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A MAN WITHOUT: A SEARCH FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY

A Thesis

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

in

The School of Theatre

by

Nitin Govindrao Mane
M.T.A. University of Mumbai, India, 2009
May 2017

I dedicate this thesis to my loving and caring mother.

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To my mother and father: Thank you for your blessings and support.

To my brother and sister: You motivate me to work smart and achieve highs in my life.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis documents the process of devising, writing, rehearsing, and performing a solo show named *A Man Without*. The play depicts the posthumous trial of a multi-religious man named Neelkanth Khan. To be freed from limbo, Neelkanth must defend his life before Jesus, Krishna and Allah. Unfortunately, Neelkanth loses his case; yet another failure for a man whose life was a series of failures due to his circumstances and his character flaws. On the thematic level, this story implies that mankind's failure to understand religion and the Gods leads to religious fanaticism.

The backbone of this project is the training I received during the M.F.A. Acting Program at Louisiana State University. This paper details the important hurdles and breakthroughs in the process of writing, rehearsing, and performing this play. It also includes a rehearsal draft and the full performance script for *A Man Without*.

INTRODUCTION

When I joined the M.F.A. in Acting Program at Louisiana State University, I was aware of the scope and goals of my thesis project. I was to research, write and perform a solo play that reflected my artistic aesthetic, acting abilities, and vision for theatre in society. Throughout my life, while living in India and in the United States, religious fundamentalism and conflicts have been pervasive social issues. Hence, I chose religious fundamentalism as the focus of my thesis play. I personalized this global issue by exploring it through one man's struggle with personal and religious identity. My thesis play depicts the trial of multi-religious man as he attempts to prove his morality according to the rigid values of three major religions in the world. Through this story, I imply that religious dogma fails an innocent man. This premise was supported by the faculty, my thesis committee, and the M.F.A. Acting ensemble. I started my research and writing in the summer of 2016, and the project culminated in two successful performances of the thesis in December of 2016.

While growing up in India, I had friends from various religions. I visited their Temples, Mosques, Churches and Gurudwaras. I did not feel any differently while playing or sharing my food or books with my friends of other religions. However, as I grew older, there were many events and experiences that made me aware that religious conflict is pervasive and dangerous. I was in Mumbai when the attack on the Taj Hotel happened and when there was a series of train bombings. I watched on television the 9/11 attack on the United States. I read a story of a three-year-old child who was rescued by a transgender person during the Mumbai riots. Finally, I saw several movies, including *Bombay*, *Roza*, *Black Friday*, *Firaaq*, *Wednesday* and *Hey Ram* in which innocent people are ruthlessly killed by religious fanatics. These movies centered on the plight of middle class Hindu or Muslim persons who were frightened by the possibility of rioting. It made me think seriously about religious fundamentalism and its role in destroying peace. Initially, tensions in Hindu-Muslim relations

were my focus, but after 9/11, I became increasingly aware of the tensions between Islamic countries and the largely Christian west. Therefore, I sought to know these religions better to understand the reasons for the unrest between them.

India is a land of multiple religions, cultures, ethnicities, castes and languages. It would be difficult to enumerate all the factors diversifying the Indian people. As an Indian scholar Roy, Babul says “Unity in diversity” is the nation’s motto (Roy 441). India is a birthplace of many religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Islamic rulers brought Islam to the country while European colonization brought Christianity. Migrants brought the other religions, like Parsi and Judaism. The current Indian race is a combination of Caucasians (Aryans), who migrated to the country three thousand years ago, and the local Dravidians. Mongoloids are the primary inhabitants of the northeastern part of the country. In addition, there are a number of languages, castes, and cultures. In spite of this vast diversity, people co-exist relatively peacefully. Aryan and Dravidian races started living peacefully with each other after a long period of war, as did the Hindus and Muslims. But since the end of the early twentieth century until today, a religious war between the Hindu-Muslim populations ignited by British political ambition and later by the Indian political parties has been the major reason for the civil unrest.

The United States also has significant religious and racial tensions. Since 9/11, many Americans have developed Islamophobia. This can, in turn, lead to xenophobia or hatred of all South-Asian and Middle Eastern people who account for almost 40% of the world’s population. Even within America’s majority religion, Christianity, certain denominations have limits to their acceptance of other denominations. As the news media has carefully documented, racial inequality has been and is one of the most important civil issues of the nation.

The extreme hatred due to these differences leads to the civil wars, which are like bleeding wounds. Many societies across the world are plagued with such internal wars. Some examples include: Hindu-Muslim populations in India, African and European descendants in America, Shia and Sunni factions in Islamic countries, and between denominations of Christianity in Christian countries. The reason for most of these wars is the hatred for people of another religion, ethnicity, caste, or denomination. Many fanatics think the ultimate solution is to wipe out other groups and try to form a homogenous society of their own kind. However, thoughtful exploration would likely reveal that this is not possible. People differ too greatly in their abilities, ambition, and morals. While some people are trying to form a homogenous human race, others are inventing new ways to be unique. Since these two forces will work continually, creating global homogeneity in race, religion, caste and language is impossible. The wise choice would be to accept the aforementioned “unity in the diversity.”

Drawing from these realistic circumstances, I wrote a fictional story of a man who practices three major religions in the world. He and his family are at the receiving end of the hatred and violence for half a century. In a playwriting class with Dr. Femi Euba, I mastered the structural approach of writing a play and a monologue. While I was fascinated by the idea of playing multiple characters, it was challenging to execute effectively for the audience who lacked context. Eventually, I chose to write a standard monologue entitled *A Man Without*.

In Chapter One, I will cover the experience of research, writing and rehearsals of my play. In this chapter, I’m going to talk about when and how I got the idea to write a play, as well as how I created the protagonist’s backstory using historical research. I will also address how I worked on this script in three classes at Louisiana State University: Playwriting, Acting Studio, and Movement Studio. In Chapter Two, I will include various drafts of my thesis focusing on the evolution of the script from a multi-character approach to a single character monologue. I will also describe my technical vision for this production and include a

performance script that includes stage directions, as well as information about the set, lighting, and sound design of the play. In Chapter Three, I will address the experience of the live performances including a self-assessment of my work, as well as feedback from my peers and LSU faculty. Finally, I will outline my larger conclusions about socio-political theatre, my role as a playwright and an actor, and my growth in the M.F.A. Acting Program at Louisiana State University. I think theatre, along with other forms of art, should be a harbinger of social and political change. After graduation, I will focus my efforts as playwright and actor to improve social equity.

Through the writing and performance of this thesis project, I hope that the character's experience propels the audience and reader's consideration of three key issues. First, that with the advent of communication, transportation and technological innovations, globalization has created greater proximity between cultures, religions and ethnicities. Hence, the hatred between human races, religions and cultures is now much more visible. Second, that nuclear weaponry used in twenty-first-century wars may lead to an apocalypse. And finally, that peace is not an alternative to war but the only solution for our survival.

CHAPTER I: CARVING A PLAY OUT OF THOUGHTS

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the creative process of researching, writing and rehearsing my play. My research included: historical facts about religious riots in South-Asia, literature of South-Asian writers, philosophies of religions and forms of solo shows. I will describe the craft of playwriting and monologue writing that proved very valuable in process of writing my monologue. I will also describe the unique nature of rehearsal process for this solo-show.

1.1 Impulse to Write the Play

My impulse to write this play came from the character. I first came up with this character many years ago, while I was attending an acting workshop in Mumbai. For the workshop's final presentation, we were assigned to write a five-minute monologue. At that time, Mumbai was still reeling from the recent terrorist attack and many artists were helping the public to heal by acknowledging the incident in their art forms. I too wanted to contribute to that effort through my writing and performance, which was an early sign of my inclination to explore socio-political theatre.

I had to be cautious while writing a monologue on such a provocative topic. Firstly, it shouldn't sound like a news report, documentary or a speech. Secondly, I should not choose sides. I wanted my art to relieve, rather than re-traumatize, the people recovering from the loss of their loved ones. I was in search of a character whose suffering could be dreadful, but still would not agitate people or provoke them to take revenge. As a result, I chose to narrate the story of this character through five one-minute incidences in his life. I focused on how he came to terms with the odds in his life, how he consoled himself in the absence of family and friends and how he kept himself occupied so that he did not go mad. After the performance I got the feedback that people really could identify with the struggle of this fictional character.

It was recommended that I expand the monologue into a longer play. Thus, several years later, this became the impulse for the character and content of my graduate thesis play.

In returning to the story in graduate school, there was more foundational research that I needed to complete. First, I needed to define the world of the play and second, I needed to find how the protagonist communicates with that world. I determined that the protagonist, Neel, is the child of a Hindu-Muslim inter-religious marriage. I wanted to link his backstory with the history of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the Indian Subcontinent. So, I reviewed the history of the partition of India based on Muslim and Hindu majority areas and subsequent Indo-Pak wars and terrorism.

