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ME PAENITET

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
Joshua Stenvick
B.F.A, University of Minnesota-Duluth, 2014
May 2017

DEDICATION

Me Paenitet and this thesis project are dedicated to the sufferers of PTSD. Stay strong. You are not alone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Me Paenitet would not be possible without the help of Captain Michael Meissner, U.S Army. Thank you for your wisdom, understanding and willingness to share your stories. To my thesis committee and faculty advisors, thank you for your patience and guidance throughout this exciting period. And to the ensemble that went on this journey together: thank you for your feedback and constant wave of support.

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ABSTRACT

The coming pages will document my journey from the initial creative spark, to the final performance of a one-man show. The first chapter will chronicle the creative process and how I came about the idea. The second chapter will show you the performance text along with analysis to give a side-by-side example. The third and final chapter will detail what this thesis project means to me personally, my graduate degree and how my views on art have evolved. What was my one-man show about? It's a story about the moment our moral compass is turned upside down, and finding our way back to true north. I call it, *Me Paenitet*. This is its journey.

INTRODUCTION: INTRODUCTIONS COME FIRST

Imagine you're driving in your car on the way to the grocery store. It's a perfect day and you come to a stop at a four-way intersection and wait for the light to change. You can't help but notice how perfect the day seems; the sun is out, birds are chirping and you can't stop admiring the sporadic giant white puffy cloud as it rolls through the sky. The light turns green and you begin to drive, when out of nowhere, you are blindsided by a driver who tried to make the light coming from your left. Or perhaps, imagine if you were to think back to your college days and you're walking home after your 8 p.m. class, exhausted from a day of work and school, and you're mentally trying to prepare for the night of homework you have ahead of you. You're so focused and drained that you haven't noticed the man walking behind you for two blocks, waiting for you to take the short cut you've taken a hundred times through the dimly lit alley, and then you're tackled from behind, ripped of your pants, and raped. Once again, imagine just briefly, that you're eighteen again. The joys and fears of life are at your fingertips. You feel a strong sense of duty for your country and the only thing you want to do is serve the nation that's served you, or follow in a family member's footsteps. You're swollen with pride as you graduate from basic training and you're already considered a hero in your hometown without having done anything. And then the call comes. You are to be deployed in combat and are ordered to spend the next seven months helping the weak, defending democracy, and fighting off terrorists. Oh, you'll also spend the next seven straight months watching people die, potentially killing a human yourself, and you'll be dodging attempts on your life on a daily basis. These are just a few scenarios in which a person may develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD.)

Above were just a few scenarios in which a person may develop PTSD. So, what is PTSD? According to the Mayo Clinic, "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event."¹ To put it simply: PTSD occurs when we go through a traumatic event and our mind tells our body to go into fight or flight mode. Anyone can suffer from PTSD, it knows no age, gender, or demographic. It only cares if you've been through a traumatic experience. But we can see why so many veterans of our military suffer from this disorder. Days, weeks, months or years spent in battle, thinking that each step or each day could be your last takes a toll on the brain and makes it incredibly difficult to function when you're finally safe at home. According to the Veterans Affairs office, considering only the current Middle East Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, 11%-20% of veterans will suffer from PTSD. The number rises to 15% if you include Vietnam veterans. Those are some pretty staggering numbers, but what's being done to help them? Again, according to the VA center, they offer two different kinds of therapy treatment and medication.

No, you have not stumbled on a research paper that deals with PTSD and I am not going to throw a bunch of facts at you to try and convince you of a cause and to believe what I believe. Rather, this paper is going to take you on a journey, an artistic journey, from an artist's perspective about what it's like to live as a man who suffers from PTSD and the only way out of his mind, and the only way he feels he can stop being a burden to his family,

¹ Mayo Clinic Staff. "Definition." *Diseases and Conditions: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. N.p., 6 Feb. 2015. Web. 25 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/basics/definition/con-20022540>>.

is by ending his life. Unfortunately, this is all too common, as twenty-two veterans kill themselves every single day. This is a journey one artist takes to discover what a PTSD victim goes through in even a single second of a day of his/her life.

The first chapter will take you through the birth of my creative process. A process that was explored as part of my thesis to complete my Master of Fine Arts degree in Acting at Louisiana State University, which required me to write, devise, and perform a twenty-minute solo theatrical piece. How did I end up on this topic? How did I write a play and develop a character to accurately portray this human? What was my process like? How and what did I take from my training? In the second chapter you will be able to see various drafts of text and see for yourself the journey of my idea and follow along as it takes shape over various written drafts. Chapter Three will discuss the performances, feedback received from peers and faculty, as well as directions to keep growing and advancing the piece for a possible tour or production. It will also discuss the failures of the piece and the areas that need strengthening.

I hope you enjoy the ensuing pages as much as I've enjoyed creating them. It didn't start out this way, but I have found a cause that I firmly believe in, and that cause is not leaving any person behind; I want to understand where they came from and be here to make sure that they feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Some things just cannot be fixed with a pill; it takes effort from all of us in the community.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA

Creation is difficult. I have spent years unconsciously putting up a big cinderblock wall around my soul and heart to protect it. Protect myself from feelings and experiences that may be difficult or emotional to go through. But in order to create, you have to remain open to all experiences, painful or happy, because it's through those feelings that art is created. I have had to work really hard at breaking that wall down over the past two years. In fact, in my previous training, I thought the walls had been busted down and I was free and able to experience. Graduate school taught me that that wasn't the case. Through grad school, I have come to realize that my best creation happens best when I've remained open and available to change. It's led me to the belief that the artist's body is a vessel. Whatever the story requires, we must use ourselves to carry the story and the character(s) to the audience. We must show the audience exactly what the characters are going through physically and emotionally no matter what situations we find ourselves in, which is difficult when you've built walls around yourself to protect yourself from feeling or experiencing anything negative. I've decided at a very late and very blocked off stage in my life to dedicate my life's work to the craft of acting, story telling, and truth.

Now there's a huge difference between ideas and creation. Ideas come fast and furious with me. I have all sorts of random cocktail napkins, journals, and pieces of paper with outlines and story ideas scribbled on them. Ideas are our daydreams, the moments in our day-to-day lives where we wish we were someplace else, or married to that beautiful human or that we won the lottery. But the creation part? Creation is deciding to take that vacation on a whim, asking out that person you've always wanted to and actually winning the lottery. Okay, so maybe that last one is more luck than anything, otherwise we would all

“create” winning POWERBALL numbers. But simply put, creation is the doing and ideas are just that, they’re thoughts. So why is creation so difficult and why do most avoid creating? For the same reason we don’t put in for that time off, and the fear we’ll be rejected by our ideal mate and the overwhelming knowledge that we’ll never hit the big numbers: fear. It’s almost like you put your soul and your personal ideas and beliefs on display for others to judge and affirm for you. Putting my soul and ideas on display in a powerful way for others to view and criticize? Whew, that’s a whole different ball game, and one I’d never played before. But it hasn’t deterred me from trying, from devoting my life to the craft, and from seeking the ultimate story. I have found with my time spent at grad school, that the feeling has only grown stronger and my need to tell that story has only grown. I told my professor at the University of Minnesota – Duluth, Tom Isbell, right before graduating with my B.F.A. that I was going to find success. He smiled and asked me, loosely speaking, how could I be so sure that I would find success. I simply responded that there was a story inside me, fighting to get out that the public would connect with and would be beneficial to society in some way. I still have this feeling. It keeps me going, it keeps me driven to create, to act, and to write.

It is because of this drive that the thesis project was one to which I was looking forward to. When looking at graduate schools, it was important to me that their thesis projects centered on the artist’s creation and were not simply a “showcase”. It was the element and project in grad school that I was looking forward to the most. I was looking forward to it so much, in fact, that I had ideas before I arrived on campus. I had numerous ideas for stories and the project as a whole and I couldn’t wait until the final year to begin the work. Before I showed up for day one of my first fall semester, I had a first draft of the

script completed. It was going to be the greatest thing I've accomplished to date.

Something I wanted to do. A project I wanted to work on. No one telling me what material I have to work with or what story to tell. And that seemed like a dream.

At that point, my first year of graduate school, I had been an actor for five years. That's it. Five simple years. Sanford Meisner said; "acting is easy, it just takes twenty years to get good at it."² And if that were true, I still had a good fifteen years until I became a good actor. The first year of my graduate training was also a time when I thought there was a right way and a wrong way to achieve good acting. You could either do it, or you couldn't. Little was I aware that it would be the area of the unknown, the middle and the not knowing area is where the "talent" and inspiration would come. First I would have to shake the old, the comfortable, and the way I've always done it. I'd have to reinvent myself and learn all that I can, surround myself with the craft, absorb as much as I could and, most importantly, not be afraid to fail. It has been a lot harder than I thought. But out of that I have learned the greatest life lesson to date: if it's not scary, I don't trust it. If it's not hard, I don't trust it. I'm not interested in easy and the things that I can do. I'm not interested in the comfortable. It was also around this time that I heard a quote that hasn't left me. My favorite musical band is U2, and while watching one of their documentaries I heard, "You have to reject one expression of the band, first, before you get to the next expression. And in between, you have nothing."³ This hit me hard. Would I be willing to reject what I knew in order to find something new and exciting? Could I live with being stuck in the middle, with nothing?

² Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York, Vintage Books, 1990.

³ Guggenheim, Davis, director. *From The Sky Down*. Universal Music, 2011.

Challenge accepted.

I was going to put away everything I knew and reach. Reach hard and far. I was tired of being called a “boring” actor. “Not interesting”. “Doesn’t take risks”. Those comments are direct quotes from the head of my acting program I received at the end of my second semester of grad school, who also told me after a production that my work wasn’t “worthy of Tennessee Williams”. It was also during this time I read a fantastic quote from my favorite actor, Daniel Day-Lewis; “Why would I want to play a middle class, middle aged, white Englishmen?”⁴ That prompted me to ask myself; why do I want to play myself? I don’t. I want a rich character, a rich story, and something that stretches me because I knew I was capable of more than what I had shown through my first year of grad school.

I scrapped my original idea of a man who avoids reality by running to the mountains and struggles with unrequited love. Snooze. I know: I’ll throw in the extreme circumstance of him dying, you know, because it feels like I’m dying inside! Snore. Go big, Stenvick! I threw it out, but now what? Where would I go from here? I no longer had an idea for my thesis and it was supposed to be performed in less than two months. Writing it wouldn’t be difficult, but I would have to direct, design and, you know, do the actor thing. For the first time in years I had no idea. Nothing even remotely resembling a spark in my mind or in my heart was there. None that felt right at least. None that felt like it would accomplish my new goals. A larger panic began to sink in as more days passed without an idea.

I was lying in bed one night tossing and turning. I decided to turn on my trusty television, NETFLIX, and a documentary caught my eye. It was on the Roosevelt family and

⁴ This quote was read on the website IMDb.com, which is a movie database. The contents of the website are published by unknown sources and can be added by any person who creates an account. Daniel Day-Lewis may never have said these words, since I can’t find accurate records of them anywhere else.

it was about their lives before, while, and after they were in office.⁵ The program came to the end of World War II and was discussing the Lindbergh trials as well as what was happening with the German SS Officers who had lived through World War II. For some reason, (and no, I am not a Nazi sympathizer, German ancestry or not) I couldn't help but feel an ounce of sympathy for them. Here were these soldiers carrying out the orders of their state, merely doing what they were ordered to do while serving their country, and they were being sentenced to death. They couldn't understand why they were being punished and honestly felt with every fiber of their being that their actions were justified. I don't believe they're innocent and that their actions should be forgiven. However, an idea for a story was firmly planted in my body.

When an idea comes to me I have to let it stew for a few days or a few weeks. I have to daydream, think about it, and make sure that it is something I want to pour myself into. It's sort of like getting a tattoo; you don't rush off and get a tattoo of any old thing because you want a tattoo. No, you plan, you research, and you make certain you want to commit yourself to the lifetime of ink on your body. It's very similar with ideas for stories with me. I have to make sure it's something to which I want to commit myself. I also need to know that I can turn it into a complete story that makes sense and can be fleshed out. I daydreamed, I talked to myself, and I kept thinking about how playing this Nazi character would stretch me farther than I've ever been stretched. Not only that, but a whole story was starting to develop inside me. The idea was morphing into a whole commentary on American history and one where we are compared to Nazi Germany. In my imagination the SS Officer was being interrogated. Not only was he defending his actions under order, he

⁵ The program can be found on PBS or NETFLIX and is called "The Roosevelt's: An Intimate History. Ken Burns directed the documentary.

was also arguing the irony of America trying to punish the Nazis for their actions during the war when Americans are also guilty of gross human rights violations through out its history.

