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Stroke For Your Arrogance

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Stroke For Your Arrogance

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Michael Dolan

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication:

I dedicate this project to my family. Thank you for your love and support and being there for all of it.....the good, the bad, and the beautiful.

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To Jean Wagner, thank you for your wisdom, time, advice and overall confidence in me throughout my time at this institution

To my theater and performance professors, thank you for fostering my growth and love of learning. You have gone above and beyond what I have expected and truly nurtured my love of theater.

To my talented cohort in the theater community, thank you for your inspiration and support.

To my friends at Bard. You've all been amazing parts of my daily life and I continue to learn from all of you.

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I. Introduction/The Beginning

I wrote, directed, blocked, and performed “Stroke for Your Arrogance.” “Stroke for Your Arrogance” started as an idea centering around the work of Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs). As funny and strange as it sounds, it ended up being a story about me. In my original idea for the script I was going to interview EMTs who were incredibly busy during pandemic days. Then the project morphed into interviewing the group of EMTs from my past. As a kid from a small town with a constantly, chronically injured past I know a lot of the EMTs who have been called to “save the day” for me in my younger years.

The story eventually evolved and took on a new direction. I noticed and felt that I really wanted to tell one story about one specific injury. I decided that splicing that with stories about EMTs (oftentimes told by EMTs) was irresponsible. So, I went back to the injury that impacted my life so greatly. The injury in question was my stroke which occurred in 2007. I'd never written about my stroke in such glaring detail, so it was very interesting to see how it sort of evolved and just the direction it went in, which at times brought up many painful memories.

II. The Writing Process:

When writing the script I was extremely deliberate and careful. I didn't want it to come out like “inspiration porn,” which I think happens so often especially when we talk about disability in forums like theater, movies or performance art. I felt that from the outside perspective, disabilities, when they're not being viewed as inspirational, are regarded as pretty depressing. In reality they are neither of these things most of the time.

I'll give you an example. In my piece I talked about what led up to my ADHD diagnosis. I was talking. I was chatting up a storm in class. Anything inherently depressing about that? Anything inspiring? No. See, what was depressing was the fact that I was slapped on Ritalin to deal with that and what was inspiring was how I responded but there's nothing inherently depressing or inspirational about that story. What was depressing was the way the world reacted to me talking too much in class. What was inspirational? How I lived through five years of that accursed medication. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm so glad that I wrote, directed and blocked this piece. I feel that if you leave anything about stories of disabilities up to able-bodied people they're going to mess it up. And yeah I cleaned up my vocabulary for this paper.

Writing this piece was an honor and it was really very weird to do. For starters, I was only seven years old when I had my stroke. Something very interesting that I find about the brain is when it's bleeding or directly after it has been bleeding it doesn't tend to remember stuff that well. This was my first time thinking about some of this stuff since it happened. Everything associated with those times were really sensitive childhood life-changing, life-defining moments. It was very interesting to remember some of this stuff again. This piece didn't make it into the

final script, but I thought about my second grade field day. It was right after my stroke, probably the best memory I have from those years. I remember exactly how I felt that day. Lost. I felt lost. All I knew is that I fought and fought to get back to that school, to participate in that field day, and then I hated my time actually there. I was a different person on that field than I had been before the stroke.

It was hard remembering some of this stuff both physically and mentally. Heck, the things that haven't been blocked out permanently from my memory just because of the stroke, I tried very hard to block out. So I just started at my seventh birthday and worked my way forward in my mind. I tried to really remember the little stuff like trips to the bathroom in the hospital, or when all the alarms that would ring when I moved, or late night vitals checks, or the daily needle I would get. Those things helped bring some of the memories back. Yeah, did I remember some things that I didn't want to, sure. I had to be careful with myself when writing this because yeah it did come out humorous and that was an intentional choice I made. But in between the bat-shit funny stories, a lot of suffering actually happened to me specifically.

So I made an intentional decision to sort of separate myself from the story at times. I let the stroke patient be this character I was removed from. Come the time of the performance this really helped me to distinguish the character as someone I was describing, not someone I was. For a lot of reasons, just my overall demeanor as well as the timing of the piece, I had to keep it moving.

When I was writing I broke up the work into three sections/monologues. I wrote all three of them individually. With each section I tried to finish it the first time I sat down to write. The

third monologue was not as easy and actually took three times. Some of it was painful to remember and write. The first two I finished the first time I sat down. The thoughts and words just flowed.

All of my work was written at around three in the morning and edited later. Why? Was this a happy accident? I seem to get my inspiration very, very early in the mornings. I remember with the first monologue, I had gotten home from a friend's birthday party when I started. I had some ideas about the introduction. I figured I'd mention Bard and get the cheap cheers early. That ended up working well as it set the tone for the rest of the piece and got the audience involved early.