1.2 Finding My Voice through Literature

When I wrote the five-minute monologue in Mumbai, I was reading the short stories of Harishankar Parsai.¹ There were many interesting short stories in the collection, including *Neelkanth*. Resilient Neelkanth grows into a wise man who could laugh at his own tragic life. I loved the way Harishankar Parsai uses sarcasm as a tool to create social awareness. He juxtaposes the desires and the flaws of his characters in such a way that readers can see through these characters as if they are open vases. This provokes the reader to introspection and, perhaps, recognition of similar truths in his/her own life. I was also inspired by the fact that the short stories were about the plight of a common man. Parsai puts an ordinary character on a pedestal and examines that character's life in relation to his/her surroundings. Finally, I was impressed by his unique and original observations on the Indian society as well as his simple and real characters. He would use simple incidences from the life of these characters, and tell us how they behave in those situations. I wanted to bring that originality and simplicity to my play.

¹ Harishankar Parsai's collection of short stories in six volumes. The title of the story was *Neelkanth*, I got the name of my character from there. Lord Shiva drinks poison to save world and his neck turns blue. Thus gets the name Neelkanth (blue neck).

There were other works of literature and films that influenced me. I had seen dramatic versions of the short stories by Anton Chekhov, Khalil Gibran, Saadat Hasan Manto and G. A. Kulkarni. I also loved watching the television series “*Malgudi Days*,” which uses character sketches and short stories written by R.K. Narayan. I was inspired by the writings of Indian-American writers like: Ayad Akhtar, Shishir Kurup, Anuvab Pal, Aasif Mandvi and Rajiv Joseph. The rhythm and musicality of their native languages percolate their writing style in English. I noticed that the South-Asian or Middle-Eastern characters written by Tom Stoppard and Tony Kushner sound and behave differently than the characters in the plays written by the aforementioned Indian-American writers. I emulated approach by the Indian-American playwrights, as Neel has spent a major portion of his life in India.

The narratives of the aforementioned stories and plays along with my historical research deeply informed my approach. Ultimately, this foundational work led to my creation of a character named Neelkanth² Khan born to a Hindu mother and a Muslim father. Using the socio-political background described earlier, I created the fictional life story of this character and his past. Below is the concise version of my backstory.

Neelkanth Khan’s grandfather is a Punjabi Muslim who has to migrate from Amritsar (India) to Karachi (Pakistan), during partition. He works hard to earn his livelihood while confronting hatred by local Pakistani Muslims. They call him a *Muhajir*, which means a traitor. This is a specific name given to Indian Muslims migrated to Pakistan. His son, (Neelkanth’s father), could not tolerate this and moves back to India to connect with his roots. He thinks he belongs to India. However he faces new problems there. He is treated differently for being a Muslim in Hindu majority nation. He falls in love with a Hindu girl and his life becomes hell. They cannot find a place to live in either Hindu or Muslim areas. Both their neighbors and acquaintances question why they entered into such “an ungodly

² An alternative name for Lord Shiva.

matrimony?” Eventually they have a son Neelkanth Khan, which presents new difficulties. They cannot agree on how they will raise the child. Their conflict to raise the child as per their religious values continues throughout their lives and ends when they die in Mumbai riots. Neelkanth(Neel) is raised in an orphanage run by a Christian Missionary. After his parents’ death, his life becomes miserable, in a different way. Although Neel goes to a Convent School and completes his education, due to a lack of a good recommendation and his mixed religious background, he does not get a deserved job. His peers and colleagues do not accept him as an equal. Therefore, he decides to go to America to earn his Master’s degree. He has hope for change but instead of religious persecution, he faces ongoing racial discrimination. Before he can live out his dream, he is killed in a terrorist attack in America.”

1.3 Structural Approach

So, I had a character and his backstory. Now the goal was to write a 20 to 30-minute monologue. As I mentioned, I had this topic in my mind for many years, but I definitely did not yet have the proper discipline to write a play. Taking a Playwriting class with Dr. Femi Euba was very helpful in cultivating such discipline. In his book, *Poetics of the Creative Process*, Dr. Euba talks about the structure of a monologue, a one act, and a full-length play and explains how each form is different from the others. In his final chapters, he offers a reverse synthesis of the process of writing a play, discusses the possible thought process of the playwright, and provides information on how these plays can be rewritten as monologues, one acts, or full length plays. This clear understanding of the structure of various forms of plays was very helpful in writing my monologue; while my piece started as an epic play, I adjusted it to be a one act and finally changed it to a monologue.

During my first discussion with Dr. Euba, we decided that my character’s central goal is to search for his personal identity in a diverse society. I chose to focus on diversity in

Indian and American cultures, and how individuals are often discriminated based on aspects of their social identity.

Rather than exploring the protagonist's complete social identity that would be defined by his religion, race, language, caste, culture, social clubs and profession, I concentrated on one major aspect of his social identity - his religion. The other suggestion that came through in discussion with Dr. Euba was to focus on the racial identity of a South-Asian person in America. However, I chose to present the struggle of personal identity versus the religious identity because I knew that particular discussion is a huge part of my subconscious and conscious experience.

Joshua Mark, an American scholar and director of the *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, writes and I paraphrase: every civilization has created its God which looks like them. The morals written in the respective religious books are apt for those societies. The present societies need to either modify or accept a religion that is based on present culture (Mark,1). This theory is what I am trying to present through the dramatization of Neel's story.

1.4 Rediscovering the Character

When I started the rehearsal process, I thought I knew a lot more about this character than any other character I have performed on stage. However, as an actor I continued to discover many things throughout the rehearsal process. In order to define the given circumstances of this character, I used my research, discarded drafts, and the final draft. I also relied on my memory and observations of people in identity crises. I spoke with some of my friends who are in inter-religious marriages. Nevertheless, the social identity of this character is unique. While I could not find a real-life reference for a person who follows three religions, I could compare this character with another fictional character from Ang Lee's film *Life of Pi*. The lead character in that film follows all religious faiths in the world, one after another. He finds so many similarities in the values of all the religions and wonders why there is so

much hatred between the religions in spite of these basic similarities. This character and his behavior gave me a point of view for the character in my play.

The next phase of my acting process was to personalize and deepen these circumstances. I began to examine Neel's struggle to find his identity and fit into society from his truthful point of view. For Neel, it is essential to earn the acceptance of his peers, which would make his life significantly easier. Neel complains about the lack of empathy from the people around him. To identify with this, I substituted³ his relationships with my experience of friendships. For example, I was a bookworm in the high school, and some tough guys used to bully me, and the memory of that helped me access that sense of alienation and victimization. I also substituted my experience of living in boarding school and dorms for his experience of being in an orphanage. The common factor in both experiences is homesickness. However, in Neel's case there is no possibility of meeting his parents during vacation. I also wondered about the impact of his upbringing on his personal development. I imagined that Neel would be socially awkward since he did not learn any social skills from his parents or at the orphanage. Hence, he could not speak with girls; I imagined that while he dated a few girls, none could imagine a future with him, and so he remained unmarried at 35. Instead, he spent his time reading voraciously: detective novels, Darwin, Plato, Karl Marx, the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita and the Quran. There were some friends who would give him a hard time in an orphanage due to his multi-religious background and interests. Finally, I began to develop the character's behavioral strategies to deal with his reality. I determined that Neel uses sarcasm and witticisms as a coping strategy to get even with society.

The second important thing was trying to determine the rules of the world of the play. The world of the play is purgatory. To concretize the physical space, I imagined that Neel's

³ Uta Hagen uses the technique of Substitution, to particularize the character's relationship with the world of the play. Substitution helps the actor to personalize the experience of the character.

soul would be stuck on an asteroid after his death. He could see stars, planets, and the whole universe more clearly.

Each religion and culture depicts their God(s) differently. He/she/it is anthropomorphic in some and abstract in others. In my play, Neel sees the Gods as colored lights. From a writer's point of view, the Gods were symbols of the light of wisdom and reason. From the actor's perspective, I wanted to imagine the three faces listening and responding to me. Those were my personal images and I kept it personal to me. Hagen, Uta, in her book *Respect for Acting* describes the substitution method to personalize relations and objects from the world of the play (Hagen, 35). So using substitution, I deepened my relationship to those three faces as if they were three humans from whom I sought guidance and wisdom. Once the givens of my world were clear and the objective of my dialogue was clear, blocking the show was not a problem.