When it came down to it, I couldn't move forward with the SS Officer idea because there wasn't enough time. If I were going to develop that piece I'd need a compelling and believable German accent, I would need to do a copious amount of research, and it also occurred to me that while I wasn't one hundred percent worried about the audience liking the character, I did want them to relate to the character. And no one relates to Nazis. Bottom line, there simply wasn't enough time for me to develop this story and character. What did happen was I was able to boil down all of those ideas and identify the true meaning of the piece: accountability and moral lines. The story was fundamentally about a character being held responsible for his actions in war, and his main argument to defend those actions were that they were his duty. It was also about the grey area that soldiers live in, in which they are trained to cross moral lines and to commit acts that they wouldn't normally engage in but have to due to commitment to country. Finally, the story evolved into one about what it's like for those who are thrust into a survival situation and necessarily had to commit heinous acts. My mind instantly went to the Vietnam War.

A simple Google search of "war time crimes Vietnam" will instantly bring up the My Lai Massacre. For those who aren't familiar, a commander gave the order to have the entire My Lai village executed and he later went on trial for the murder of over five hundred innocent people. The commander claims that he had received an order to "defeat the enemy", was given the coordinates to do so, and therefore, carried out the act. He was found guilty and was the first military employee to be convicted of murder charges.

President Nixon eventually pardoned the commander, but this was nevertheless a compelling story.⁶ However, just like the SS officer idea that had been floating in me prior to, there were some holdups with this idea. First, I felt that much like the SS officer, the line wouldn't be as grey as it was clearly black and white, he was found guilty after all. People would not have an easy time relating to the story and to this man, thus they wouldn't be thinking of the story. The guilty man was also alive, so there could potentially be backlash, if by the off chance, he got a hold of it and didn't agree, or felt it portrayed him in a negative light. In addition, the time I had to work with was also a concern. I'm not opposed to research and doing what you need to do to ensure that the story is accurate and true to life, there simply needed to be more time to complete the extensive research that would have been needed. So, it was becoming apparent that the story would focus on what a person has to deal with after they commit an act they wouldn't think of in civilian life, and how this act subsequently affected their day to day life. Little did I know that my story was about to become crystal clear.

It was during this time that we were assigned a project in my movement class. We were to come up with a character mask and then perform an improvisation based on our thesis idea for the M.F.A. Acting ensemble to watch and give feedback. I was in a panic as soon as the assignment was given. How in the world could I possibly create a story about shooting people during a war out of thin air and on the spot, and have it be meaningful and

⁶ Wikipedia contributors. "My Lai Massacre." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 Feb. 2017. Web. 26 Feb. 2017.

well done? The assignment was not to be premeditated or rehearsed, but a true improvisation with nothing, other than our circumstances, for us to prepare prior to performing.

I went through the process of finding a character mask that I felt reflected what my character would look like. I selected one that had the right shape, contour, and feel that I believed this person would have. I spent time walking and moving my body to find this man's physicality. Even if I wasn't going to use it directly, this exploration was putting my mind on whom this guy was and what he'd gone through. I started speaking based off of how my body was moving and adjusted until I found the sound that matched the body, and served the character and story. Next, it was time to perform.

I went out into the hallway away from the class to focus and prepare myself to enter. The only thing I had prepared prior to this moment were the circumstances of being arrested for the murder of a civilian, some physical work, and some vocal exploration. I entered, sat down behind a desk with my wrists held together, and improvised some text. The exercise wasn't very long, maybe five minutes, and I'm fairly certain I dropped all the physical and vocal work that I had prepared. I wasn't too concerned with that because I didn't spend loads of time working on them. I'm also pretty positive that I repeated, "Let me go" a few hundred times and sprinkled it with some colorful four-letter words. But I managed to stay out of my head about it and it led to a perfect ending of the exercise. The language I used arose truthfully out of the circumstances and out of my feelings towards the military police officer that I imagined were detaining/interrogating me. Fortunately, it worked really well. Repeating the lines "let me go" worked on me just like a Sanford

Meisner repetition exercise.⁷ The intention kept flying and I didn't move forward with my dialogue or story until I absolutely had to. And then when it came out, it came out organically and spontaneously. My classmates were very responsive and enjoyed the improvisation; they were taken aback and in a sort of awe. Our professor, Nick Erickson, was excited; he very much loved the performance and the idea that had been taking hold of me. In fact, I ran into him six hours later and he commented to me that he was still thinking about it. He also told me that my thesis definitely needed to be on this topic because it was still so relevant and very compelling. That was the tiny push I needed to confirm that this needed to be the story I told. Now, it was time to write.

Before I dive into the writing process of the script, the rehearsals, and the performances, I want to address my history of writing. It's important to explain why the art of writing a play doesn't scare me. I've written four full-length plays, as well as multiple one-acts, scenes, and monologues for auditions. I have also taken numerous playwriting courses at the collegiate level and read four books on the subject matter. While I may not have penned a Pulitzer Prize winner to date, I can tell you all about structure and I know how the arc of a script is supposed to work. But this project was different. I actually was scared to write this script and the fear was holding me back from doing what usually comes fairly easy to me. I was afraid for one main reason, which was the difference between everything I've already done and what I was about to do: all of my other plays had numerous characters. How was I going to write a one-person show? How does the story unfold when there isn't anything to get from another character? Where is the conflict going

⁷ Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York, Vintage Books, 1990.

to come from if there aren't any other characters on stage? I've written plenty of monologues for auditions, but those are forty-five seconds and this one-person show would be twenty to thirty minutes long. Because of those questions, it was clear that the conflict and drama wouldn't be created between two characters, but it was an inter-personal conflict that the character had to fight.

I was able to start with three approaches and ways to prepare for the task. The first step I took was to make myself familiar with the form. I purchased and read Susan Merson's book, *Your Name Here: An Actor/Writer's Guide To Solo Performance*. It was helpful to read literature on the form because solo performances are hardly ever addressed in playwriting books. As I read on I started to see that solo performance pieces followed the same structure, the same arc as full-length plays. I recognized then that I needed to think of my audience as my scene partners and that they were the Military Police (MP's) I had imagined in the room with me. Once I figured that aspect out and gave myself permission to start writing, a huge burden was lifted off my shoulders. The book helped me find my confidence in writing again and it didn't seem as difficult as I made it out to be. The book also helped me to think long term for the piece and helped me realize that I don't need any props or fancy technical elements to make my piece good. Susan wrote "Most solo plays are designed to tour and that means they can and should be able to happen anywhere from a huge stage to the back of a John Deere tractor." (Merson 39) That ignited my spark. Okay, if I was going to challenge myself to stretch my acting abilities, I was going to go all out and hold nothing back. I decided that I was going to bring it Peter Brook style⁸ and I

⁸ Peter Brook is a British director who wrote a book titled *The Empty Space*. In the book, Brook outlines his views on theatre and claims that any empty and bare space can be called

would attempt to tell this story with me and nothing else to help me. No scenery, no sound and no props. Just lights, costumes and my ability to tell a story.

Second, I've talked briefly already about letting ideas stew, daydreaming on the topic, and letting creativity come to you, but that's what I really started to do at this point in the process. I learned a valuable lesson during this period: you can't force creativity. Even though I was excited to write the piece, and I had done some improv with the character for a class assignment, I still had no idea what to do. Not long before I started this process I also began a life change. I started a meditation practice and started to find new ways to relax my body and mind. I also began setting intentions at the beginning of each day; I decided to focus on positivity instead of all the negative things life can throw at us. It all started to help and make sense. We have to give ourselves time to relax and recharge, which helps both our physical and mental health. The next thing I knew, creativity was flowing, I was writing and writing fast all thanks to mindfulness.

Which brings me to my third point; write, write, and write. There's one piece of advice I give to writers who are just starting out: do not worry about it being perfect on the first shot. It's impossible and it will not happen. Writing is like every other artistic craft, it needs to be worked and shaped. As actors we don't simply show up the first day of rehearsal and expect to deliver an opening night performance. No, we rehearse for weeks, we get messy, and we make discoveries about the story and our character. Similarly, you have to sit down and give yourself the freedom to write without worrying whether it's good or bad. So write it, write it all good and bad, and allow whatever comes out to come out. Shape and polish later. I'll even write when I have writer's block. I'll keep putting down

a theatre. A man walks across an empty space while someone watches him and the spectator just witnessed an act of theatre.

thoughts and words to the page regardless of whether or not it's coherent. Deleting is a lot easier than it was twenty years ago with the invention of the computer and the delete button. It's important to keep the thoughts moving forward and eventually you'll write yourself back into the story. A second piece of advice I'd give to beginning writers is: write what you know. Trying to be something you're not will only slow the process down and diminish your confidence. We all want to pen a Pulitzer Prize winning piece, but by putting that pressure on yourself when you sit down to write your very first play, or the first draft of any play, will kill it before it even begins.

So with those three tools and ideas I was on my way, ready to start work on my project. And because of those tools and lessons I had learned along the way, it took me roughly four hours to pen my first draft. Not too shabby. Once I sat down free and willing, the words poured out of me. I brought my first draft in to read to my ensemble during our Acting Studio.

It's also important to point out that at this time during the process is when the collaboration and help from peers and others started to become really handy. From that first draft I brought and read in Acting Studio, I was able to get from the ensemble some very positive and important feedback. Faculty members were also reading the drafts and helping me focus and shape the story's structure through constructive feedback. Most importantly, this was the time I reached out to my cousin, Michael Meissner, who is a Captain in the United States Army. He was able to help me with situations that I had written and dialogue suggestions to make it true to life. It was with all this help that I was able to move to the next drafts of the text and really shape my story into something I believe to be very special, and some of my strongest writing.

I had done it. Something just three weeks prior I didn't think I was capable of doing was completed. I was ready to move onto the acting phase and to take the writing cap off. (However I wouldn't actually be able to do this through the entire process.) Class work was halted to give us time to rehearse and meet with advisors for one-on-one work sessions. Stage management became involved at this point too and we had evening times to work in the actual space and rehearse our pieces. I gave myself specific goals and rehearsal times for each of designated times. In the morning, I would work with my advisor in the movement studio and do "table work on our feet", which included discussion, exploration, questions, and trying new things. Then in the evening period which was to be in the performance space, I would run the work I had done in the morning and put it all together, allowing myself to continue to explore and make choices.

The bulk of the exploration took place in the morning rehearsals. I set the space, gave myself borders to play in, and then proceeded to try things out. I discussed the world, the character's state of being, and worked on his physicality. It was during this period that I made two huge discoveries for the story. First, I played with the idea that the character was restrained in a straitjacket, which gave him a clear physical obstacle, one that tied into my acting and directing impulses. That gave him an action as well, something physical to do and, more importantly, a clear objective to get out of the restraints. Second, I played with putting the MP inside the room with me, thinking that realistically he would be watching over me in the actual room. These two explorations helped me discover and strengthen the piece by realizing that the opposite was in fact true. I didn't need a straitjacket or any restraints. The room would be my circumstantial obstacle, which would act as my straitjacket and keep me contained, providing a struggle for me to still be released. And

instead of being inside the room, the doctors would be behind a two-way mirror observing me. The MP would be with them as a safety precaution as well. This discovery strengthened my work because, as I discussed earlier, it would give me an actual reason to talk with them behind the glass and it would include the audience. There was something the character needed from them and when that need is strong and the character comes up against an obstacle, drama is created, which makes an interesting and compelling story to watch. It was also during this rehearsal period where I explored the physical effects of regaining consciousness after passing out. How does the body respond? What does the stomach feel? How would one's motor skills work? The morning rehearsal period was crucial to my process. It was also important because I was working on areas to which I had previously never given any thought. I was thinking and working on the physical body of the character instead of using my neutral self. That time and exploration was crucial to the development of my story, and to my work as an actor.

The evening rehearsals in the space gave me the ability to throw all the work together. This was crucial because it allowed me to get notes from my committee members about areas of focus that I could use for my morning work the following day. First, I began to really focus and hone my acting work on the piece. A key note for me was that I needed to listen to the people behind the glass, be present with them, and take my actions based off of what they were doing, or not doing. By doing this, it helped to create a believable life and behavior for the character, which resulted in living truthfully from moment to moment. The second area that was strengthened in this period was my vocal characterization. All this work I'd been focusing on with physicality and story telling and I forgot that the voice is an important ingredient for authentic acting. The story focused on a veteran who was born

and raised in suburban Minnesota. I needed that voice and dialect to really bring the character to life and give him and the story credibility. For those two aspects, that evening rehearsal time was extremely valuable to me because I got to work and receive feedback from my entire thesis committee.

