove of doubtful authenticity.

Early feedback from my colleagues during the original development of the script suggested that I had relied too heavily on military jargon to an extent that might prove confusing to a general theatrical audience. Consequently, I backed off its usage and instead employed terms and slang that were more widely understood by the population at large. I suspect, however, that some of those compromises might not ring true with a more knowledgeable audience. It will be important, if I hope to establish the credibility of my voice in this piece, that I am respectful of the sensibilities of those who know these people and these stories on a very personal level. A cavalier attitude toward accuracy and authenticity is the quickest way to undermine and discredit not only any story about the military, but any group or subset that carries such a unique bond of extraordinary experience, hardship, separateness, and shared danger.

As of this writing, I have been approached to stage a performance of *A Single Revolution of the Sun* at a venue in Baton Rouge later this spring. I don’t anticipate any substantial changes prior to that production; however, the opportunity for a Q & A session following the performance will be an invaluable opportunity to test the waters, court a more critical and less supportive (i.e., less “theatrical”) audience, and find out what passes the “straight face test” - and what doesn’t.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

While I had developed confidence over the years in my ability to write as a journalist, essayist, and advertising copywriter, I hadn't even remotely thought myself up to the task of writing fictional prose much less a play. I'd met playwrights. I'd spoken with them, I'd listened to them, I'd read their work, and I didn't feel I saw the world as they did. On this occasion, however, with a metaphoric gun to my head, I was surprised and delighted to learn that I did, in fact, have the tools and skill sets needed to create a moderately successful piece of theatre. I have a basic understanding of the rules of storytelling, of dramaturgy; but more essentially, I have stories to tell that have been awaiting expression. And now, I have the means to bring them to life.

In addition to those discoveries, I now am of the belief that I have the rudiments of a methodology for approaching the work that will enable me to overcome inertia and "procedural paralysis". It is far too easy to respect the work too much, to fear failure to the point of censoring one's impulses and need to risk. For this process to succeed, there can be no fear of failure; everything remains fair game and on the table. If the pieces of the puzzle are arrayed in front of you, an order will present itself, and a story will rise.

When that happens, the words of the playwright, which from their origins are truly his own, find a resonance and power that seem destined to find their audience.

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## VITA

Gregory Leute was born in Philadelphia, PA, in 1954, the youngest of three siblings. A year later, his father would leave active service as a Navy pilot to become a high-school English teacher. Nine years later, his mother would return to her studies to become a middle- and high-school teacher of French and Spanish.

Language was always valued in the Leute home –father George would frequently break out a dog-eared volume of treasured verse to read at the dinner table before or after dessert. Though the children predictably squirmed and rolled their eyes, the readings took root. As diverse as their individual professions today may be, each of the Leute children to this day can quote verbatim at least one dinner-table offering.

Though possessed of a rich fantasy life and a fondness for role-playing, Gregory would not get his first serious taste of theatre until high school. He eschewed treading the boards for more athletic pursuits, but watched with awe and envy the activities of his thespian contemporaries. A chance viewing of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* in 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP English class got his full attention, and despite resisting the bug for a few more years, infection had taken hold.

While an underclassman at the University of Delaware, Leute's predilection for role-playing and elaborate practical jokes caught the attention of a local community theatre director, who encouraged him to audition for his first play, Peter Shaffer's *The Public Eye*. That summer, he was cast in a Villanova Shakespeare Festival production of *Measure for Measure*, directed by Leslie Reidel (then head of the Temple University MFA Acting program). Having completed his requirements for his English degree early in his junior year, he devoted all his academic and free time from that point on at the school's theatre department, performing in productions of Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldritch*, Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody*, and Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.

After helping to form a new community theatre group in Philadelphia's Main Line area – the Entirely Theatre Company – he again was cast at Villanova, this time as Richmond in a production of *Richard III* directed by Dugald Macarthur, Reidel's successor at the helm at Temple University. Several conversations and an audition later, Leute was invited to join the graduate ensemble.

After two years at Temple, feeling frustrated and underutilized and concerned by troubling developments in the Cold War, Leute left the MFA program to become a Naval Aviator. He was commissioned in August 1981, and completed flight training in December 1982. After Fleet Replacement Squadron training in Jacksonville, Leute was assigned to Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron 7, attached to Carrier Air Group 5 onboard the USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67), flying the SH-3 Sea King. The carrier battle group was deployed in support of the Multinational Peacekeeping Force in Beirut, during which time the air group saw action in raids over the Bekka Valley and a series of colorful "encounters" with Soviet vessels and aircraft. At the completion of his fleet tour, he was assigned to Naval Air Station Jacksonville, where he served as Assistant to the Legal Officer. His varied activities in the NAS Jacksonville Legal Office

convinced him he wanted to pursue a Juris Doctor degree, so he applied to and was accepted at the University of Florida's Holland Law Center, slated to begin in January 1988 (several months after the end of his active obligated service).

In the final months before his discharge, Leute read about an upcoming production of *Hamlet* to be performed at the University of North Florida and starring a popular local actor by the name of Michael Emerson. Having been champing at the bit to perform again, Leute auditioned for the production and was cast as Laertes. The production went on to become one of the most celebrated Shakespeare productions in Northeast Florida. After his release from active duty, Leute began his studies at the University of Florida School of Law, but it was by now obvious to him that his passions were elsewhere. He left law school at the half-way mark, returned to Jacksonville, and continued his affiliation with the Naval Reserve while auditioning for every part that appealed to him.

Throughout the 1990s, Leute established a body of work that garnered awards for his performance work (four Best Actor Awards and a Best Supporting Actor award) and directing (one Best Play award) in a varied array of community, university, and professional production. While he had hoped one day to return to his studies and complete his Master of Fine Arts degree, opportunities to do so eluded him, even after retiring from military service in 1997.

He continued to perform, direct, and choreograph stage combat throughout the 2000s, hoping to devote himself fully to theatrical and film work upon retirement from his work as a web designer and advertising copywriter. That opportunity found him in 2009, though not in the form he had anticipated. After both he and his wife Bacot lost their jobs in the crash of 2008, they put their household goods in storage; loaded up their basic belongings, their cat and their camper and took to the road, spending time in a family's "snowbird" retreat in Broward County, FL, while planning their next move.

While in Melbourne, Leute decided to complete his MFA theatre studies, and sought out former colleagues from his days at Temple University. Two especially generous friends, Rick Barbour and Anthony Powell, now established in influential positions in the Denver theatre community, offered encouragement and extremely useful advice, as did his friend Michael Emerson, now an established stage and television actor of national prominence. Once he shared his plans with other friends and colleagues, all were enormously helpful in offering advice, recommendations, and endorsements. After a series rigorous auditions in the winter of 2009-2010, Leute received invitations to several MFA programs, but Louisiana State University spoke to him as an especially strong fit.

Leute began his studies at LSU in August 2010. His performance work in the Swine Palace ensemble has included *King Lear*, *The Metal Children*, *Electra*, *August: Osage County*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Free Man of Color*, and *All the King's Men*. He has served as Teaching Assistant to Voice training mentor Joanna Battles and has taught introductory acting since 2011. His talents and interest have encouraged him to continue seeking certification to teach vocal training, coaching, and dialect work – as well as to find his high-water mark as a performer.