To dramatize the Gods' reactions, I needed to incorporate some technical and design elements. I wanted to use some special colored lights (ideally: saffron, green and red) to represent each God. I also wanted their responses to be flashed on a screen. For the sake of simplicity, I ultimately decided to read the Gods' responses that were written on leaves contained in a glass jar on a bed of coloured stones and marbles. The Gods' objections were indicated by a warning sound effect. To represent the asteroid I used a large coloured stone. We used a spotlight to indicate the effect of acquiring a television or telepathic vision. My costume was formal. I wore a sign of each of the character's three religions: a cross on my chest, a red *tika* on my forehead and a Muslim kufi hat on my head. I added red dye to indicate a wound on my lower back.

To realize these technical and design elements, I relied on the support of many collaborators. LSU's Visiting Assistant Professor of Costume Design, Camilla Morrison, helped in selecting the costume and the right colour for the blood. Jared Mentz, our Stage

Manager, helped me to organize the timing and placement for each technical cue. My thesis advisor, Nick Erickson, guided me in making my interaction with the space more direct and meaningful. My voice professor, Stacey Cabaj, encouraged me to be fully present in the given circumstances and to use my voice to achieve my objective.

I am also grateful for the assistance of my classmates in the M.F.A. Acting ensemble and those in Dr. Euba's Playwriting class. In our Acting Studio, we discussed our ideas and got suggestions for the translating our ideas into dramatic scenes. My classmates gave many valuable suggestions that ended up in the final draft. Two examples include: the suggestion to read the Gods' responses from a jar and minimizing the exposition. I also benefitted from sharing my work in our graduate Movement Studio. Here I explored the behavior of Neel's relatives, which helped me to deepen his relationships with his world, and winnow the play down to a single character's narrative. Finally, in a playwriting class, I developed my third draft. It was helpful to read my monologue several times and receive my classmates' valuable feedback.

My first hurdle in writing a solo piece was to deliver it in monologue form. Initially, I wrote an epic play, which had dialogue and was more of a narrative than a play. I was lured by the opportunity to portray many characters. I then worked to make it a series of monologues, but still, the names of characters I portrayed and the invisible characters I spoke with were confusing to American ears. Finally, I decided to write a standard monologue as described in my playwriting class. I got suggestions for the relationship between the character and the audience that included the audience is a jury or a committee deciding Neel's fate in a case. Perhaps Neel was fighting trumped up charges put on him by racially biased superiors. This led me to the idea of arguing my case before mankind's ultimate jury: God.

My second hurdle was technical in nature. I wanted to use a projection screen to provide historical background of the religious battles and their repercussions in South Asia,

as well as portray certain effects to represent Gods' responses. This unfortunately did not materialize. My third hurdle during rehearsals, was to stop thinking as a writer and start thinking like an actor, which proved to be very challenging. My fourth hurdle was writing the play's ending. It was difficult for me to write a conclusive ending because I wanted it to be an open-ended discussion. The world of my play was a liminal space like in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. My character does not get what he wants, but he also does not stop trying. The process of seeking justice and the conversation between a human being with his God is eternal. I did not know how to get this message across.

In conclusion, the development of my thesis play was full of challenges and surprises. The first few drafts were loaded with the research and exposition. The subsequent drafts became more personal and specific. Ultimately, the final monologue was most effective draft; I found a clear objective, relationship, and action for my central character. Once I got the clarity of these structural details, writing the monologue was relatively easy. Despite some technical limitations, I found the rehearsal process very rewarding.

CHAPTER II: FINDING VOICE

2.1 Urge to Do a Solo Performance

As Susan Merson wrote and I summarize, a solo-performance is a generative art rather than an interpretative art. The artist can voice his/her opinion and can highlight his/her best abilities. It is a platform to experiment and innovate. He can voice his independent opinions and concerns. It takes a lot more commitment and discipline but the best part is you are working for yourself (Merson 9).

I agree with Susan Merson. I think the solo performance gives an ideal platform for underrepresented artists. Other art forms including music, painting, sculpture, poetry and dance could be practiced individually. The artist doesn't have to wait for the opportunity to create his work. Since the theatre is a collaborative art, unlucky individuals could have to wait forever to get the opportunity to showcase their talents. There is a chance that very talented actors may never get the opportunity to work and lucky actors would be overwhelmed with the amount of work despite the lack of talent. This could be a frustrating situation for an aspiring actor. After all, performance is a skill which could be improved and sharpened with practice. Solo performance would keep an actor occupied in the meantime. In conclusion, solo-performance keeps an actor busy, gives him liberty to create work he loves and helps him grow continually. Hence, relying on the solo performance could help the artist to remain in the business. Also, solo show is less expensive, so a highly entertaining solo show could be a good alternative for a theatre company to control the budget.

2.2 My Process of Creating a Solo Performance

When I started writing the text for my solo performance, I had a few things with which to start. I had a strong subject, a character, research on Hindu-Muslim relations in South-Asia, and a general knowledge of the various forms of the solo performances. I have

discussed my character and strong subject in Chapter One. Here, I will discuss the different forms of solo shows.

My first inspiration was the full-length solo play by Doug Wright called *I Am My Own Wife*. In this play, a single actor performs all thirty-six characters. The play covers the life of Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf. The show happens in many locations and covers a lifetime of the protagonist. I loved this form as it would give the actor the opportunity to perform multiple characters.

My first draft was an ambitious and sprawling attempt to emulate these structural aspects of Wright's play. I attempted to dramatize the backstory of three generations of the protagonist's family. The scenes portrayed a people's sense of unity despite the widespread hatred in a hostile political climate. It included multiple characters, spanned a great length of time, traveled between many locations, and featured a projection screen. I started my process with historical research and writing a backstory of the character. However, I got negative feedback on this draft. First, most the text was devoted to the exposition of the protagonist's backstory, and it had very little action. Second, I realized it would be difficult for an American audience to understand the references to communal riots and the significance of religion-specific names. Third, it was all dialogue and there were no clear instructions on how I would effectively play two or three characters in a scene.

2.3 Shifting Gears

Hence, for my second draft, I relied on the creative process of playwriting as taught by Dr. Femi Euba in his playwriting class at LSU. Dr. Euba finds the creative process analogous to birth, a transition from the metaphysical to the physical world. He identifies the elements that make drama interesting: an action leading to the consequence, conflict, stakes, a deadline to complete the action, and commitment to the action. Dr. Euba also teaches that the

playwright is a first physical interpreter of the play and that he/she fleshes out the idea of the play from a real or fictional story.

With this knowledge, I began writing my second draft. My inspiration for this draft was Aasif Mandvi's full-length solo play *Sakina's Restaurant*. Here, the protagonist is also a narrator and he swiftly changes into five other characters. Although the play is structured as a series of monologues, it manages to have an interesting narrative. This approach appealed to me, so I wrote about a day in the life of a News reporter at a television channel in Mumbai. It became a series of monologues by six different people that the reporter, Neel, interviews after a bomb blast in Mumbai. While there were many things happening, there was no central conflict and arc for the protagonist. To address this challenge, I made a structural outline in the form that Dr. Euba teaches, which is included below.

Idea-Note: Search for personal identity.

Subject: Hindu-Muslim conflict in South-Asia.

Immediate crisis/Situation: Bomb blast in Mumbai on July 12, 2011.

Theme: Religious discrimination.

Plot Structure: Interviews of affected people.

Central Character: Neelkanth (Neel) Khan, a news reporter at a television station.

Objective: Success as a news reporter and marry the girl of his dreams.

Conflict: Her family does not approve of him as her boyfriend.

Stakes: Losing the love of his life.

Deadline: One month.

Obstacle: Her father.

Major Dramatic Question: Will he be a successful news reporter?

Climax: He loses everything.

The criticism I received on this draft was that there were too many invisible characters onstage and that it was still difficult to keep up with the names of the different characters. While this draft may have played well in India, some American audiences may have found it confusing.

2.4 Arriving at a Happy Idea

Finally, I wrote a third draft. By this time, we had discussed in our playwriting class the dramatic structure of a monologue. I focused on how it is different from a full length or one act play.

Subject: Discrimination due to religion/sexism/racism

Immediate crisis/Situation: A bomb blast in Madison, Wisconsin (and the protagonist's resulting death.)

Theme: Social identity versus personal identity.

Central Character: Neelkanth (Neel) Khan, a professional.

Objective: Prove he is a good man.

Conflict: God/Personal Identity.

Stakes: Escape from limbo.

Deadline: As soon as possible.

Obstacle: Rigid religious rules.

Major Dramatic Question: Will he prove he is good?

Climax: He fails.

Tactics: To tell the truth, justify small glitches, and question the rigidity of the religion.

Finally, my third draft had just one character, one location, and maintained temporal continuity. While the other drafts were narratives, this draft was more focused on the conflict of the central character, and therefore the most active. Neel has to prove his moral integrity

in order to go to heaven, which seemed like a much simpler form to convey the main conflict. I also added the five questions through which the character would strive to prove his moral integrity. The answers to these questions constituted the majority of the text of my third draft and subsequent revisions.