There is also hidden work that actors must do while preparing for a role. This work includes research on the character, specifically, where they came from, their relationships to the other characters and clues about personality and where they come from that can be found in the script. These script based clues include: knowing where the character comes from and working vocally to make it accurate; any physical impediments that may need to be worked to give it authenticity; and if it's a historical piece, knowing what, specifically, that history is and representing it as accurately as possible. But at the end of it all, we are artists, and as such we need to use our artistry, our bodies as vessels for the story to give it *our* interpretation. I'm not supporting laziness and saying one shouldn't do any research, but when it came down to it, I had the circumstances for my story and I wasn't going to bog myself down with statistics and end up trying to tell someone else's story. That is to say, simply, I wasn't going to play my homework and research. The story was about crossing moral lines, and I was going to give my interpretation of what that meant to me. So my actual research was very limited. I was already familiar with PTSD and its effects and it wasn't a piece that was going to throw facts at the audience to make them see a cause. The little research I did involved a few YouTube videos of actual military PTSD sufferers to try and find, specifically, when possible changes to one's mood may occur in a day-to-day routine. That's all. That little work allowed me to incorporate mood swings in the performance, which gave it extra nuance while trying to pursue my objective.

What was invaluable and would seem to take the place of research, per say, was the help I received from those around me. First, to make it as accurate and as true a story as possible, I worked with my cousin who, as previously mentioned, is a Captain in the United States Army. He was able to give me proper wordage and walk me through a scenario that would have actually happened in the field of combat. Having that resource just a phone call away was invaluable and probably the reason I didn't need to do as much research on my own on the piece. I was able to go to a direct source.

Also invaluable were the help and outside eyes I was able to get from the faculty and ensemble. If it weren't for my faculty and advisors pushing me, I wouldn't have gotten outside my comfort zone. The specificity on physicality and vocal qualities for the story made it as successful as it was and were important because I couldn't look from the outside. Acting and directing yourself simultaneously can be an impossible feat. So getting those notes and opportunities to work with the faculty was instrumental to the success of my piece.

I was also able to find my faith and confidence in myself as an artist through the process of working with them. Confidence is important. Why are artists the worst critics of themselves? I realized through our discussions that while I need to know what to fix, I also need to know it's getting better and the work is paying off. With confidence and faith comes ease and willingness to work.

The ensemble played an invaluable role in this process by being a set of ears. Being able to bounce drafts and an idea off my peers was one of the most important parts of the process. I didn't need to know whether it was good or bad, but rather, what made sense and where was it still lacking? How did the structure work? For my next project I will

remember to find people I trust to be a set of ears for me because it was one of the aspects that helped me the most with this process.

There can, of course, be too many cooks in a kitchen. How I managed to work around that it wasn't a problem for me was to continually narrow my outside influences. I started out very wide and bounced ideas off of everyone, listening to what they all had to say or try to contribute. As I got deeper into the rehearsal process and neared performance time, I narrowed it down to one faculty member and one ensemble member. I still got notes from all over, which I stored away and am keeping for a rainy day, but I had to focus in and not worry about a million things at once when I didn't have time to fix a million things. That was a must because we can all be critics and we all have an opinion on how things could potentially be done.

As we train, we talk about craft an awful lot. This was the first time I experienced what it actually meant. Doing the work over and over in class and rehearsals to have it work like a well-oiled machine during performances. My process has gone from simple research to encompassing craft in its entirety: vocality, physicality, and specificity. I will never do a project again that will not take those into account, because after this project I refuse to be bland and unspecific any more in my work. I will rely on my craft.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TEXT

The story is written, I've got a character in my mind, and now it's time to execute. But we all know that there is so much more to a production than simply one man and words. There are lights, a place for that character to be (set), props, and a costume to think about. All those elements go into making a production complete and help to tell the story thoroughly. In the coming pages you will be able to read through three distinct drafts of my script's development. By reading the drafts you will get a better understanding of how an idea can morph and grow into a final piece of art and will have a better understanding of Chapter One.

The first draft you'll encounter in this chapter was the very first. At that point, the story centered on a man being interrogated for wartime crimes. This draft also came out of my improvisation exercise in Movement Studio.

When dreaming up this world, an interrogation room came to mind. I envisioned a very sterile environment; a very bland room with white walls, florescent lights, and a table. The idea was that the interrogators would be in the room with me and I would interact with the audience as if they were the interrogators. There was also an MP (Military Police) officer in the room to supervise. I also envisioned a cup of water and an ashtray on the table with a pack of cigarettes. I was originally going to use actual set pieces and put up a back wall to give the audience a better understanding of the room. The remaining borders of the room were going to be defined by lights with sharp and focused edges. The clothing I pictured this character wearing was a khaki jumpsuit to give the audience the understanding that he was currently being jailed and held for questioning.

Technical elements are as important to a production as the acting and directing. It isn't until all the pieces are in place that the world and story are fully created and realized. In fact, technical rehearsals are my favorite aspect and period of a production. It's when the entire team, all the actors and designers, work together to bring the story to life. Actors bring their weeks of rehearsal and character work and designers bring their weeks of research and technical skills to make the world believable and realistic. It's a true collaboration and it's when I feel a production team wholly becomes a family operating under one roof. Without designers and technicians, actors are walking around in the dark through an empty space with nothing to sit on or touch, and, if it's a Union house, you'll also be walking around in the dark.⁹ Conversely if it weren't for actors, designers would have very beautiful landscapes that serve no purpose and go to waste. So both sides need each other to bring the playwright's vision and story to life.

When reading the first draft there are a few things to note. First, the scope of the technical and design elements. The second would be the character's objective, personal story, and stakes. Third, I also came up with a title, *Me Paenitet*. I came up with this title while I was thinking of the main objective of George, the character. If his goal/objective were to commit suicide, would he leave a note? If he did, what would it say? I figured there is one thing that every suicide note had in common, the phrase "I'm sorry". I paired that instinct with the impulse to use Latin for the title. The reasoning behind wanting to use Latin was for me to hide the literal meaning of the play, and to put it honestly, I like the way Latin sounds when spoken out loud.

⁹ A union theatre, by contract, keeps every single light in the building off, with the exception of one solo lamp. Known as a "ghost light".

Me Paenitet

By Joshua Stenvick

CAST

GEORGE, Member of the United States Army.

SETTING

An interrogation room at the Pentagon

LIGHTS UP ON:

(GEORGE sits at a table. He is wearing a khaki jump suit and his hands are cuffed.)

GEORGE: Not until the fucking JAG¹⁰ gets here. Did you phone him? Is he coming? What the fuck ever, that's your fucking job, man. Go get my JAG. I'm not going to talk to you until he's here.¹¹ Not that he can do anything. I honestly don't know what he can do. Or what I can do, for that matter. But sitting here and saying all these things that may get me in trouble doesn't seem like too good an idea. So I'll wait.

(The lights dim. George stretches his body in the chair as best he can and lays his forehead on the table. Lights come back up. Time changes.¹²)

GEORGE: What the fuck am I doing here?! He wants me to say all this stuff but he won't tell me what I'm doing here. Will you? Can you? Will you even fucking speak? Sitting there like you're deaf and dumb but I see that uniform. I'm a god damn Sergeant or this fucking country. The 140th platoon,¹³ in fact. Prairie Dogs! What the fuck do you do? Sit here in your safety and comfort and your fucking air conditioning while I'm out there protecting your fucking right to breathe like a god damn pig. Seriously, are you asthmatic or something? You should go to the infirmary and get that checked out. Pig. You fucking pig.¹⁴

(Silence.)

GEORGE: Sorry. I'm sorry. It's just...I don't want to be here. I want to go home. I know. I get it. Not yet. We gotta wait. Listen, is it possible to maybe get these cuffs off? You've got the door locked, a fucking gun, people behind this window and they're all carrying guns. So maybe, you're safe. Please? I want to go home...

¹⁰ In order to create authenticity, I needed to use slang that would be used in such a case. "JAG" refers to a military lawyer. Explicit language was also a part of who this character is.

¹¹ The other characters were in the room with me for this draft.

¹² Originally wanted to use lights to help with time changes during piece.

¹³ The 140th doesn't exist. Nothing over 12 exists, but it was important for me to not represent an actual company.

¹⁴ Trying to bring in a natural rise of temper.

(The lights dim. The handcuffs are removed, a cup of coffee is sitting on the table and George is standing to the side, looking through the looking glass.)

GEORGE: Why is this tinted, anyway? Do they not think that I know there are people behind here? ¹⁵They aren't fooling any one. Thanks, by the way. For getting these off. And this cup of coffee. Any chance you can convince them to get me a cigarette? I know, that would require you to speak and we can't have that. Do they read lips behind there.

(George says the following directly into the looking glass.)

GEORGE: Can I please have a fucking cigarette?

(Silence.)

GEORGE: Worth a shot. You're never gonna get a broad to go out with you if you don't learn some conversational skills. You know that, right? Unless you prefer the gents. Hey, I get it. I know what six months in basic can do. We gotta do what we gotta do right. Out in the fucking desert. No female interactions for months. Years maybe. All these fucking camel jockey's¹⁶ running around and one night, you look over at your squad brother in a completely new way. Maybe it's the moonlight. Whatever it is, your cock is suddenly rock hard and you're tired of cranking the shank. I get it, trust me, I do. Haha, yeah fucking right. I'm fucking with you. Caught doing that shit, they'd cut your little pecker off. You do what you gotta do, you know, but you don't do that. You do what you gotta do, you agree with that? It's sort of the story of our lives for guys like you and me, right? Doing what we have to. What we're told to. I don't think you'd be standing here making sure I didn't leave if you weren't told to watch me by your commanding officer. You prolly got better things to do. Hell, I got better things to do.

(Silence. George looks at the MP and around the room. Twiddles his thumbs and fights to fill the awkward silence. Finally, he gives.)

GEORGE: You can't let them do this to me, you know. You have a responsibility to protect me, your brother.¹⁷ You gonna let them do this? You gonna let them take me down for doing my job? You gonna stand by and just let it happen? Come on. You and I both know there isn't a brotherhood stronger than what we got. Shit, I knew this guy who served with me a few years back. Couldn't take the service. Always bitched and complained. You know, one of those? Then they finally get out and get back to putting on those civilian clothes...and they just can't handle it. You realize that they don't give a shit for you there in that world.

¹⁵ The MP is in the room while the investigators are behind the looking glass.

¹⁶ I wrestled with the notion of a mild (if ever one exists) racial comment to help add authenticity to speech. I thought it would help to give him a point of view about where he came from.

¹⁷ This was the beginning of realizing I needed to make sure that George was trying many different ways and angles to get out. Relating to the MP was a strong choice that stuck through all the drafts.

They take for granted every fucking thing you've done and gone through. There's nowhere to turn, no one to turn to. All you want to do is get back. Get back to being needed and being important. Get back to defending the rights for people to bitch. And for those around the world who don't have those freedoms, to fight to ensure they too can bitch like Americans without fear of being killed. But what they don't tell you is that it's fucking impossible to get back in once you quit. It isn't just the government that hates quitters. What do your brothers think? You already let them down and quit, you think they're gonna trust you ever again? So now you're living with that. And that's something that we can't live with, right? So after a few weeks...you put a gun to your head.

(George stops. Takes a drink of coffee and clears his throat.)

GEORGE: Every day, twenty-two¹⁸ veterans put that gun to their head. Every fucking day. And they warn us about that. But do they do anything?

(George finishes the contents of his cup. Fidgets. Looks back at the two-way mirror.)

GEORGE: Help me. You gotta help me. The things they're saying...they're not true. You know they're not true. I can't talk because I need a JAG before I talk to them, just in case. But what they're accusing me of doing; it's fucking bullshit, man. It was an accident. A fucking accident, man. It happens all the time. And you don't think I'm gonna have to live with this for the rest of my life? Shouldn't that be enough? But you and I both know that they'll set us out there to fry to protect their image and their image of their war. So sure, label me as a baby killer and let the public crucify me. I don't stand a chance. They build you up to be this fucking soldier. The ultimate fucking badass. And then they expect you to be okay when you cross that line? How the fuck are we suppose to be okay? Most of us cross our moral line within months of enlisting. They think they can train you to forget about everything, forget what you've done. But it's not that easy. You can't just turn the fucking switch. I mean, they fucking told me what to do. Defeat the enemy. That was my order. I was given coordinates and, fuckin' A, I carried them out. And here I am. And why? An accident. A fucking accident. When you're going through it. And you're watching your brothers and sisters getting their fucking heads and limbs blown off. See them carrying their insides around with them before dying...You start to get a bit trigger happy. To say the least.

(Another silence. George is almost searching for courage to continue.)

GEORGE: Maybe it's a good thing you can't speak. Some one to listen is always good. But I need your help. You know where I'm coming from; you understand where I'm coming from. You could help be a voice of reason for me, you know. You can stand side by side with your brother and fight to the death with me. Like we took an oath to do. Don't you remember the oath we took? "And the orders of the officers appointed over me." Remember? That was part of the oath we took. And that's what I did. I obeyed the orders of the officers appointed over me. Plain and simple. Destroy the enemy. Destroy the enemy. Fuck! I don't deserve to

¹⁸ I got that statistic from my Cousin Mike, a Captain in the Army. He also works with programs that help bring awareness of this to the community.

be here.

(George gets up and circles around the table and leans on the back of the chair.)

GEORGE: I have family. I know how something like this would feel. I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Last option sort of shit. Not a family, family, if you know what I mean. I'm not married or anything. But I have a mother and a father. I have brothers and sisters. And to think of them...I can't. Which is why I didn't want to. I didn't.

(George sits back down.)

GEORGE: I miss my family. I wonder what they're doing back in Minnesota. Where are you from?

(No response.)

GEORGE: Right. No talking. Don't need you getting chummy with the inmates. I remember my first tour being that way. No saying anything to anyone, really. Which was fucking weird, because we had all been together for years and through countless training exercises, both stateside and abroad. But when you're put into that battle. It's real. And there's this dying sense that you better not get too close because what's the point? They may not be here in an hour. And then you witness that very thing. Your best friend gets KIA or you watch some one lose their best friend and you look around, not sure where you are. A long way from home, that's for sure. A long way from the farm in Minnesota. From my brother and sister. From my mom and father. From Friday night-lights to picking apples in the fall. Where you from? Right. I grew up on a farm in a small town called Brandon. It's in Minnesota.¹⁹ It was a poor farm. Ma had me when she was seventeen and we had welfare in our family. I'm ashamed to admit it, but yes, we did. And that's a huge reason why I chose to defend this country. We live in a place that will help a person when they're down. That hard times fall on us all and you government will be there to lend a hand? That's a great fucking country. Worth defending. That's the thing; most people look at us and judge us based on their opinion of the war. They don't fucking know us, they don't know where we came from or what we have to deal with. They don't fucking know what we go through over here and the sacrifices we make to ensure the world is safer. Look at me, right now, my situation, they all just judge that and the...I joined because I felt a duty to repay what had been giving to me and my family while we were down. That's why I joined. Uncle Sam made sure my family ate and didn't die for about two years. Two fucking years of collecting a check you didn't earn. Two fucking years of watching my mother get looks at the grocery store because of what she used to pay. And I'm thankful, don't get me wrong. But I didn't take that for granted.²⁰ And programs like that, they don't come free. But it's worth the cost for

¹⁹ I decided to make the piece a little personal by including the actual hometown of my parents. I knew I wanted George to come from small town America and it just made sense to make it personal.

²⁰ This was also the point of making it personal for the Veteran. There's a reason people choose to enlist and I have met and spoke with very few who simply wanted to play war.

me. I'm making a better life for me and my family. I'm doing something I believe in, and I'm doing good.²¹ I know, hard to look at it that way with me sitting in this chair. With what I did. But we all make mistakes, man. You gonna be one of those that sit there and judge? How could you do that, having walked in my shoes? You know what I've gone through, I would never do something like that on purpose, all right. Unless it was absolutely necessary. Haven't you ever made a mistake? Haven't you ever made a decision you wish you could take back?

(The MP answers "yes".)

GEORGE: "Yes, Sarge", you little E3 piece of shit. Don't forget who you're talking to. I'm glad you understand where I'm coming from. Now, will you please help me make them understand? Will you help me? Please. I wanna go home. I wanna see my family.

(George is up and walking towards the MP.)

GEORGE: And you can help make that happen, okay. I didn't do anything wrong, you know that and I know that. Now we just have to get them to know that, okay. Please. Help me. I'm begging you. I didn't want to do it.

(The MP punches George in the gut, then knees him in the forehead. Once George goes back, the MP pulls his arm behind his back to subdue him and slams him on the table.)²²

GEORGE: Okay, yes I fucking meant to. There are you happy. I meant to pull that trigger and meant to kill those fucking kids.

(The MP has released George and he falls back into the chair.)

GEORGE: I meant to kill them kids. I mean to. It's not like it sounds. It's not. You really got that arm hold down, good for you.

(George catches his breath.)

GEORGE: We got Intel that this certain village was taken over and pretty much being held hostage. Those that didn't comply, were simply executed. Not only that, but leader of this group we had been hunting for months was responsible. Perfect, liberate a village and take out this nasty fuck. Now, satellite images and inferred are fantastic tools. However, when you are dealing with hostages and takeovers, it's a little hard to distinguish one red blob from another. So we treat it as an extraction. Of the utmost sensitive because we can't start losing civilians. We decide to start our mission at the school, thinking there might be least

²¹ It's usually about a sense of duty in some regard or the other, so this was a choice I felt was very strong for the piece.

²² I really wanted to incorporate a movement aspect to push myself, but as you'll see in the following drafts, it would end up being more weird than strong. I believe the note I received during feedback was that it would take the audience out of the story.

amount of resistance there and we could find people who would be more than willing to help us locate and find the source of the group. We enter this school, and there's nobody. Images show every person huddled in one room, I'm thinking, they're hiding and just trying to stay together. Which, unless you as a group are willing to stand up and defend yourselves, doesn't make a bit of difference. You just make finding every one and killing every one that much easier. Any way, we go up the stairs and they're at the end of the hallway. There's an intersection before the room, so we set up on either side of it and our translator starts to talk. It's a female voice. She says she's the teacher and she's helping protect her students. There's fourteen of them in there, they're all on their stomachs and ready for us lead them out. She said they had been there for two days since the conflict started. Made sense since the smell of piss and shit was pretty fucking potent. We start to move in formation, slowly. My staff sergeant didn't want to go. He didn't. But hindsight is always 20/20, see. We succeed, I'm a hero. But here's a lesson I didn't take into account that day. Being stupid will get you killed. And it will get your men killed. Do you want to send your friends and guys that trust you home in body bags because you want to play fucking Rambo? No. And in fact, we hate those motherfuckers because they're the ones getting fucking people killed with their fucking John Wayne bullshit. It had been a long week. You know how I was telling you that I didn't have a family of my own, well; I don't have a girlfriend either. She left me four days before this went down.²³ Now you want to talk about a real fucking kick to the teeth. I love her. And sure, maybe I was a little less afraid of death that day. She just gave me a reason of getting out now before marriage, not sure if I was what she wanted any more, still really loved me blah blah fucking blah. I'll tell you something, I'm not the only one that that's happened to while over seas. But I will say, I'm probably one of the smarter ones to not ask any questions. Why is that smart you might ask? Well, I've learned over my thirty-three years that you don't ask questions you really don't want to know the answers to. Was she fucking someone else? Don't know, don't care. I love her and I hope she's happy. And I say that openly admitting to not wanting to know the truth because I couldn't take it. So remember that. Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to.

(There's a slight pause as George searched for the track he was on, or maybe he was thinking of her...)

GEORGE: My judgment was clouded. I know that now. They wanted to get eyes in the room to know for sure. Duh. I didn't need to be told that's what we should do, I should have just fucking known that because I'm a smart motherfucker. But I didn't. I wanted to be anywhere but there. I thought that once I got this mission over, I'd be able to back up and go home. Like, all would be well. I sent a squad to open the door and we'd come in behind them. The four men went...

(George gets up from the table with his cup and approached the looking glass.)

²³ This was another aspect that would change immediately. At first I thought a distraction would be the best option for him to do what he did. But I would soon realize that pinning it on something other than his training seemed arbitrary.

GEORGE: Can I please have more coffee? Or water? Please. Anything.

(George turns away from the looking glass and sets the glass back on the table. He stays standing.)

GEORGE: The four men and the lead took the hand, and slowly opened the door. Initially I thought we were in and I made the right call because he seemed to sit there for what seemed to be an eternity and stare through the small crack. Then I heard the pop. And the sound of a bullet entering flesh. You never forget that sound. The whizzing bullet and the sound of it ripping through flesh and bone. In this case, through his eye. He fell back and instantly the door was blown out from the inside. The other three were scattered around us in pieces. All I could hear was the sound of a gun firing and bullets bouncing around us. I couldn't quite see as the dust was still settling. And then it did...do you ever have those moments where the whole world seems quiet? You can hear anything, just complete silence. No matter where you are or what you're doing, the world is just dead. That was what I experienced. Right before the dust settled and I was thrust back into the situation by what I saw...can I please get a refill?

(The lights dim and George paces behind the desk. There is a new cup of coffee for him.)

GEORGE: The dust settled enough for me to see who was firing in our direction. There were two of them, and they only paused when they threw a grenade in our direction. They alternated this, at least twice. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Didn't want to believe, is more like it. It was a man and a woman, husband and wife? I have no fucking clue. But they were using these two children as human shields. I gave the order to stand down, being well protected from the bullets, until we could get a better idea of how many there were and where in the room they might be. It didn't take long for me to realize there were only two. And they were ducked behind this desk that was flipped over and in front of the desk, they were using these two kids. Kids, man.

(There is a pause to take a drink.)

GEORGE: It was then I realized that without those two in front, this wouldn't go on much longer. This of course happened a lot faster than I'm describing it. I guess you could say that I don't really feel up to admitting the fact that I fired twice. One for each. They dropped and my guys were quick to end the scuffle before it got out of hand any further. I was paralyzed for what seemed like a week afterwards. I wasn't able to move. All I kept thinking about was who they were and the last thing I wanted to do was walk in that room. Then it became real. You know, it's funny. Bullets don't have names. But bullets don't miss targets, either. I was the one who aimed and I was the one who made the shots. I finally crawled out from behind the wall and walked into the room. My guys were already high fiving and celebrating a victory. At what cost? Eight lay dead. Four good guys, two bad guys and two innocent children. Because of the decision I made. Which, would seem like an easy one to make. Especially after we walked in and found a grenade in the hand of one of the fucks that had been responsible. Was he gonna throw it at us? Nah. There were thirteen other kids in that room. Once we took out their shields they were gonna take the rest of them

down and leave none of them alive. In a sense, you'd like to think that my actions saved the lives of thirteen others. Not counting my men. And that may be true. My training kicked in and I did what I had to do to preserve life. But I didn't wanna do it like that, man. I didn't wanna kill two kids. Who were eight and six, by the way. Once the village was secured and the dead accounted for...we found their parents. Do you know what that's like to tell parents they lost one of their kids? I was a coward. I lied. Right to their faces. I couldn't admit that I made the decision to kill their kids outright. I said they were simply caught in the crossfire. I'm such a pussy. So that's what I'm gonna have to live with for the rest of my life. Oh, and the fact that they wanna take my life away from me. Everything I have worked for, they're gonna strip from me. I'll be discharged, unable to find a job and I'll have that hanging over my head for the rest of my life. Once they discharge me...I won't have access to their support or health care. I'll be on my own. Haunted by those two. We all make mistakes in our lives. Without question. Most of the time we can move on from them, ignoring what others think and how they act and get back to life. I don't think I can. No matter if they decide not to discharge me or hold me responsible. I do. I hold myself responsible and that isn't something I can deal with. I need help. I wanna go home. I want my mama. I don't wanna think about this any more. When I'd go home for holiday release or time off...my town was so proud of me. What are they gonna think now? What are they gonna think about this man who once would have cut their grass or plowed their snow? Now, I'm just a baby killer. I need you. I need your help. I need that gun. I need you to use that gun. Please. I can't go on with this memory. You can say I attacked you. Please. Just help me not feel like I'm a bad person any more...²⁴

END OF PLAY.

This second draft you are about to read shows the growth of the idea by incorporating some important notes. First, to increase George's struggle and desperation I completely changed the setting. This is the time, as explained in Chapter One, the focus morphed from wartime crimes to PTSD and suicide. So I changed the setting from an interrogation room to a suicide watch room. I altered his costume from a jump suit to a straitjacket. I did this in hopes of giving George a greater visual struggle and something to actually fight against. I also took the idea for an actual back wall out of the equation and decided to simply use light to provide boundaries. This draft also incorporates a technical

²⁴ This is the ending I spoke about being muddled and unclear. What I did take away from at least writing it was that the story and ending needed to be about his acknowledgement of *wanting* to get better.

element that I originally hadn't planned: sound. I wanted to include a battlefield soundscape to help the audience hear and see what the suffering soldier experienced.