There are several key developments in this draft. First, in order to approach the global issue of religious fundamentalism, I wanted to include all the Gods of the world's religions and the souls of people who had died in man-made calamities like wars and terrorism. However, my faculty and my classmates made me limit the number of Gods to three and recommended that I did not interact with any souls in purgatory. Second, I also minimized exposition and asides. Finally, the technical challenging of depicting the Gods became the subject of interesting classroom discussions. I received many suggestions: use three mirrors, use transparent glasses with Gods' image in them, use cutouts of the Gods, either hanging or presented in stationary frames. Eventually I settled on the very simple solution of three colored lights.

2.5 Third Draft

A Man Without

(There is the sound of the huge blast on the dark stage, stage fills with fog. 30-year-old Neelkanth(Neel) Khan is lying on a rock placed upstage center, as if he is a victim of a blast He is wearing formal attire and an official ID on his chest. He is wearing a cross on his chest, a red tika on his forehead, and a Muslim kufi hat on his head. Blood clots appear on his chest and neck. He suddenly wakes up as if he has gotten up from a deep sleep. He gets up, looks around, and tries to figure out where he is. He looks at a shadow of someone. He thinks he has company.⁴)

⁴ I got a suggestion that the shadow and conversation with it may not sound true, so I got rid of that in next drafts. My first need to talk was when I needed help and everything else was expository, so I had to get rid of that too.

NEEL:

Oh! What is this? Where in the hell am I? Wow! I feel lighter, no heartache, no backache, no worry of tomorrow to weigh me down. I can't even feel my body's weight. I feel like I am seven again. It is fantastic, calm and sweaty.... is this a sauna? What the hell? They have a rock instead of benches, what a little stingy sons of bitches. *(The shadow disappears, but he does not notice it.)* It is too damn hot. Hey, turn it down. Can you believe there is no attendant? Aren't you hot? *(He realizes he is alone and that shadow is disappeared. A chill runs down his spine. He looks around and tries to locate the switch. He realizes it is a huge place. He is terrified.)* God this place is huge, it is boundless. I can't bear this heat, hey, turn it down. Hello, Hello, Hello! Can you hear me? It is so quiet. I can hear my cells metabolizing oxygen and excreting carbon dioxide. *(He chuckles at the absurdity of the thought.)* I haven't seen the sky so clearly. These stars, moons and planets, God! I feel like I am at the centre of the universe. It is so magnificent, yet terrifying and hot. *(He yells)* Help, Help! Help! Jesus! *(He desperately prays to Jesus. Jesus appears in a light. He has no idea. He thinks it is not working and starts praying to Lord Krishna, Lord Krishna appears as another light. He does not see it and then he prays to Allah. Suddenly he feels calmer and he looks to find all three in front of him)* Jesus! Krishna! Allah! You all are here! Together! And you are playing cards! Thanks for coming on time. I have been praying since childhood! No, I didn't mean to rub your nose into that, I was referring to this instant. I just prayed for a minute and you are here. Thanks for coming. You know something, I thought you were not for real. I used to laugh at people who kill each other for you. *(He looks at them and does not think they liked that last comment.)* I am very sorry, I'm a little nervous, confronting you all together. But seriously, where do you stand on communal riots? Sorry for being inquisitive. Everyone says you have all the answers, so I'm curious to know, do you? Have the answers? Of course, you do! I'm not doubting your knowledge. Sorry, I'm rambling, it is my first time

talking to the God...s. So, how are you doing? Sorry! God this is hard. Okay, why am I here? I mean, I appreciate the view of the universe and all, but the temperature is killing me... Oh! It is not hot anymore. Thank you. But, what is this place? I haven't been here before. It seems like some dream. Am I dreaming? What? *(He looks at his shirt as if someone has just pointed to his shirt.)* What is this? *(He shivers at the thought of death. He is not sure if he is dead or dreaming.)* Am I dead? Is this the Hell? Heaven? Say something, it is getting scarier again.

What? Okay! *(He goes and picks up a chit from a jar. He reads from it.)* I would be freed from this place if either my dead body is disposed with the proper rites or if I prove I led a moral life. If I pass the ethical test.

So, I am dead! Are you sure? Of course, you are. You are God! But I am here with you, that's good, I guess. Okay, but how am I supposed to take care of my own funeral? Can I call someone on earth? Can I use your phone? No? You don't have a phone? God! *(All three make a sound)* Sorry! Do you have anything like landline telephone, pager, Apple? *(An apple falls)* Not this one, a laptop to send an email. What about TV? Well, I can't sleep without TV, you know. If that is a case, send me back to the earth. *(He sits like a fed up child. He is stuck by some object in head)* Ouch! ...Oh!

(He looks in the audience. He sees many people.) I can see people. I can see things on earth. Thanks for this...ummm ... television? *(He suddenly looks at his dead body and sighs.)* Ahh! Oh my God! Is that me? Oh, that reminds me, I was going to work and there was a huge blast...the guy next to me was sweating in AC and he looked possessed. I wonder where he ended up?*(He sighs as if that is it.)* So, I am dead. Oh doggy, stop, stop, stop licking me. Aren't you a cutie? Aren't you a cutie? Oh, what are you doing? Not on my face, not on my face! Ugh! ...*(To Gods)* Did he do that on purpose? *(His attention goes on something else near his dead body.)* Oh! That child is breathing, hello! Hello, oh! Nurse! Take that child

first. Hello, can you hear me? Take him to the Madison Hospital first. You can save him!
How can you miss him? He is on the pile of those dead bodies, he is holding onto those hanging intestines for support. You are getting distracted by the crushed eyeballs and severed limbs and decapitated bodies. Look on the other side. Can't you follow directions? Oh, Shit! Hey paramedic, listen, listen to me, there is an old African-American lady under that debris. She is moaning! Can't you hear her? Come on! Dig it. Good! Good! Don't worry, dear lady, they are coming for you. Not there, on your right, on your right, damn it! God! (*A sound by the Gods*) Can you do something? Of course not. At least there is a help, everything is fast in America. What am I supposed to do now? What? Okay!⁵

(*He picks one chit. He reads.*) You were dishonest!

I was honest all the time... (*Sound of clouds and lightening*) ...most of the time! (*Lighter sound*) Well, I tried! (*Sound fades. So this sound and lightening act as a lie detector from now on as he continues his confession. He looks above and follows someone passing by with his eyes.*) Namaste Gandhiji. He said honesty is the best policy.⁶

But, it wasn't getting me anywhere. When I said I believe in all religions, they couldn't believe me. Belief in multiple religions was part of who I am; they thought I was trying to be bigger than what I am. They said belonging to everything is like belonging to nothing. Then, I had to accept their concept of beliefs. Believe in one religion and hate all others.

Surprisingly, loyalty is measured not by how much you love them, but how much you hate others. If you say, "I'm with you Cubs," the Cubs fans will say, "okay, whatever" but as soon as you say, "Indians suck," Cubs fans will be like, "Do you want a beer bro? A slice of pizza,

⁵ It was suggested that I get rid of the graphic description of the events on the earth. I limited them to description of the protagonist's corpse.

⁶ I got rid of historical figures passing by, in order to avoid the confusion as to why are they here in limbo.

maybe, feel free to have anything on the house.” Of course, he has to be drunk enough to make the last offer. But, you are getting an idea right. Sorry, for rambling again!

Lord Krishna, my point is, What choice did I have? My father was a Muslim, the mother was Hindu, and I was raised by a Christian missionary after my parents’ death in the riots. I thought I had the beauty of all of them in me. That’s good, I can fit everywhere, but I was wrong, I couldn’t fit anywhere. I wasn’t invited to weddings, mine or someone else’s, festivals or ceremonies. Can you imagine celebrating Diwali/Christmas/Id on your own; it’s not fun! Did you know? Renting an apartment was a huge task. My applications remained pending for a very long time. Even murderers got security clearance faster than me. Arranged marriage was out of the question and love was out of sight. I heavily relied on cats and dogs for love, while receiving daily doses of hatred from my fellow Homo Sapiens. Homo Sapiens is just a fancy term for people. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I explained it to you. Jesus! Religious people are simpletons. They follow simple rules. If you belong to their religion, they trust you, otherwise, they don’t. An inter-religious marriage was a felony in God’s kingdom and a child of that marriage was just a silly mistake. So, I was treated like a mistake. I became a standard of inappropriateness. If I did something, it was wrong, said something, it was false. I tried too hard to get their acceptance. No matter what I did, they would hassle me with mean questions, without a hint of subtlety. Didn’t your mother get a decent Hindu boy? Why were your parents so irresponsible? Was your father a sex maniac? I couldn’t take it. I just gave up; moved to a new localation, and practiced one religion. But, it didn’t work inside. Pretending allegiance to one religious club was the only way I could survive. It’s all I could come up with. You can’t hold me responsible for that. They were at fault for not accepting me for who I am. Even though there was nothing fundamentally wrong with me. Lord Krishna, you became a beautiful lady to kill a devil. Wasn’t that a misrepresentation? Why? I see! There is a double standard in your judgmental overtones.

My body is still lying there, no one is even looking at it. There is no one to claim it. Well, this sucks! Sorryfor swearing. I could have put the coin in the swear jar, but I don't have coins. Does Mastercard work here? Sorry, I'm rambling again. Can you do something about it? Can we get in touch with the Madison Hospital? Of course not! You know, you've got to upgrade your tech support.

(He picks up a cheat from the jar and reads)

You were corrupt. You bribed a police officer when you were seven years old.

What? Is this a joke? How can a seven-year-old...oh! Wait a minute! Are you talking about the bracelet? Well, what choice did I have? I wanted to see my dead parents before they dispose of their bodies.

I was terrified. Hindus killed my Muslim father and Muslims killed my Hindu mother while I was trembling with fear. When they saw me they were confused. Signs of two religions on a little boy....they were dumbstruck. To solve the puzzle, they abducted me and took me to a priest. He saw a circumcision and a *tika* on my forehead. I could recite Sanskrit shlokas and Urdu verses in the same breath. They said something about me being half Hindu and half Muslim. I was worried each of them would half kill me. But, luckily anatomical division was not as easy for them as the religious division. It got curiousor and curiousor, but their rule was very clear, do not kill your own. Since, they could not figure out which half of me was Hindu and which was Muslim, they were helpless. I was an enigma to them. They were thinking so hard, their faces looked like chimps discussing string theory. Finally, the puzzle exhausted their tiny brains. So, they left, leaving me there, in the middle of nowhere. I was terrified. Suddenly a ghostly police officer emerged like he was waiting for his cue. I told him, I desperately wanted to see my parents. I was trembling with fear. Even he was moved by it. He picked me up and started walking. But as soon as he saw a gold bracelet on me, he was even more moved. He said, "if you give me this gold bracelet, I will take you to your

parents.” I immediately agreed. He could have asked for anything at that time and I would have said yes. I was too young to understand the concept of bribery. Come on! Be flexible! Children are forgiven even in courts of law. Right? Right?Okay Okay...

Still, nobody is claiming my body! This is ridiculous! My body is feeling lonely, cold and rejected. Help me! ...Please help me!

(Another question hits him.)

You are not generous. You did not donate anything to temples, churches or mosques.

Seriously! Come on, you can’t punish me for being poor. What are you a Republican

/Democrat? Your logic is circular. I was born in a poor family, had shitty jobs, and you are

judging me for not donating money? It’s like punishing a crow for not being white. /it’s like

punishing a bull for not giving milk. You know, the only people who are affected by my

death are those credit card companies. Since I left nothing behind me except those credit card

bills. Besides, why do Gods’ houses need more money? The collective wealth of all the

temples in India could pay off all of the international loans of the country. You need more

money! To build new Temples, Churches, Mosques? When 100 million people in the world

are homeless.

If God is omnipresent, then why there is a fight for a piece of land in your name? If the entire

universe is yours, why do you want to put a sticker and claim a piece of land? Why do you

need a Mosque in place of a temple or church in place of a Mosque? Allah, why couldn’t you

stop the destruction of Buddha statues? Jesus, why couldn’t you stop the massacre of Jews?

People are sacrificing their lives for building God’s houses, which you of course, never use,

and you are enjoying an evening out together playing board games and consuming fast food?

(The light grows brighter and heat increases. He starts sweating.) Okay. Okay. I won’t. You

are just like corporate bosses. They like questions. They say, “Speak only if you have

something nice to say about us. Otherwise, shut the fuck up!” Sorry! No coin...swear jar...Mastercard...

Finally, they are moving my body. God Bless America! Soon I will be disposed of and free. I don't have to be judged by you. Frankly, I'm tired of being judged. In India, America, and now here, in the middle of nowhere. Oh no! They are taking it to the airport, they are sending it to India. (*He gets a huge jerk and finds his dead body in India.*) My body is in India. What am I? A FLASH?

You were not loyal to a religion.

Well, I'm not answering it.....don't you see, you are holding me responsible for your deeds. I did not choose my parents, I did not choose the Catholic orphanage I stayed in. How could I practice religious monogamy? My parents were each obsessed with instilling their own religious values in me. They fought like crazy people to take custody of my soul/senses. I couldn't believe these were the same people who fought with the whole world to get married in the first place. I was their regular battleground, no wonder I felt like the Gaza border. A white Catholic sister at the orphanage, I prefer to call her mother, was also pretty determined to raise me as a good little Catholic boy. These are three people I loved the most. How could I have denied anything given by them along with all that love, bread and cake? And later red wineas your bloodJesus.

Then I grew older, got bored, became agnostic and atheist, not necessarily in that order.

When I got struck with logic, I questioned your existence.

Then slowly logic started dictating me. Everything about your powers seemed imaginary.

Logic did not deny your importance, though. You have been the rock stars of the entire world for generations. I'm with all of you, but I cannot choose any one of you. As a child, I believed in each of you, equally. Your presence in my life was an extension of my love for

my mother, father, and Sister Angela. Being loyal to one of you is like choosing one of them; it is not easy for me.

They are trying to figure out the religion of the dead body. (*Laughs*) Well, good luck trying to figure out what I couldn't. Look at them all, they are all fighting to claim my dead body for their religion. They are doing it again. It is surprising. When I was alive they rejected me with great passion and now that I'm dead they are fighting for me with the same fervor. Oh my God! They are fighting for the right to dispose of my body. A fellow as insignificant as me is a reason for the religious fight. I am becoming one of your symbols. It is painfully flattering. I am sorry, but I never imagined it could happen. When I tried to be one of them, they humiliated me, ignored me, and rejected me. Now they are fighting for me, as they fight for disputed territory, like the Kashmir Border and Jerusalem. God, please make a decision. I don't think they can. As you know, religious battles are eternal. The world is fertile for them. Now there is only one route to escape. Ask me another question.

Mom, Daddy⁷. (*He tries to talk to invisible mom and dad.*) What are you doing here?

(*A question comes to him.*) That is an example of your unreliability. You did not dispose of your parents' bodies with proper rites.

But I was only seven when you both died, leaving me alone in that scary world. When I found your bodies after searching that whole mortuary, I was dizzy and collapsed due to the horrifying display of your mutilated and disfigured bodies. When I recovered after two days, I was in an orphanage and whomever I asked about you said that you are in heaven and I should not talk about it. The more I asked about it, the crazier they thought I was. They took me to a psychiatrist. They gave me pills to forget you. But I never did. How could pills erase something like that? I am sorry that you had to suffer because of me. This is wrong, Jesus,

⁷ I avoided bringing mom, dad, grandfather, or other victims into limbo, in order to avoid confusion. I had an idea that a light would represent each soul, which would have been a huge technical challenge.

why they have to suffer? These rules make no sense. Hey, Krishna, do you see the practical fallacy of your rules? It is like your judgment is accidental; sometimes it sounds autocratic. Allah! Do you care for us? Are we your precious creations? Or you are our creations? I have doubts about you, even when I can see you. How can you punish so many innocents? How come you always take the side of supremacies? Are you corrupt, dishonest, disloyal, irresponsible and unreliable...? (*The lights indicating Gods start to go down.*) Don't run away, tell me the truth. Do these questions bother you? Do you have answers to them? Do you know the ultimate truth? See, if you can't take the criticism, how can I? I know you preach your favorite disciples. But I got nothing from you. Am I asking wrong questions? But these are my genuine questions. If they are out of your scope, maybe it is time to expand your scope. (*The lights representing the Gods are off.*) Probably they have gone to expand their scope. (*A sound of throat clearing in the dark.*)

Dad, is that Grandpa? Oh, Grandpa! You mean you too. (*The auditorium fills with sounds of people from all across the world. They are murmuring in many languages. Lights are thrown on the audience as well. All corners of the auditorium feel with faint blue lights of various intensity. Some lights are flickering and some are moving. The sound grows and makes Neel uncomfortable.*) Who are all these people? What is this a Zombieland? Oh no!looks like...people died during partitions, civil rights movement, world wars, and cold wars, 9/11, Mumbai Bomb blasts, Paris attack, Orlando attack, Syrians... How come they are here? They are the victims of the riots and wars. We are the victims. We had no time to plan our funerals. We just took off, without notice. Put us somewhere. Get us out of it. I don't mind heaven or hell, but at least get us out of this. Oh, it is getting hot again. I can't bear it anymore. Jesus, Ya Allah, Hare Krishna, I am sorry. Forgive me. I will not ask any questions. These damn educational systems made me a skeptic. See, I'm switching off my brain, I won't think anymore. Take me out of it. Please! Daddy, Mommy, Grandpa, Uncle, hey you, and

you, look at me. Why don't you plead with your Gods to take us out of this? *(There is the sound of a mature and tired laughter. He looks at them. He pleads them. Then he joins them and walks like a zombie, without any purpose.*

END OF PLAY

2.6 The Final Draft

A Man Without

(There is the sound of the huge blast on the dark stage, stage fills with fog. 30-year-old Neelkanth(Neel) Khan is lying on a rock placed upstage center, as if he is a victim of a blast He is wearing formal attire and an official ID on his chest. He is wearing a cross on his chest, a red tika on his forehead, and a Muslim kufi hat on his head. Blood clots appear on his chest and neck. He suddenly wakes up as if he has gotten up from a deep sleep. He gets up, looks around, and tries to figure out where he is.)