It was also during this time that I started to really set lofty goals for my acting and push myself beyond anything else I have done. With just simple lighting and costume, I wanted to see if I use only my acting and intentions to fully communicate this story to an audience. Finally, the big question that came out of this draft was: how would it end? The script and story made sense and gave me a lot of excitement, but the how the story ended was still significant and an unanswered question.

Me Paenitet
Me PEH-nee-tet²⁵

By Joshua Stenvick

CAST

GEORGE, Member of the United States Army.

SETTING

A suicide watch room.

LIGHTS UP ON:

(GEORGE lays on the ground in a straitjacket.²⁶ He slowly starts to wake as the affects of the drugs are still in his system. He tries to stand and falls over. He takes his time and more precisely, tries to stand again. He doesn't move, just waits for the world to stop spinning. It does and he slowly moves to the looking glass. He stares at it for a moment and then starts to slowly pound his head against it. Harder and harder. He starts to moan and slowly, his moans become words.)

GEORGE: Water. Give me some fucking water. Water...

(George stumbles back from the looking glass. He falls down. The lights dim as time passes. A water bowl is lying on the ground next to him. Lights come back up and George awakes. He sees the bowl and slowly gets on his knees and bends over the bowl and starts to lap the water with his tongue, like a dog.)

²⁵ People had been having problems pronouncing the title, so I sounded it out as well.

²⁶ Here is where you'll notice the change in circumstances. He is no longer being held for questioning but enters the piece wanting to die and fighting to get out so he can die.

GEORGE: Am I a dog? Am I? I don't deserve this. No human deserves this, fucking look at me. I'm a goddamn Sergeant for this fucking country. The 140th platoon, in fact. Prairie Dogs! What the fuck do you do? Sit here in your safety and comfort and your fucking air conditioning while I'm out there protecting your fucking right to breathe like a goddamn pig. Pig. You fucking pig.

(George thrashes his body around and tries to escape the straitjacket. But it does its job. He gives up.)

GEORGE: Sorry. I'm sorry. It's just...I don't want to be here. Why are you keeping me here? Just let me do what I want, please. Can you let me out of this thing? Hm? No one will need to know, man. You just unlock this and go to the bathroom and it'll be done. Please...so no. I get it. If you do that than you haven't done your job. And guys like you and me are about getting the job done. No matter what the cost. No matter that someone's life is taken from them. Why is this tinted, anyway? Do they not think that I know there are people behind there?

(George says the following directly into the looking glass.)

GEORGE: Can I please have a fucking cigarette?

(Silence.)

GEORGE: Worth a shot. You know, you're never gonna get a broad to go out with you if you don't learn some conversational skills. Unless you prefer the gents. Hey, I get it. We gotta do what we gotta do right. Out in the fucking desert. No female interactions for months. Years maybe. All these fucking towel heads running around trying to kill you, it's the ultimate fucking hard on. And one night, you look over at your squad brother in a completely new way. Maybe it's the moonlight. Whatever it is, you're tired of cranking the shank. I get it, trust me, I do. Haha, yeah fucking right. I'm fucking with you. Caught doing that shit, they'd cut your little pecker off. You do what you gotta do, you know, but you don't do that. That's sort of the story of our lives, right? Doing what we have to. What we're told to. I don't think you'd be standing here making sure I didn't off myself if you weren't told to watch me by your commanding officer. You prolly got better things to do. Hell, I got better things to do. Which is why I need you to help me. You can help me. Let me out of this thing, let me finish my final mission and all will be well.

(Silence.)

GEORGE: You can't let them do this to me, you know. You have a responsibility to protect me, your brother. You gonna let them tie me up like a fucking dog and hold me against my will? You gonna stand by and just let it happen? Come on. You and I both know there isn't a brotherhood stronger than what we got. Shit, I knew this guy who served with me a few years back. Couldn't take the service. You know, one of "those"? They finally get out and get back to putting on those civilian clothes...and they just can't handle it. When you're out, you

realize that they don't give a shit for you in that world. They take for granted every fucking thing you've done and every fucking thing you've gone through. All you want to do is get back. Get back to being needed and being important. Get back to defending the rights for people to bitch. And for those around the world who don't have freedom, to fight to ensure they too can bitch like Americans without fear of being killed. But what they don't tell you is that it's fucking impossible to get back in once you quit. It isn't just the government that hates quitters. What do your brothers think? You already let them down and quit, you think they're gonna trust you ever again? So you're back home and you can't even look your kid in the eye. You have kids? I have a five year old. Lucy. Goddamn, she's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. So amazing that I can't look her in the eyes, I can't listen to her laugh and I can't hold her without thinking about what I've done. And the poor thing has no idea. She thinks I'm mad at her. And I can't have that any more. I can't keep letting her mama try to explain to her. Because she doesn't deserve that either. I can't keep putting her through what I'm going through. She is the strongest, most thoughtful and intelligent person I've ever met. You ever known someone like that? That you sit and wonder how they possibly could love you. You, of all people. Think of my beautiful daughter and my wonderful wife and let me go. You don't want me to keep putting them through this either, do you?

(George stops. Takes a drink and clears his throat. He thinks for a moment and finally gets on his feet.)

GEORGE: They program you up to be this fucking soldier. The ultimate fucking badass. And then they expect you to be okay when you cross that line? Most of us cross that line within months of enlisting. They think they can train you to forget about everything, forget what you've done. But it's not that easy. You can't just turn off the fucking switch. I mean, they fucking told me what to do. Defeat the enemy. That was my order. I was given the coordinates and, fuckin' A, I carried them out. And here I am. I need your help. You know where I'm coming from; you can stand side by side with your brother and help end this. Don't you remember the oath we took? "And the orders of the officers appointed over me." That was part of the oath we took. I could make you release me, how about that? What are you, an E2? Well, I got you there. I'm ordering you to release me. Release me. Release me, now or I'll have you reprimanded. Sure, you won't follow orders. But I did. Destroy the enemy. Destroy the enemy. Fuck! I don't deserve this.

(George gets up and circles around.)

GEORGE: I wouldn't have done something like this if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Last option sort of shit. I wonder what they're doing back in Minnesota. Where you from? Right. No talking. Don't need you getting chummy with the inmates. I remember my first tour being that way. Not saying anything to anyone. Which was fucking weird, because we had all been together for years and through countless training exercises, both stateside and abroad. But when the bullets start flying, It's real. And then you witness that very thing. Your best friend gets KIA or you watch some one lose their best friend and you look around, not sure where you are. A long way from home, that's for sure. A long way from the farm in Minnesota. From my brother and sister. From my mom and father. From Friday night-lights to picking apples in the fall. I grew up on a farm in a small town called Brandon.

It was a poor farm. Ma had me when she was seventeen and we had welfare in our family. I'm ashamed to admit it, but yes, we did. And that's a huge reason why I chose to enlist. We live in a country that will help a person when they're down. Hard times fall on us all, man, and our government will be there to lend a hand. That's a great fucking country. Worth defending. That's the thing; most people look at us and judge us based on their opinion of the war. They don't fucking know us, they don't know where we came from or what we have to deal with. They don't fucking know what we go through over here and the sacrifices we make to ensure the world is safer. Look at me, right now, my situation, they all just judge that and the...I joined because I felt a duty to repay what had been giving to me and my family while we were down. That's why I joined. Uncle Sam made sure my family ate and didn't die for about two years. Two fucking years of collecting a check you didn't earn. Two fucking years of watching my mother get looks at the grocery store because of how she paid. And I'm thankful, don't get me wrong. But I didn't take that for granted. I just wonder if it was worth the price. I know... look at me now. Have you ever made a decision you wish you could take back? I meant to pull that trigger and meant to kill those fucking kids. That's why I need you to let me out of here. I'm not fucking around now, do it! Let. Me. Fucking. Go.

(George catches his breath.)

GEORGE: We got Intel that this village was taken over and people were being held hostage. Those that didn't comply with the hostiles were simply executed. Not only that, but the leader of this group we had been hunting for months was responsible for the attack. Perfect, liberate a village and take out this nasty fuck at the same time. Now, satellite images and inferred are fantastic tools. However, when you are dealing with hostages and takeovers, it's a little hard to distinguish one red blob from another, which is a problem because we can't start losing civilians. We decide to start our mission at the school on the south end. We enter the school, and there's nobody. Images show every person huddled in one room, I'm thinking, they're hiding and just trying to stay together. Which, unless you as a group are willing to stand up and defend yourselves, doesn't make a bit of difference. You just make finding every one and killing every one that much easier. Any way, we go up the stairs and the room is at the end of the hall. There's an intersection before the room, so we set up on either side of it and our translator starts to talk. It's a female voice that answers. She says she's the teacher and she's helping protect her students. There's fourteen of them in there, they're all on their stomachs and ready for us to lead them out. She said they had been there for two days, which was when the conflict started. Made sense since the smell of piss and shit was pretty fucking potent. We start to move in formation, slowly. My staff sergeant didn't want to go. He didn't. But hindsight is always 20/20, see. We succeed, I'm a hero. But here's a lesson I didn't take into account that day. Being stupid will get you killed. And it will get your men killed. Do you want to send your friends and guys that trust you home in body bags because you want to play fucking Rambo? No. And in fact, we hate those motherfuckers because they're the ones getting fucking people killed with their fucking

John Wayne bullshit.²⁷

(There's a slight pause as George searches for the track he was on.)

GEORGE: They wanted to get eyes in the room to know for sure. Duh. I didn't need to be told that's what we should do, I should have just fucking known that because I'm a smart motherfucker. But I didn't. Or it slipped my mind. Or I wanted to be anywhere but there. I thought that once I got this mission over, I'd be able to back up and go home. Like, all would be well. I sent a squad to open the door and the plan was to come in behind them. The four men went...

(George is up and signaling to his squad, just as if he were there.)

GEORGE: The four men and the lead took the handle, and slowly opened the door. Initially I thought we were in and I made the right call because he seemed to sit there for what seemed to be an eternity and stare through the small crack. Then I heard the pop. And the sound of a bullet ripping through flesh. You never forget that sound. Point man fell back and instantly the door was blown out from the inside. The other three were scattered around us in pieces.

(There is the sound of an explosion mixed with gunfire and screams. George takes cover. The sounds of bullets bouncing against metal and rock slowly give way to nothing. Everything is silent and all we can hear is a light ringing.)

GEORGE: What do we do now, sir? What do we do now, sir?! SIR?!

(George settles back to his position behind the wall.)

GEORGE: The dust settled enough for me to see who was firing in our direction. There were two of them, and they only paused to throw grenades in our direction. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Didn't want to believe. It was a man and a woman, husband and wife? I have no fucking clue. But they were using these two children as human shields. Stand down. STAND DOWN! No one fucking shoots until I give the command.

(The sounds of gunfire return and gradually get louder and louder.)

GEORGE: Make a fucking move, Sarge! We gotta do something fast otherwise we all fucking die. Sarge. Sarge! Stand down, stand down.

(The silence and steady humming return. We hear two shots back to back followed by the sound of the shells hitting the ground, and then an eruption of quick fire. The silence. George

²⁷ One of my favorite lines that I ended up cutting. This is an example of letting things go that don't serve the story. As much as I enjoyed this line and little outburst by George, it didn't continue to drive the story forward.

*can't move. Finally. He gets up and walks around the room. Looking at what he just did.)*²⁸

GEORGE: You know, it's funny. Bullets don't have names. But bullets don't miss targets, either. I was the one who aimed and I was the one who made the decision. Eight lay dead. Four good guys, two bad guys and two innocent children. Sometimes I think it was the right decision to make. Or at least I try to convince myself. After we walked in we found a grenade in the hand of one of the fucks that had been responsible. There were thirteen other kids in that room. Once we took out their shields they were gonna take the rest of them down and leave none of them alive. But my training kicked in and I did what I had to do to preserve life. My commander use to say to me; "Goodman, you may be a liberal fuck, But you don't shoot like one." But I didn't wanna do it like that, man. I didn't wanna kill two kids. Who were eight and six, by the way. We found their parents after we brought peace. Do you know what that's like to tell parents they lost one of their kids? I know that if it were me and it was my princess, I'd be ruined. So I did the only thing I could think of. I lied. I was a coward. Right to their faces. I said they were simply caught in the crossfire. I'm such a pussy. So that's what I'm gonna have to live with for the rest of my life. Killing two not much older than my princess.

(George starts to thrash and try to escape the jacket.)

GEORGE: You gotta let me out of here, please! They tell us when we're over there that ever single day, twenty-two Veterans put that gun to their head. Twenty-two. But do they do anything about it? Fuck no. They leave us fucking hanging high and dry. Jump through loops to get proper fucking care and how do you prove your fucked in the head?

(He settles.)