NEEL:

Hello. Hello... Hello! It's so quiet. I can hear my cells metabolizing oxygen and excreting carbon dioxide. *(He chuckles at the absurdity of the thought. A big sound. He cries loudly.)*

Mommy! No, no, I'm a big guy, I won't cry, I will do something! *(Another sound)* Jesus!

Help!

Hail Jesus! You're my King!

Your life frees me to sing.

Hare Krishna Here Krishna...

Yah Allah Illilah, rahamdil rasullah!

I will praise You all of my days

You're perfect in all Your ways!

Jay Radha Madhav Kunj Bihari

Yah Allah Illilah, rahamdil rasullah!

Oh! It's not working. The important thing is you should connect with your God. How? Hey God, Whoa God. Come-on, Come-on, give me a chance...*(Jesus, Lord Krishna and Allah appear in three different lights with the sound of a flute, church bell, and ajan. Neel has no idea.. Suddenly he feels calmer and he looks to find all three in front of him)* Jesus! Krishna! Allah! You all are here! Together! Thanks for coming so quickly. You know, I've been praying since childhood and you never showed up. So I didn't think that you are real. I used to laugh at people who kill each other for you. *(He looks at them and does not think they liked that last comment.)* Sorry, I'm a little nervous, confronting you all together. But seriously, where do you stand on communal riots? Racism? Gay rights? Feminism? Okay, here's an easy one, do you like puppies or kittens? Sorry for the inquisition. Everyone says you have all the answers, and you are...sorry .. I'm not doubting your knowledge. Sorry, I'm rambling, it's my first time talking to God. Sorry, Gods. *(He kneels down.)* So, What's up? Sorry! God this is hard. Okay, why am I here? I mean, I appreciate this view of the universe. But, what's this place? Haven't I been here before? It seems like a dream. Am I dreaming? What? *(The God's point at the blood stain and clot on his shirt on his left lower back and upper back.)* What is this? *(He shivers due to the thought of death. He is not sure if he is dead or dreaming.)* Am I dead? Is this Hell? Heaven? Say something...

What? Okay! *(He goes and picks up a chit from a jar. He reads from it.)* I would be freed from this place if either my body gets the proper rites or I prove I followed at least one moral principle in my life. I get only five chances to prove that. Only five! Okay!

So, I'm dead! Are you sure? Of course, you are. You are God! But, I'm here with you, that's good, I guess. Okay, but how am I supposed to take care of my own funeral? Can I call someone on earth? Can I use your phone? No? You don't have a phone? God! *(All three make a sound)* Sorry! Do you have an iPad? Apple? *(An apple falls)* Not this one, a laptop to send an email. *(He sits like a fed up child. A spot comes up to him)* ...Oh! *(He looks at the*

audience. He sees many people.) I can see people in Madison. Thanks for this...ummm ... live telecast. *(He suddenly looks at his dead body and sighs.)* Ahh! Oh my God! That's me. At least there's help, everything is fast in America. Well, I can prove I am a good person. Okay. Allah, I was not corrupt my whole life *(Red light.)* Oh! The gold necklace! But, I was seven. I had no choice. I had to give my gold necklace to a cop, so that he let me see my dead parents, before they disposed of their bodies.

Hindus killed my Muslim father and Muslims killed my Hindu mother. I was terrified. When they saw me, they were confused. Signs of two religions on a little boy....they were dumbstruck. They saw a circumcision and a tika on my forehead. I could recite The Bhagvad Gita and Koran verses in the same breath. They said something about me being half Hindu and half Muslim. I was worried each of them would half kill me. But, luckily anatomical division was not as easy for them as the religious division. And their rule was very clear: do not kill even half of your own. I turned out to be an enigma to them. Finally, they left, leaving me there, in the middle of nowhere. I was terrified. Suddenly a cop emerged. He picked me up and started walking. I was mumbling, "I want to see my mommy and daddy." But, as soon as he saw a gold necklace on me, his eyes widened. He said, "If you give me this gold necklace, I will let you to your parents." Immediately I agreed. He could have asked for *anything* and I would have said yes. I was too young to understand the concept of bribery. Come on! Be flexible! Children are forgiven even in courts of law. Right? Right?.Okay, Okay...

My body is still lying there, no one is even looking at it. There is no one to claim it. Well, this sucks! Sorry ...for swearing. Can you do something about it? Can we get in touch with the Madison Hospital? No! You know you've got to upgrade your tech support. Okay, chance number two. I was honest all the time... *(Red light)* ...most of the time! *(Red light)* Well, I tried!

I *had* to misrepresent my religious identity. When I said I believe in all religions, they couldn't believe me. They thought I was trying to be bigger than what I am. They said belonging to everything is like belonging to nothing.

Lord Krishna, my point is, what choice did I have? My father was a Muslim, the mother was Hindu, and I was raised by a Christian missionary after my parents' death in the riots. I thought I could fit everywhere, but I was wrong, I couldn't fit anywhere. I wasn't invited to weddings, mine or someone else's, festivals or ceremonies. Can you imagine celebrating Diwali/Christmas/Id on your own, it's not fun! Even renting an apartment was a huge task. My applications remained pending for a long time. Even killers got security clearance faster than me. An arranged marriage was out of the question and love, forget about it. Well, my two cats loved me. Jesus! Religious people are simpletons. They follow very simple rules. If you belong to their religion, they trust you, otherwise, they don't. They treat interreligious marriage as a felony and a child of that marriage as a silly mistake. So, I was treated like a mistake. I tried too hard to get their acceptance. But, they were mean, too mean. I couldn't take it. I just gave up; moved to a new location and practiced one religion. But, it didn't work *inside*. That's why I had to pretend, I only believe in the religion of the majority, of that locality. Otherwise, I'm clean. Doesn't count? Okay!

Chance three, I was generous. (*Red light*) I helped the poor. Well, I didn't donate anything to temples, churches or mosques. Because I couldn't! Come-on, you can't punish me for being poor. What are you - a Republican? Your logic is circular, I was born in too poor a family, had shitty jobs, and you are judging me for not donating money? You can't milk a bull, sorry. Besides, why does God's house need more money? You know, Indian temples could pay off all of the international loans of the whole country. If you are one, why do you need millions of Temples, Churches and Mosques? Do you know that 100 million people in the world are still homeless?

The entire universe is yours. I wonder why do you need a Mosque in the place of a temple or a church in the place of a Mosque? (*The light flickers.*) Okay! Okay! I will stop. No more questions. You remind me of corporate bosses. They don't like questions either. They say, "Speak only if you have something nice to say about us. Otherwise, shut the fuck up!" Sorry! Finally! They are moving my body. God Bless America! Soon I'll be disposed of and free. I don't have to be judged by you. Frankly, I'm tired of being judged. Oh no! They are taking it to the airport. They are sending it to India. Oh, it is going to take forever. Oops!

Chance 4, I was loyal to my family and you all. I guess that's the winner. No! Loyal to just one of you! Well, that's bit slippery slope for me. But I guess you are responsible for that more than I am.

See, *I* didn't choose my parents. My parents were each obsessed with injecting their own religious values in me. They fought like crazy people to take custody of my soul. I couldn't believe these were the same people who fought with the whole world to get married in the first place. I was their regular battleground; no wonder I felt like the Gaza Strip. How could I practice religious monogamy? I didn't choose the Catholic orphanage, I stayed in. A kind sister at the orphanage, I prefer to call her mother, was also pretty determined to raise me as a good little Catholic boy. These are the three people that I love the most. It was tough to deny something given by them along with all that love, the bread, and the cake?

Then I grew older, got bored, became agnostic and an atheist, not necessarily in that order. My logic questioned your existence. Everything about your powers seemed imaginary. Logic did not deny your importance, though. You have been the rock stars of the entire world for generations. I'm with all of you, but I cannot choose any one of you. As a child, I believed in each of you equally. Your presence in my life was an extension of my love for my mother, my father, and Sister Angela. Being loyal to any one of you is like choosing only one of them; it is not easy for me.

My body is in India. So fast, Wow! I feel like a dead flash! They are trying to figure out the religion of the dead body. (*Laughs*) Well, good luck trying to figure out what I couldn't. Oh my God! They are fighting for the right to dispose of my body. I am a reason for the religious fight. I am becoming one of your symbols. It's painfully flattering. I am sorry, but I never imagined it could happen. They are fighting for me like they fight for disputed territory, like Jerusalem and the Kashmir Border. So, please make a decision. I don't think they can.

Lord Krishna, I was a very responsible son. (*Red light*) Oh! I couldn't dispose of my parents' bodies with proper rites!

This is wrong, Jesus, why did *they* have to suffer? These rules make no sense. Do you see the practical fallacy of your rules? It is like your judgment is accidental. Allah! Do you care for us? Do you consider us your precious creations? (*The lights indicating the Gods start to go down.*) Don't go away, tell me the truth. Do these questions bother you? Do you have answers to them? Do you know the ultimate truth? Am I asking the wrong questions? But these are my genuine questions, aren't they in your syllabus? Maybe it's time to update your books. Life has changed in many ways since you wrote these books. Could you update your rulebook too? (*The lights representing Gods are off.*) I mean not right now, you can do it later. I wonder if God created us or we created the Gods, well, it's not in my syllabus. (*All lights off.*)

I know, I lost all of my five chances. Life was a chaos. I tried to do good and failed. Is it different in your books than someone trying to do bad? If you change your decision, you know where to find me. Because damn sure! I don't know where to find you? But, I will keep trying again and again and again. Because I'm not afraid of failure! (*The lights on the Gods go off and then stage lights dim.*)

END OF PLAY

CHAPTER III: PERFORMANCE AND FEEDBACK

3.1 The Joy of Being On Stage

Being on the stage makes me happiest. My passionate relationship to the theatre started when I saw my high school classmate's performance on stage and I was exhilarated by it. I witnessed the power of the stage, which transformed an ordinary guy into an icon. I believe no matter how much I work in the rehearsal hall, the moment I perform in front of an audience, it affects me in a completely unique manner. Every time I perform a show on stage, I am humbled by the audience's response.

I was overwhelmed by the amount of connection I had with this particular project. I had written, directed, and was performing in it. It was amazing to see the packed houses. I was also excited that I had given myself the opportunity to talk to the Gods. As soon as I saw the three Gods in the form of three lights, that became my focus. I was aware of the audience's giggles and laughs, but they were not as important to me. I gave myself permission to completely ignore the audience and focus on my scene partners and the world of the play.

3.2 Physical and Vocal Warm-up

To prepare for the performance, I used Patsy Rodenberg's warm-up as taught to me by LSU Voice Professor Stacey Cabaj. It is an extensive body and vocal warm-up that helps with clarity of speech, with a free and supported voice. A fifteen-minute warm-up to enliven your body, breath, voice, range, resonance, and articulation. The release of tension from these muscles helps in creating a free and supported voice. This warm-up helped me to be more centered and gave a needed vocal support to speak effortlessly. I have worked extensively with my voice teacher to create an additional personal warm-up, which focuses on clarity of my speech sounds in my continual practice of a Baseline American Dialect.

3.3 Performances

My first performance was great. From an acting standpoint, I was completely in conversation with the Gods and felt at ease. From a design standpoint, the sound and music cues were perfectly timed. I worked with compromised technical choices like a tacky bowl of leaves carrying the Gods' messages, a light giving me a telepathic vision, and a very dim light that was supposed to be the magical light of the Gods. They were not helping me to create the world of the play. So, in my imagination, I substituted those with the designed bowl and bright lights. Overall the first show was a great experience.

I generally do not like the second performance of a show, and the thesis performances were no exception. While after the first show there was a sense of the relaxation and ease, I was mentally and emotionally in a different place the next day. During the second performance, certain light and music cues came at the wrong time, but it did not throw me. I managed to deal with it. When I saw the recording of the show with friends, they did not notice the technical mess-ups.

3.4 Feedback

The most important feedback I received from the audience was the tinge of appreciation I saw in their eyes after the show. Many of them communicated that they recognized the immense need for an exploration of the play's themes; they appreciated and thanked me for working on such a complex topic. Some intelligent audience members also observed that the play was also about my search for personal identity. My friends also responded favorably to the performance. They loved the journey of this character and his unique struggle. Some people gave me sympathetic hug. Others thanked me for saying what needs to be said.

From a faculty perspective, Nick Erickson, my thesis advisor, shared this feedback over email:

Nitin Mane's solo show was a compelling look at the clash of religious cultures in an afterlife limbo posing some of the enduring questions of the existence and intervention of gods on humanity, personal moral struggles to live up to religious edicts, and living life with divided allegiances. A fascinating and absorbing work of theatre (Erickson).

My voice coach and mentor Stacey Cabaj wrote in an email that:

Nitin Mane's thesis play synthesized many of the skills and techniques he's learned throughout his graduate studies at LSU. It reflected his personal passion for social and religious equity, his interest in dramaturgy, and his penchant for comedy. As he continues to work on the play, it is recommended that he continue to refine the technical/design conventions for the Gods' responses, further develop his acceptance of the given circumstances, and continue to explore the means by which to live truthfully within them (Cabaj).

I am overwhelmed by the positive feedback from my faculty. Nick Erickson was the first faculty member with whom I shared my ideas about this particular play, way before I accepted the offer to join the program. He was invested and supportive throughout the process. My voice professor, Stacey Cabaj pointed out that I was able to use many of the skills and techniques learned in the classroom. I agree that this project was the great opportunity for me to explore my artistic potential; I was able to apply many techniques and skills taught to us in our Acting, Voice and Movement studios. I feel a great sense of artistic ownership of this project.

In addition to faculty feedback, I also received some astute feedback from classmates and friends over email. My friend, Wadje, Nishant emailed me his wonderful feedback:

Nitin Mane's play, *A Man Without* reflected human nature and its confusion when it comes to practicing multiple religions. The complication of practicing multiple religions at the same time and an attempt of being faithful towards every religion is perfectly depicted in this play. Each religion has its own guidelines, some do's and some don't. These guidelines may not be the same for every religion. This anomaly among different religions and their customs gives a rise to an inevitable confusion. Finally, I would like to say that *A Man Without* depicts the pain of a person, who strived for his entire life to make sure that he is faithful towards all the religions he belonged to in a really humorous way (Wadje).

My friend, Wadje had witnessed a few readings of my last draft before the actual performance and was excited to see the performance. He could identify with the play very well. After reading the play we would end up discussing religion and sociology. Those discussions helped me to get a few pointers for the theme of my play.

My classmate Caitlin Morrison emailed me her feedback:

I thought that you brought a lot of yourself to the project, so there was definitely a sense of fun and heart. I enjoyed the humor that was laced throughout, and I really liked the concept and the idea of talking to the three different entities. I think that you could have been a little more specific in the relationship with each. You seemed to interact with all three in the same way and I think there was an opportunity to explore a few more differences. I think that you could have gotten a little more specific about what this purgatory place looks like. Potentially a waiting room at the DMV or the Post Office? Somewhere that mirror the boredom and monotony that you would be facing indefinitely. I think that would free you up to receive the questions in a bit a different way. I just felt as though you seemed a little lost in the space. On a structural note, I think that the five questions worked really well. However, I think that you could have clarified your tactics a bit more. The objective seemed clear to me, but I felt that you were mostly taking the same tact. As you fail each question, the stakes should get higher and your desperation to find a way in with them should increase. Overall, I really enjoyed your show. I felt really moved by your relationship with your parents and your frustration with the “rules.” I think this piece has the potential to be really great and I look forward to seeing future iterations of it (Morrison).

Caitlin Morrison was deeply involved and invested in the process of solo shows developed by each MFA ensemble member. I appreciate the detailed feedback she gave here. I loved her feedback during the writing process of this play, which inspired me to explore various possibilities for the character. In her feedback, she suggested that I should interact differently with each deity. I avoided it during my first rendition because I was trying to make a point that God is abstract. But, to her point, I am willing to think that, the God of every religion is unique and the persons of that religion follow a unique set of ritualistic behaviour while interacting with their Gods. Hence, dealing differently with each God would be more appropriate. I would also like to work on her second suggestion of using different tactics while answering successive questions.

Another classmate, Cara Reid, emailed me the following:

I thought your piece was an interesting exploration of the consequences we face when we follow society's conventional expectation of religion. The world teaches us that we must follow certain rules to get to where we want to go when in fact, religion, specifically, is so personal, there is no way we can abide by everyone's laws. It was a personalization and an existential quandary of how we should find our own peace within ourselves and our core beliefs (Reid).

I loved Cara Reid's thematic feedback. She has tried to grasp the essence of my play in few words and very honestly reflected what this play meant to her.