GEORGE: I couldn't even do it at home. It would be so easy. I should have. Then I wouldn't be here. Literally. I can't keep letting my family down. I can't watch them go through the pain of not knowing. And I had to get back to base because I can't have them finding me. So I tell you what, you let me out of this fucking thing, and I can end the pain. End it all. Not be a fucking burden to any one. Or. I could smack my head against this floor. Jump up and land on my neck. Kill you. How about that? You'd have to protect yourself. I don't need anything other than my feet to kill you. That's what I'll do. You ready. Do it. Do it. Do it!

*(George rushes forward. Blackout.)*²⁹

END OF PLAY.

²⁸ At this point I'm still incorporating sound to bring the audience on the ride with George.

²⁹ The ending was still shaky for me. What needed to be clear, that I hadn't expressed fully with this draft is the notion that the ending would come from his wanting to get better so he can get back to his family, rather than dying.

The third and final draft that you'll read is my performance text. This was the text I went into our technical rehearsals with and was the text I committed to memory for the performance. There were five drafts between the second one you just read and the final performance text. The reason I am including the performance text and not the very next text that followed the second draft is that the changes made from draft three to the final draft were minor grammatical adjustments with each one. The story and structure remained the same through out.

So what were the elements that changed? First, I decided that I needed to lose the straitjacket and restraints. After reading the draft to peers and advisors, it became crystal clear that this was one man's struggle with what he had done and the moral lines he had crossed. He was still in a suicide watch room after attempting to take his own life, but the confines of the bare room would serve as the physical restraints for him. I also got rid of all bodies in the room with George and put them behind a looking glass, observing him. By doing that, it actually gave me more of a reason to look out and use the audience as the other characters. It also helped with the ending that I so desperately couldn't figure out. At first I thought I needed to have an ending with some sort of resolution, which is important, but I thought I needed to get that from the MP (Military Police) and doctors. When in reality, putting everyone behind the two-way mirror allowed me to create a resolution that the character determines on his own; ultimately George admits he needs help and does not actually want to die. Finally, I eliminated all of the sound effects. I was really going for a minimal design and thought that it would be more effective. It's easy for us to hear and see what a person is going through, but in real life if we were to observe someone going through a PTSD attack, we wouldn't hear or see what they were hearing, we would just be

witnessing them reacting in the actual surroundings. So I thought eliminating the sound would be more effective.

This was also when my cousin Mike's expertise came into play. He was able to walk me through exactly what his protocol would have been if he were in this situation as a Captain in the U.S. Army. Speaking with him over the phone and having him take my idea and turn it into something that actually could have happened may have been the single greatest breakthrough of the script. In my imagination I can create battle scenes and scenarios, but I needed it to be authentic in hopes that this piece would land with all audiences and, most importantly, any veterans in the audience.

It was during this draft and conversations with my cousin that I realized that this piece I had imagined, written, and developed into a story was bigger than I originally anticipated. It struck me that this piece could offer sufferers of PTSD the hope and strength to reach out and demand proper care. Perhaps it could help them to recognize that what they're going through, understand that their suffering is heard, and trust that people are here to make sure they are safe and are helped. As mentioned in Chapter One, it's funny how ideas and stories can change the more you commit yourself to them and dedicate yourself to the creative process. While my original intent was to write something entertaining, I ultimately arrived at a story that could be meaningful and beneficial.

Me Paenitet
Me PEH-nee-tet

By Joshua Stenvick

CAST

GEORGE, Member of the United States Army.

SETTING

A suicide watch room.

LIGHTS UP ON:

*(GEORGE lying on the ground. He starts to wake slowly. He struggles to rise to his feet, hunched over and observes the room. He begins to shake himself back to functioning and scopes the room out. Finally he erupts.)*³⁰

GEORGE: GET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!

(He goes to the door and pounds on it.)

GEORGE: Open this door! Get me the fuck out of here!

(George stops and looks at the looking glass on the other side of the room.)

GEORGE: I know you're in there. Let me out!

(Looking at the window.)

GEORGE: Am I an animal? Am I? I don't deserve this. No human deserves this, fucking locked up like an animal at the zoo. On display for all you fuckers to see. Who are you fuckers anyway?

*(George goes to the looking glass, puts his face against it. Exhausted, he rests his head against the glass while he catches his breath.)*³¹

GEORGE: Is that a fucking uniform you got on? No fucking way. I'm a goddamn Staff Sergeant for this fucking country. Prairie Dogs! What the fuck do you guys do? Sit here in your safety and comfort and your fucking air conditioning while I'm out there protecting your fucking right to breathe. Pigs. You fucking pigs. You should have left me where you found me, I didn't asked to be saved and then thrown in here.

(George raises his wrists above his head.)

GEORGE: In fact I think I cut pretty deep and did a good job so let me the fuck outta here.³²

(George notices movement from behind the window. In an attempt to stop them from coming

³⁰ Losing the straitjacket was a big help. I realized at this point the room and locked door acted like the jacket in regards to restraints.

³¹ This was the draft that I realized everyone needed to be behind the window. By doing so it gave me more room to explore the space but also gave me things to discover as the piece went on. What he sees behind the glass starts propelling him forward into action.

³² I also decided that I needed to come in with the wounds of an attempted suicide. It was a tough decision to make because I want to be gentle, but it was the missing piece of the costume aspect that I didn't incorporate until this final draft.

in and fear of what they'll do to him, he starts to do pushups to calm down.)

GEORGE: Sorry. I'm sorry. It's just...I don't want to be here. Why are you keeping me here? Just let me do what I need to, please. You just unlock this door and I'll be on my way, you won't have to worry about me any more. I get it, fat chance in hell of that happening. If you do that than you haven't done your job. And guys like us are about getting the job done. No matter what the cost. No matter if some one's life is taken from them.

*(George is standing in front of the glass, slowly pounding his head against it, still trying to wake up. He rests against it again for a slight moment.)*³³

GEORGE: Why is this tinted, anyway? I clearly see you guys in there. Who are those others with you? Doctors and shrinks and people who think I have a problem? Fucking doctors and shrinks. Let me guess, you wanna throw some pills at me? Solve all the world's problems by throwing a fucking pill at it.

(George retreats to a corner to calm down with his breathing exercise.)

GEORGE: I'm sorry. I'm all better now. You fixed me. If you give the order to let me out I promise it'll never happen again. I just lost my way for a second there. But I'll go home and be the most perfect person you've ever seen. It'll be just like nothing ever happened. I swear to God Almighty himself. My brain is fine. My soul is fine. I just need to get home; can you help me get home?

(Silence.)

GEORGE

Worth a shot. Hey, if you don't wanna let me out, how about bringing me back to my room at least?

(Silence.)

GEORGE: You can't let them do this to me, you know. You, wearing that uniform. You have a responsibility to protect me, your brother. You gonna let them lock me up like a fucking dog and hold me against my will? You gonna stand by and just let it happen? Come on. You and I both know there isn't a brotherhood stronger than what we got. I'm not talking about friendship, fuck friendship. I'm talking about brotherhood. You know, my life over yours, yours over mine. Shit, I knew this guy who served with me a few years back, right. Couldn't take the service after six months. You know, one of "those"? They finally get out and get back to putting on those civilian clothes...and they just can't handle it. When you're out in the civilian world, you realize that they don't give a shit for you. Or rather, they take for granted every fucking thing you've done and every fucking thing you've gone through. So, six months after getting your wish and getting out, you want to get back in. Get back to

³³ During actual performances I eliminated tinkering with the glass as it ended up being too much and pulling the audience of out the story.

being needed and being important. Get back to defending the rights for people to bitch. Get back to your brothers. But what they don't tell you is that it's fucking impossible to get back in once you quit. The government hates quitters. It's listed as direct as fucking possible on your papers. AWOL/Desertion. And it isn't just the government that hates quitters. What do your brothers think? You already let them down and quit, you think they're gonna trust you ever again? So you just stay home. Live with this feeling of not belonging. But the guilt is so strong; eventually you can't even look at your kid. I mean, that's not me, I didn't quit.

*(Silence)*³⁴

GEORGE: Any of you have kids? I have a five year old. Lucy. Goddamn, she's the most amazing thing I've ever seen.³⁵ Funny thing is I can't look her in the eyes, I can't listen to her laugh and I can't hold her without thinking about what I've done. And the poor thing has no idea. My princess thinks I'm mad at her. And I can't have that any more. I can't keep letting her mama try to explain to her. Because she doesn't deserve that either. My wife. She is the strongest, most thoughtful and intelligent person I've ever met. You ever known someone like that? That you sit and wonder how they possibly could love you. You, of all people. I can't keep putting her through this either. I can't keep putting all of this on her. It's become her responsibility. Explain it to the daughter. Explain it to the family. Explain it to the friends. That's right, even friends. We can't have a fucking bar-be-que without them asking if I've cut back on the drinking, do I still have funny dreams, has she thought about having me committed. A bar-be-que is how this all started anyway. Watching my princess play on the swing set and I see this little boy getting shaken and scolded by his father. I fucking lost it. Thankfully, he didn't press charges. My wife and I... we're best friends and I can't keep doing this to her. She needs to get on with her life and it'll be a lot easier if I'm not around. Think of my beautiful daughter and my wonderful wife and let me go. You don't want me to keep putting them through this either, do you? So you let me end it, or we keeping holding them back from their lives. Think of my family. Do it for my family. Since that bar-be-que my dreams have gotten worse. I even dream when I'm awake. I'll see everything. I'll see what I've done and the people I've hurt. I can't keep hurting people. Strangers, my friends, my fucking family. Those guys standing next to you behind the glass, they don't fucking know. People like them have tried, man, they've fucking tried. Why can't they de-program you to be a soldier, huh? Why can't I go through six months of learning how to be normal, to be soft, to have a beer belly and high cholesterol, because they program you to be this fucking soldier. The ultimate fucking badass. And then they expect you to be okay when you cross the line. Most of us cross that line within months of enlisting. They think they can train you to forget about everything, forget what you've done. But it's not that easy. You can't just turn off the fucking switch. I mean, they fucking told me what to do. Defeat the enemy. That was my order. I was given the coordinates and, fuckin'

³⁴ I found that taking these silences were extremely important during the performances. I had to plan and think of my next approach at trying to get them to release me.

³⁵ What I should have done here is give an example of why she's so amazing, like her eye color or another feature. That was a note given to me by an audience member after a performance and I believe it was a correct note. By doing so, I would have been able to solidify how important the daughter was, but also give the audience an image to see as well.

A, I carried them out. And here I am. But not my men... I need your help, soldier. You know where I'm coming from; you can stand side by side with your brother and help end this. Don't you remember the oath we took? "And the orders of the officers appointed over me." That was part of the oath we took. I could make you release me, how about that? What are you, a PFC? I bet you're a PFC or at best, an E5.³⁶ Well, I got you there. I'm ordering you to release me. Release me. Release me, now or I'll have you all reprimanded. Sure, you won't follow orders. But I did. Destroy the enemy. Destroy the enemy.

(George is seeing the enemy. He hears an explosion and drops down. He rises to a knee and holds his rifle up and aims. He sees the kid, or is it his daughter?)

GEORGE: Fuck! I don't deserve this. Come on! This isn't my fault. I never asked for this.

(George goes to his breathing.)

GEORGE: I wouldn't think this was the only way if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Last option sort of shit. I know I have a beautiful family. And they are so important to me. But I'm doing this for them. I really am. My family means that much to me that I'll disappear to save them.

(The breathing has calmed him down. Now his thoughts are solely on his family.)

GEORGE: I am thinking about them through out this, trust me. I wonder what they're doing back in Minnesota. Where you all from? Right. A little hard to talk through thick glass. I mean, isn't that your job, doctors, to talk to me. To help me figure this out and fix me? This cold shoulder tactic reminds me of my first tour. Not saying anything to anyone. Which was fucking weird, because we had all been together for years and through countless training exercises, both stateside and abroad. But when the bullets start flying, It's real. And then you witness... Your best friend gets KIA or you watch some one lose their best friend and you look around, not sure where you are. You're a long way from home, that's for sure. A long way from the farm in Minnesota. From my brother and sister. From my mom and father. From Friday night-lights to picking apples in the fall. Fuck, I wish I could go back there.

(George senses another panic attack coming so he focuses on his breathing.)