My friend and a Theatre Ph.D. student Fadirepo Simisola, emailed me his feedback:

Giving the spate of so many atrocities that continues to be perpetuated in the name of religion, the play, is a needed intervention to the problem of religious extremism. Through the examination of world's major organized religion, the play reveals consequences of religious fundamentalism at not only a personal level but also at the societal level. This balanced view is crucial because societies have never existed in a vacuum – societies are made up of different individuals - and whatever affects an individual will most likely affect the society at large. I look forward to a full-length expansion of the play and probably by then, the playwright can suggest ways to tame this hydra-headed monster (Fadirepo).

My scholar friend Fadirepo has made very interesting observations. I remember we attended a few discussions on social inequalities when I was in the process of writing this play. I am pleased he was able to understand and comment on the microscopic as well as macroscopic effects of religious extremism.

Another friend of mine and also a Theatre Ph.D. student at LSU, Sara Christian, emailed me her feedback:

The mixture of light and heavy moments was well balanced and well received from the audience. His relationship with the audience progressed as the story went along and the connection grew stronger with each challenge he threw at the deities. Despite the heavy subject matter, the overall tone was rather light and playful. Considering the circumstances of the character's liminal state, it was refreshing to see him the character and the actor taking risks (Christian).

Sara Christian has made very nice observations from the audience point of view.

Many of the audience made similar observations after the first and the second performances.

Overall, the feedback was positive and many of my friends and audience members felt that I should extend the monologue to an hour long show. It speaks a lot about my training at LSU. I learned many techniques during my Acting, Voice, Movement, Singing, Dance, and Playwriting Studios. Here are some highlights from the program that directly impacted my approach and technique on the performance of my thesis play. In Acting Studio II, we learned the Meisner Technique. It was, by far the most useful Acting Studio for me. The Meisner Technique helps an actor to live truthfully within the given circumstances. The huge emphasis on living, rather than performing, a character is an essential technical shift. The concept of being in the Second Circle, as defined by Patsy Rodenburg, is really helpful. It facilitates really listening and responding naturally. It helps the actor speak to one's scene partner rather than talking at him/her, diminishing any presentational acting. This approach was very useful for me to connect with the Gods and really talk to them. The application of Meisner Technique helped me to live truthfully even in this fantasy land.

In Acting Studio III, we focused on period styles. While it was thrilling to tackle such rich texts, the greatest takeaway was learning a method of structural analysis of a monologue, which helped me while devising and performing my thesis monologue.

In Movement Studio, along with physical fitness and flexibility, we learned many physical approaches for embodying characters. Of the many approaches we covered, I particularly found use in: the Laban movement chart, mime, improvisation, and mask work. These explorations helped me to get under the skin of my character. I also improvised parts of my monologue in the Movement Studio and got much-needed feedback.

Our Voice Studios gave me tools to warm-up my vocal and physical apparatus so that I can produce free and supported voice. I learned to be in the second circle with my scene partner, which means I can really interact with him rather than shouting or mumbling at him. The dialect work and understanding of the International Phonetic Alphabet sharpened my

listening skills. This tool would be very helpful for me to practice the Neutral American Dialect on my own. With the precision of the dialect work, in the future, I could enact multiple characters of different accents and cultures. In conclusion, the techniques learned in different studios, enriched my artistic experience on stage.

The application of various techniques learned during my M.F.A. Acting program at LSU helped me to create this wonderful production. The elements learned in each studio had their unique contribution. The techniques learned in the Movement Studio helped me to explore the physicality of the character. The techniques learned in the Voice Studio helped me to have a fully supported voice, clear speech and ease in the performance. The techniques learned in the Acting Studio helped me to act truthfully to achieve my objective, to deal with obstacles, and live truthfully within the given circumstances. The amalgamation of specific work done for the devising, writing, rehearsing, and performing my monologue and the application of techniques learned during my M.F.A. program helped me to create this meaningful solo performance.

CHAPTER IV: FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Value of Thesis in My Journey As a Theatre Artist

The most important takeaway from this experience was developing a disciplined approach to devising my own work. I have always believed that theatre is a collaborative art form and needs the input of many artists. However, this experience made me realize that I can create a show as an independent artist. I enjoyed the freedom of creating a show that would capitalize on my expertise. I also considered this play my first step to creating my own style of playwriting. It gave me the opportunity to be a theatre artist and a harbinger of a social change.

During the process of developing the solo show, I grew as a playwright too. Creative writing is very interesting and rewarding process. I began my process with a strong theme. I continued the research to get the related historical and philosophical details. I wrote the fictional backstory. The plot of my play changed twice, but my central character and his quest for his identity remained the same. I do not regret writing the previous drafts because those drafts prepared me to write my last draft. I found the voice note⁸ of my central character while writing the earlier drafts. The earlier drafts helped to consolidate the backstory. I read Indian-American playwrights to study their choice of form, style and subjects. I also observed their use of the language and a selection of the words. The understanding of the creative process of writing gave me the framework for my monologue. I used my research to create the outline of the play based on the framework. Once the outline was done, writing the monologue became easy. Then, with the guidance of the peers and faculty, I worked on clarity and simplicity.

⁸ Voice Note is characteristic style of verbal expression the character speaks. The term was used by Dr Femi Euba in Playwriting Studio.

While performing this dramatic monologue, my M.F.A. training served me well. I was overwhelmed by the theme of the play. Given the nature of the issues dealt within the play, it was easy to get lost in it. But, I realized I already have the detailed character analysis. The given circumstances for the character are clear as daylight to me in the form of writing research and unused drafts. I know Neel's objective, his relationship with the Gods, his obstacles, and reason for the immediacy of the action. These given circumstances guide my action in the play. So, my monologue became a simple Meisner exercise for me. After this it was very clear, I have to use my words or actions to get what I want from the Gods. When they deny, I need to change the tactics or try harder. This was the only thing I had to do. In essence, the training in the Acting Studio was useful to make my performance believable. The training in the Movement Studio helped me to physicalize the character. During various Movement assignments based on devising our thesis, I explored the physical details such as the leading center in the body, the gait of the character, the posture and the gestures of the character. The mask exercise helped me to get under the skin of this character. The work in the Voice Studio helped me to improve the clarity of my speech. I wanted to sound native to my American Audience. My training in the Voice Studio and Voice tutorials were continuously devoted to the clarity of my speech and acquisition of a Baseline American Dialect that is useful in performing in American theatre.

This project means a lot to me. This theme has dwelt in my mind for a long time. The issue of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and Islamophobia is ongoing. As a theatre artist, this theme is important to me because it frightens me and affects the people around me. Religion and its importance for the human societies need to be understood and discussed objectively. I hope my play will encourage people to discuss religion and look at it in a different light. I am grateful to the training received during M.F.A. Acting Program at LSU as it helps me realize my goal of becoming a socially conscious theatre artist.

4.2 Future

I am going to develop this short monologue into a one-hour play. I have a few ideas on how to work towards achieving this goal. As I see it, there are three ways: I can add more questions to the judgment, expand the answers to the existing questions, or start asking questions to the Gods earlier than in this performance text. I am going to use all these strategies in order to expand the script. I want to engage the Gods in a conversation about religion and the Gods. Hence, I will ask them questions about their origin and duties towards the humanity. I am not looking at the expansion just in terms of length, but my next iteration would delve more deeply into the subject. I want to bring the whole discussion of the creation of the God and of religion, which, in this incarnation, I had to skip because of the time limit. After creating a new draft of this show, I would love to perform it in different Fringe Festivals, both nationally and internationally. I plan to create at least one solo show per year, for the next five years, in order to establish myself as an independent artist. I am interested in creating art that is relevant to the world today and I strongly believe theatre can be a powerful medium for social change.

Equipped with the new tools and techniques learned in M.F.A. Acting Program, I feel more empowered to create art that speaks to me. I am happy that I got the training to express my ever growing awareness of mankind using the theatrical form. I can create the art that inspires me, makes me feel better as a human being, and allows me to express my humanity. In the next five years, I am going to explore the possibilities of growing as an independent theatre artist. I am really grateful to the M.F.A. Acting program at LSU for making me an independent and complete artist.

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VITA

Nitin Govindrao Mane was born in Maharashtra, India. In 2004 he received his Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (M.B.B.S.) from Grant Medical College in Mumbai. While practicing as a resident medical doctor, he discovered his love of theatre and competed in several theatre competitions. In 2010 he received an M.T.A. in Theatre from the University of Mumbai. He then worked as an instructor for several theatre workshops and as an actor in television and film. He joined the M.F.A. Acting program at LSU to deepen his craft. While at LSU, he performed in many Swine Palace productions, including: *As You Like It*, *Disgraced*, *Julius Caesar*, *Vieux Carré*, *Noises Off*, and *The Seagull*. After graduation, he plans to pursue a career as an actor and teacher of acting.