GEORGE: I don't know if I would do it differently, that's the thing. I feel like I should take the re-do if I had that chance, but I don't know if I would, honestly. Because... I grew up on a farm in a small town called Brandon. It was a poor farm. Ma had me when she was seventeen and we had welfare in our family. I'm ashamed to admit it, but yes, we did. And that's a huge reason why I chose to enlist. We live in a country that will help a person when they're down. Hard times fall on us all, man, and our government will be there to lend a hand. That's a great fucking country. Worth defending. Worth serving. That's the thing;

³⁶ Getting the ranking correct was important. They weren't accurate up until this draft. Another reason I was ever so thankful for my cousin's assistance.

most people look at us in uniform and judge us based on their opinion of the war. They all think we're these ultra conservative motherfuckers serving the machine. They don't fucking know us, they don't know where we came from or what we have to deal with. They don't fucking know what we go through over here and the sacrifices we make to ensure the world is safer. If we weren't over there, they'd be getting stronger and bringing the fight to us, then we'd have a real fucking problem. Look at me, right now, my situation, they all just judge that and the...

(The breathing is starting to lose its affect.)

GEORGE: I joined because I felt a duty to repay what had been giving to me and my family while we were down. That's why I joined. Uncle Sam made sure my family ate and didn't die for about five years. Five fucking years of collecting a check you didn't earn. Five fucking years of watching my mother get looks at the grocery store because of how she paid. And I'm thankful, don't get me wrong. But I didn't take that for granted. I just wonder if it was worth the price. Have you ever made a decision you wish you could take back? Like I said, I don't know if I'd take back my decision to join. But other decisions. I don't know. It's all a fucking blur now. When it comes down to brass tacks, I meant to pull that trigger and I meant to kill that fucking kid. That's why I need you to let me go. Because I don't want to hurt anyone again, and I know I'm going to, I know it. I'm always scared, I'm always on watch, and how can I protect my family if I can't even protect my men. I'm not fucking around now, do it!

(George goes to the window and starts pounding on it.)³⁷

GEORGE: Let. Me. Fucking. Go.

(The pounding on the glass and the spike in heart rate send him to the ground for cover. He peers out the doorway and sees the hostage situation.)

GEORGE: I need to stop these visions; I need to stop these dreams. Please! I can't live with them any more. Make them go away. Please.³⁸

(George is calming himself down.)

GEORGE: We got Intel that this village was taken over and people were being held hostage. Those that didn't comply with the hostiles were simply executed. Not only that, but the leader of this terrorist group we had been hunting for months was responsible for the attack. Perfect, liberate a village and take out this nasty fuck at the same time. The platoon split up and my squad was assigned to the south side and the school was the first building

³⁷ By not constantly using the "glass" that didn't really exist in my set, it allowed moments like this when I wanted to use it more successful.

³⁸ This piece didn't end up in the final performance. I made the cut before opening night because I felt that pounding on the glass and high intensity was a strong choice to propel him into a flashback.

at our point of entry. We enter and secured the lobby and I kept a team there as our support. The rest of us started making our way through the school securing each room as we went. We got to the very last room and we could hear noises, muffled sound... so our translator starts to speak. A voice answered, it was this guy, and said he was the teacher and he had huddled everyone together in one space to keep them safe. He said they had been there for two days, which was when the conflict started and it made sense, since the smell of piss and shit was pretty fucking potent. I give the order to start having the kids evacuate one by one. The door opens, a kid comes out, the door closes and we search the kid. Once it's clear, the door opens and another comes out and so on and so forth until they're all out. All the kids check out and the last one was the teacher. He comes out and is clean and all that's left to do is secure the room... My Sargent didn't want to go, he didn't. But hindsight is always 20/20, see. He wanted to get eyes in the room first. Duh. I didn't need to be told this, I should have just known because I'm a smart motherfucker. But I didn't, or it didn't cross my mind because I wanted to be anywhere but there. I think I thought that once I got this mission over, all would be well. I'd be able to pack up and go home. I send the team in...I'm watching this, thinking one building down, one to go and we're outta here. They enter and respond that there's no one in there. Then I hear it. Cover! And then I really hear it, the explosion. If you've never had an explosion happen in front of you, all you can really hear is this light ringing while your body adjusts. When it does and the smoke settles, I realize that all hell has broken loose. The kids in our room are all fucking running to save their lives so I go to the door to try and contain the situation and get a look at my men...In the hallway there stands the teacher, screaming in his fucking language and he's hiding behind one of the kids that escaped. He was using this kid as a human shield...look, I did what I thought was right. My mind was on the four that had entered the room and I needed to get to them. I needed to know that they were okay.

(There's a slight pause as George searched for the track he was on.)

GEORGE: What do we do now, sir? What do we do now, sir?! SIR?!

(George settles back to his position behind the wall.)

GEORGE: STAND DOWN! No one fucking moves until I give the command. Make a fucking move, sir! We gotta do something fast. Stand down, stand down.

*(Silence)*³⁹

GEORGE: You know, it's funny. Bullets don't have names. But bullets don't miss targets, either. I was the one who aimed and I was the one who made the decision. Six lay dead. Sometimes you can follow your training down to the exact, and it still won't turn out the way you want. My brothers and sisters aren't home because of me. I should have waited. I should have been the one to go. Then, I think of that kid I took out. Sometimes I think it was the right decision to make. Or at least I try to convince myself. My training kicked in and I

³⁹ I decided to get rid of all sounds and allow the audience to witness what George was going through without trying to make them go through it. I felt it was a stronger choice.

did what I had to do to preserve life. My commander use to say to me in basic; “Goodman, you may be a liberal fuck, But you don’t shoot like one.” But I didn’t wanna do it like that, man. Any other day I was cool with being a great shot. Not that day. I didn’t wanna kill that kid. Who were six, by the way. We found their parents after we brought peace. Do you know what that’s like to tell a parent they lost one of their kids? I know that if it were me and it was my princess, I’d be ruined. So I did the only thing I could think of. I lied. I was a coward. Right to their faces. I said they were simply caught in the crossfire. I’m such a fucking...ugh! So that’s what I’m gonna have to live with for the rest of my life. You gotta let me out of here, please! They tell us when that every single day, twenty-two Veterans put that gun to their head. Twenty-two. But do they do anything about it? Fuck no. They leave us fucking hanging high and dry. Jump through loops to get fucking care. There aren’t words for how I feel or what I think and how do I prove that I’m fucked in the head? I can’t. But I am. I am fucked in the head and I have no idea how to get better. Help me.⁴⁰ I can’t keep living like this. I can’t be a fucking burden to people any more. I don’t wanna leave my princess. I don’t want to leave my amazing wife but I don’t know what to do. This out is the only option I have, right? Help me. Please help me get back to my daughter...LUCY!

END OF PLAY.

These three drafts reflect three very different versions of the story. They reflect the evolution of my intellectual and creative process. The development phase was a long journey, one that started out one way and took a complete one-eighty. However, I am extremely proud of where the story ended up, proud with the writing, and beyond proud of the final product. While it wasn’t my intention to write something so deep and meaningful, I am ever so happy that it turned out that way.

⁴⁰ Finally. This is the ending I wanted and it ended up writing itself after writing and rehearsing multiple drafts. It’s about realizing he wants actual help and does want to get back to his family, even if the first thirty minutes didn’t.

CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMANCE AND RECEPTION

Performing something you created from the ground up is unlike any experience I've ever had. It was the greatest rush, excitement, and nervousness that I've ever experienced. On all the projects on which I've previously worked, there has always been the ability to hide behind another element, whether it is the direction, writing, one's fellow cast mates or even the designers. As a writer you can hide behind the same aspects if the piece isn't well received. That was not the case with this project. These were my words, my ideas, my designs, and my acting. If I had to compare it to any other form, I'd say it was the closest I've ever gotten to the feelings that I imagine musicians feel. So it was important for me to work through those nerves and anxiety to really focus on telling the story.

How does one do that? We all have different ways of dealing with nerves and anxiety. Since these were all new variations of fear for me, I had to find new ways to get through them. The biggest thing that changed was my pre-show warm up routine. I had to incorporate meditation before I began any other exercise to help steady my breathing and get me back to being present and available. I then used a form of meditation to work through my body and vocal warm-ups. The best way I can describe it is to compare it to Yoga. Every physical stretch and every vocal warm-up incorporated connecting my body to breath. I relaxed with each exhale and breathed into each stretch to maximize its effectiveness. This approach worked tremendously to ease my nerves, and helped me to focus on the story, character, and given circumstances. I'd ask myself questions like: Where was I? How did I get there? What was my state of being? What were my thoughts about family? Those questions really allowed me to gain a stronger sense of focus and start, as Sanford Meisner would say, accept my circumstances. That isn't to suggest I don't warm up

for a normal production where all I've done is rehearse a character. I do, it's a must for me. I usually do my stretches, vocal warm-ups, and tongue twisters while listening to music to help me relax and it's usually done out of costume. For this project, the major difference was using the breath as a way to calm and focus; staying open and exploring that approach served me really well.

There always seems to be opposites in our lives. I find that nothing is ever all good and nothing is ever all bad. So while this was an exhilarating experience for me, and one that I'll never forget, what was a downfall or a negative that I took away? I have been wracking my brain over that question for over a week now, honestly, and I can't come up with anything. Seriously. I believe my artistic approach of organically coming up with a story and knowing that it was the story that I had to tell worked better than well. I wrote and wrote and rewrote and didn't rest until things started fleshing out. I never felt rushed or cramped or like I was running out of time, since there was a definite date that the piece was going to be performed. I never felt lost or unsure of what I was creating (though as I explained above, I certainly was nervous about it.) Once I found the story, I didn't second-guess it. It grabbed me. Pulled me in. But with all that being said, it's important to note what was negative and what could have been done differently. It's inside that area that our growth will be found, because we'll acknowledge what needs work and what to do next time and what needs work. So in the spirit of growth and in the spirit of never being done with learning, I present *how* I would have done it differently. I use *how* instead of *what* because there isn't any one thing I would have done differently, but I know in the future how I'm going to do it differently. What is that one aspect? Rehearsal time. During a regular production you will get three to six weeks of just rehearsing with your director and you

usually hit a stride before the production opens. In the future, I am going to make sure that I create more rehearsal time and work more on my feet. I believe this is important because all of the major breakthroughs I had throughout the process came while working through the text and story on my feet, and I don't know if I gave myself enough time living in the world prior to performing the piece for an audience. I only got to perform it twice and I would have loved it if I didn't finish with the second performance and feel like I was just then starting to understand the story and relax into the role.

Not only was the project one of the greatest rushes and accomplishments of my life, it was also one of my largest growth spurts as an artist as well, in part because of the new aspects in my life (meditation, risk taking, listening and other personal changes I discussed in Chapter One), but the performances of this project were some of the freest, open, most exciting and interesting work I have ever done. Moreover, it came naturally and I didn't feel a lot of forced action or faking through the emotions. In fact, it has been the only time that I have consistently found myself in an emotional state for weeks at time just working through the text and story. I know that as I speak about the craft and teach young actors, the thing they most identify the most with "good acting" is the ability to cry. This is probably due to the fact that it is a real human emotion that is difficult to manufacture on command for an audience. I believe that as long as the actions and reactions are authentic, whatever emotions happen in the moment are great. But this was the first time that, throughout each rehearsal and every performance, I found myself living truthfully and experiencing emotions unconsciously without thinking where I needed to go emotionally in order for it to be "good". It was one of the very few times that I recall being totally free and open to whatever the circumstances of the story did to me. For the first time in a long time

I followed the story and lived the life of a character and my hard work and dedication to my craft started to pay off. What that goes to show me is one of the biggest lessons and take away from the project: a stronger work ethic. I've always believed that I had a strong work ethic. In fact, when I was an undergraduate studying acting I always told others and myself that I knew I would never be the greatest actor...but I would not be outworked. That was one thing I always knew I had in my control. For one reason or another, it left me during my time away from training. I didn't quit working, but it felt like I started to lose the drive to outwork others and be the most prepared and ready to go. If I'm being honest it probably had something to do with getting caught up in needing to prove myself.

In my first year of grad school I lost site of what mattered. I got caught up in being new and an outsider and felt the need to have to prove myself to others. If my ensemble or peers knew something, I had to make it known I knew it as well. I was under the impression that I needed to prove myself to people, and that is not a healthy way to go through life. But in my first year that was truthfully where I was. Working on this project got me back to listening, working and focusing on myself. I knew that I only had to prove to myself that I was better than yesterday. This project came along at the perfect time for me. It got me back on track focusing on what I needed to do to meet the challenges and goals I had set for myself before grad school.

In addition to renewing my work ethic and sense of purpose, I also grew significantly in my physical and vocal characterization. This project was the first time I really, fully believed in melding the two components together to create a character. I witnessed first hand the power these two aspects can have on a story. I originally started performing my piece with a standard American dialect, but after adding a Minnesotan

dialect it really took off. It became more personal, more nuanced and more interesting for an audience. From here on out I will forever consider the voice as being crucial to the character as the lines I memorize. I don't know if that's to say that every project is going to require a drastic dialect change, but to not think of it will do an injustice to the story and character.

How did the performances go after all this work and discovery? Amazingly. As I described earlier in this chapter, I had to change my entire preparation to address my fear and anxiety. The new pre-show warm-up/ ritual I had to incorporate was highly effective. The first performance was a success. It was one of the few times that I remember fully sinking into the story and not worrying about the outside world or if I was doing it right. I just dove in and gave it everything I had. It was an intense thirty minutes and when I finished I knew I had left everything I had out there. I had no regrets about any artist choices and felt that it had been my finest work. Stacey Cabaj, the Associate Head of the M.F.A. program at LSU, told me in conversation that my performance was a "pinnacle of [my] achievement."

The second performance had a minor hiccup, but in the end it was a testament to how far I've come. At the very beginning of the performance my cast mates forgot to let me know they were starting the show so I continued to warm-up and prepare. Unbeknownst to me my audience was sitting in the dark while my cast mates scrambled to try and find me. I was warming up in our designated area, like every night, and was told I needed to get out there immediately as the audience had been sitting in the dark for a minute. I didn't get to ease into the performance or prepare my entrance from the wings, I just had to go out and

do it. In the past I would have been stuck and let that affect the entire show. However, my warm-up had relaxed and centered me, which allowed me to let it go and move on

However, Nick Erickson, the Head of the M.F.A. program at LSU, noticed a difference. He felt that I didn't give as strong a performance as I had in previous rehearsals. I felt I did a pretty darn good job at forgetting it happened, but at least to one person it did seem to have an effect. For better or worse, there always seems to be a difference between how the actor feels in regards to their performance and the way the audience receives it. I have experienced many performances where the actor seemed to be doing it for him/her self, almost in a show off manner, which leads to a dull, uninteresting and untruthful performance. I've also experienced performances where the actor was so magnificent that I couldn't help but watch their every move, only to find out later that they felt like they had an off day or were in their head thinking too much.

That was the only noticeable difference between the nights. I felt very successful both nights, and by the end of the second performance I felt I was starting to hit a stride. It would have been exciting to explore the piece over a four week run. But alas, that will have to wait.

I received some specific feedback from an undergraduate theatre student who had seen a performance. Alexandra Abney emailed me her congratulations and some thoughts on the show. In addition to her compliments, she gave me two pieces of advice that I plan to incorporate in the next iteration. The first recommendation was that a physical description of my character's daughter would really help the audience visualize and relate to her. I fully agree with that suggestion and plan to add a favorite thing or two about her that the character loves and misses the most. Alex's second suggestion was to add a small piece of

furniture or something to the set. A goal I had set for myself at the beginning was to really stretch my imagination and ability on a bare stage. I also wanted to keep the piece authentic and since it is set in a suicide watch room, there wouldn't be anything in there that I could use to hurt myself. But the more I've stewed and thought about that advice, the more I do think it could help. Something as simple as a chair could give me a different level and help to achieve an outlet for all the energy Alex mentioned I had in my piece. Adding a chair would also be able easy incorporate if I took the piece on tour, since chairs are pretty standard in every rehearsal room and performance space.

The other feedback I received from the audience was really vague. A lot of "great job" and "powerful" and "I loved it". I really appreciate the specific feedback from fellow theatre artists. In the months since the performance, Tom Anderson, a local actor, has shared with me on more than one occasion that he truly enjoyed the piece and thought my work was lovely. Gregory Leute, another local theatre artist, told me the piece was "damn good." His words were also important to me because he is a veteran. He acknowledged that he served in a different branch and that he did not know what the protocol in my characters situation would be and he was not a sufferer of PTSD himself. But he also acknowledged that the piece never once threw him or had him second-guessing what was factual and what was fictional. Michael Pepp, a fellow ensemble member, told me after my first night performance that the play did something to his insides and that he was moved.

The faculty feedback varied throughout the different stages of development, obviously. But their feedback after viewing my final dress rehearsal was largely positive. Nick Erickson, the head of my thesis committee, and committee members Stacey Cabaj and Rick Holden all felt the piece had tremendous potential as a fringe show. During my end of

semester assessment, Nick even mentioned wanting to produce it in the 2018 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. There were two bits of advice, though, which were greatly appreciated and received. The first was from Stacey who mentioned that the piece could use some “peaks and valleys”. It’s an intense performance and if I could find the way to bring the levels down a little more, it might make the character’s actions more specific and engaging. Nick also mentioned that the piece could be a tad bit longer than the 30-minute thesis version. I feel that adding a little more about the daughter and my character’s background could really make the piece stronger, more cohesive and a bit longer.

Here’s the tricky thing about feedback; it’s important not to get sucked into it. Worrying about whether someone thought you were good or not will only hold you back. Normally after a show I don’t normally ask people their thoughts and offer a mere “thank you” if they do give me a compliment. If they do decide to discuss it, I let them lead the conversation and never reach to try to keep the conversation about my performance going. Know when to let the conversation die. But, in education and in rehearsal, it’s important to know that you’re on the right track. Asking your teachers questions like; “is my class work paying off?” or relating it to class specific exercises will benefit you. Asking about specific areas that have grown and more importantly, which areas aren’t growing as much, will help you to receive and incorporate the best possible feedback. If working with a director in rehearsal, keeping an open dialogue about what parts aren’t making sense and what could be clearer will help you make the overall story that much stronger and help you to deliver a solid performance. Know who to trust and who will give you the honest feedback you need to improve your art, not improve your ego.

The self-discoveries made on this project were astronomical. My confidence was back and higher than it ever has been. Look what I just accomplished. I can do it. I am enough. I am a darn good artist. And most importantly is the fact that not everyone needs to think so. I'm always going to suck to someone. That's the nature of what we do. Get over it. Don't hang yourself up on trying to please and be amazing in the eyes of the world. As Harold Clurman use to say, "fuck 'em all, big and small."⁴¹ Go out and do your work. Because more over, this is the work I actually want to do. This is what I always thought my career would be: working with a group of artists to create stories. In other words: collaboration. Going out there and not waiting to be given the chance to do work. I'm thankful for that reminder and discovery I made because I am a far better actor than I am an auditioner. The joy of creating *your* work and *your* story cannot be replicated by working on someone else's.

⁴¹ Clurman, Harold. *The Fervent Years: the Group Theatre and the Thirties*. New York, Da Capo Pr., 1985.

CONCLUSION: ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN END

The previous three chapters have documented how my artistic process has changed in regards to a proper warm-up and how my confidence has grown as a direct result. I've always made sure that my body, which is my instrument, was warm and ready to perform in whatever role I was playing. But as I've stated, this one was different, and I found success in adding elements like meditation and relaxation exercises along to my physical warm-up. Because I was able to create something from nothing and have received positive feedback that affirms that this piece was a success, my confidence grew. I take with me the importance of a proper show-specific warm-up and the knowledge that I am capable of anything I set my mind to.

My beliefs about the craft of acting have also evolved. I've had conversations with several actors about the notion of making the other actor/ character feel something instead of simply playing actions. This idea is usually met with blank stares or confused looks. I wouldn't say that I've abandoned action, but rather, sought for a more direct way to achieve stronger results. We are taught from our very first acting class that the actions, or verbs, things we can literally do to achieve our objective, are the way to go. This makes sense since acting is the art of doing and an actor should never fake anything, actions that can be done are an actor's best friend. But what if there was a more direct and successful way of doing this? It's my opinion that there is and that is, to focus not on what I can do, but on how I can make you feel. Moreover, I will not focus on the way I feel, but on the way my character can make your character feel. What I'm suggesting is that in our everyday lives we try to make people feel a certain way to get things that we want. Specifically, we affect their point of view. When pursuing sex, a promotion, praise, food, or friendship, we don't

think of actions as a way to get what we want, instead, we try to make the other person feel something. In acting, if we are to apply the same approach, the line readings and actions take care of themselves. More importantly, we open ourselves up to the act of play by taking the attention off ourselves, and putting it on our scene partner. The scene then becomes about our partner and not about us, which will make us a less selfish artist, and moreover, creating a scene/performance that is more interesting to watch.

That isn't to say actions are outdated and no longer serve a purpose for the actor, not at all. But when working on my solo show, I found that it was a more effective way to affect the doctors other side of the glass. I wanted them, the imagined audience, to feel something that would help me get my freedom and achieve my super-objective of committing suicide, as the character, of course. There was only so much that I could do with a bare stage in regards to actions that it made more sense.

I've witnessed this with young and seasoned actors alike, who are stuck in their own minds and merely play actions and play activities for the sake of busy work, leading to a scene or delivery that is not relatable to what is actually happening and taking focus away from their scene partner. My belief behind that notion is that when actors have something physical to do, their minds are taken away from the fact that people are watching their every move. But actions and the philosophy of making your scene partner feel something are one in the same. If you're trying to achieve sex as an objective, you want to make the other person feel attractive and in the mood for such an activity, which will lead to flirting, or something similar, which is an action. So it can be said that one is a result of the other, perhaps no matter which had come first. Focusing on trying to make your scene partner feel something, in my opinion, is simply an easier way to work and keeps us out of our

heads as actors which will make for a more interesting scene than the other. This new philosophy is created organically rather than intellectually and can be much easier to focus on during the act of play.

“What is theatre?” is a question that any of us who have studied theatre and acting are asked on a regular basis in our classes. One year it may mean something to us and the next year, theatre may mean something completely different. I was given a brand new answer to that question at the conclusion of this process. My piece was put up as part of a presentation with other M.F.A. actors, and we all had completely different pieces that meant something to us, and we all went about our creative processes completely different. But the end result was a great night of theatre. I’ve always thought that we were investigators into human truths as actors, that we should be in search of what is real and offer ourselves as vessels to the audience to convey real human behavior. That was confirmed for me while watching the work of two members of our ensemble. Their solo performances showed me real human struggles that I haven’t experienced, which cultivated my empathy.

With the successful completion of the project, I will earn my Master in Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University. It’s a dream I’ve had for a very long time to complete this degree. I am proud of this accomplishment and it means something more to me than any of my other experiences. As a result of graduate training, I set higher expectations for myself, particularly regarding my preparation and physical/vocal characterization. It also gives me a strong sense of duty to carry on the art form. The M.F.A. is a terminal degree that qualifies me to teach at the post-secondary level. That’s a great responsibility, one that needs to be recognized. In the future, young artists are going to look

to me for guidance, expertise, and understanding, and I have to pass on this sacred ritual. The completion of the M.F.A. is a great honor and I will carry that honor with me as I help to create the next generation of artists.

My first goal is to bring my solo show home to Minnesota and perform it there for my friends and family who weren't able to travel to Louisiana to watch it. I would love for my community at home to be exposed to the piece and the message. What's really great about the solo show is that it's mine. I created it. I don't have to pay anyone rights or worry about copyright laws; I can do whatever I want with it. I also know it better than anyone else does. I wrote it with the intention that it could be produced on any stage in any format. So the real thrill about the project is that it will always give me a project to work on. If I am having troubles landing gigs through auditions, I have a piece that I am comfortable taking on tour and producing myself. Aside from the two aspects I talked about in the earlier chapters, there aren't a whole lot of script revisions that need to be done. I believe it's adaptable so that if I have minimal lighting capabilities offered through a venue, I can adapt it easily without ruining the structure of the story. As the faculty mentioned, the piece is nearly ready for fringe festivals.

In closing, this has been one of my most rewarding experiences to date. I highly recommend the thesis project, or more specifically, the creation of a one-person show. I learned so much about my capabilities as an artist and I have this research project to thank. Not only has it helped instill confidence in me as a performer, it's given me multiple tools and a project I can perform for the remainder of my life. Because of this piece, I have the ability to always be a working actor, and that's something that not many actors can say.

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VITA

Joshua Stenvick is a native of Minneapolis, Minnesota and didn't find acting until the ripe age of twenty-nine. As a result of the 2008 U.S economic recession, Joshua enrolled at a local community college where his focus was the completion of liberal education courses that would help him to transfer to a major university. While there, he took an introduction to acting class and the bug bit. He decided to pursue the craft further by transferring to the University of Minnesota-Duluth, where he completed his B.F.A in Acting.

Joshua has not only acted in college productions, but regional theatres in the Minneapolis and Duluth, Minnesota areas. He has also participated in stand up comedy at the Acme Comedy Club located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His passion lies well beyond art as he spends his free time enjoying sporting events, music, literature, writing and spending as much time in the outdoors as he possibly can. Upon graduation from Louisiana State University, Joshua plans on moving to Chicago, Illinois to pursue acting as a full time career.