In writing monologue number two in the play I woke up at 3 A.M. About a week had gone by since the time that I had written monologue one. So I had some ideas flowing that I knew would leave me before I woke up in the morning. I started writing monologue two. I started that one with the story of the day my stroke happened. I have a lot of experience telling this particular part of my story. It took me a very short amount of time to figure out how to do that with a comedic spin. I finished monologue two and was closing my eyes at 4:37 A.M. I think I spent more time waking up than actually writing that night.

And then monologue two came out so well I just knew monologue three had to be written ridiculously late at night or very early in the morning. I was in a time crunch though at this point. I had about a month until the performance so I knew I had to get moving if I wanted enough time with the last monologue.

Like I said, the first two monologues went off without a hitch and I knew that this was

going to be the last thing I was going to be writing for this project. I think nerves started getting to me and that's why I had to rewrite the third monologue two times. That and I had no idea how I wanted to end it. The original version had a very pessimistic ending and the message I was sending was very “me- centric”. It was very much, “I did this, I got, hear me.” I decided that was not the best way to end a comedic piece. There would have to be re-writing.

Well I think the sentiment held up. I think that was a good call on my part to end on a soft note. I figured it would make the clapping louder at the end and the mood could be less somber and more uplifting. So I sacrificed a bit of the story’s pain for a much-needed applause break. Which I did end up getting at the end of Friday's show. It was right where I was expecting it so it was a good feeling to have that good of an idea of how the audience was going to react. One person started then I wisened up and shut up. Then I hammed it up a little bit. I took a step back from the music stand and did what I had seen the comic Mulaney do before on an applause break. I put my hands on my knees, looked down, and shook my body a bit to milk the applause break. And while I'm giving credit where credit is due the four hellos at the beginning of the piece and then me crediting the location I got that from Robin Williams which was exactly what he did in the recording for his HBO special “Weapons of Self-Destruction.” Bear in mind, however, it was a more expletive-filled introduction.

III. Direction Of Yourself In Motion/Tech:

The movement and blocking section of this piece was a lot of fun. I knew I wanted to keep it as minimalistic as possible. However, I did decide to go a bit more complex than your standard chair at the microphone that you would see at any typical comedy show. I figured it would be a smart move to look a little different.. If it wasn't funny, no one would drill me about it. I ended up going with two chairs and used them as tools to show progression through the story. It was a gift to be able to use the chairs to show growth over time. Also, something about splitting the center of the stage with the two chairs was rewarding for me. I hope it was rewarding for the audience as well. It's like a coaxing thing. Which at least from the stage felt good to do again. As for the stools, they were a bit tall. I'm a tall guy and they sort of dwarfed me, which I think is hilarious to think about. It made for great choreography. I was able to do things with my legs folded one over the other. I had to really reach down to touch the floor which made me extend to my full height of six feet, eight inches. I thought it was good to do.

Early on I experimented a lot with standing and sitting. Throughout the different monologues I started with toes in. This is because when I stand this way I've always been uncomfortable because it is vulnerable. And I thought it would make sense if the most vulnerable thing that the audience saw during the program was my stance. Also, I found it ideal that they see me in a less than ideal situation.

For me this became a little secret for just myself. It is my senior project, and I feel uncomfortable for you being the audience. Speaking of secrets for myself, I had three coins in my pocket for the performances. One was Rutherford B. Hayes, one had Sacagawea and one had

Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I got them from The Bard vending machine in the Campus Center. They were all dollar coins. I got them the night of a tech rehearsal and I was going to put them back in the vending machine but something just told me to just keep them. I was on my way to the tech rehearsal when I decided I was going to keep them on me for all of the upcoming shows and techs. While you'll never get me to admit I am superstitious, I still have the three coins and they sit on my record player, all face-side up.

Speaking of superstitions, here is another instance where they may or may not have come into play. Thoughts about my clothing choice would come to me often during the tech rehearsals. During the first tech I wore a purple "Barack Obama 2008" tee-shirt that says, "Change is Coming" on the back. It was a great tee-shirt that my father actually gifted to my sister way back when he was running for the presidency the first time. I ended up finding it online and purchased the identical one that my dad had purchased. It was a super special tee-shirt to me. I didn't wear it for the second tech rehearsal only because it was really detailed and I didn't really know if I wanted to wear something with letters on it on stage. Then, someone from the cohort brought it up to me. They mentioned that they were upset that I didn't wear the Obama tee-shirt again. I did slightly worse than the first tech, so you know what happened, Obama came back like he did in 2012 baby.

My childhood blanket, my baby blanket that I had loved that also belonged to my older sisters, was an item that I expected to play a bigger role in the performances. I think it was a natural progression for it not to. Not only would it have taken away from the story, but also I think just throwing it underhand like I chose to do was hilarious. Yeah, there are marks and spots all over that thing. No one has seen that thing in years. It has been probably a decade and a half

since it resurfaced. It became super unimportant and that's why tossing it is really the best comedic use for it. And, the best use for it overall. Like, yes, it takes up a lot of time in my story.

But, ultimately, by throwing it, I'm showing growth. It had been on my mind for a while to bring an end to the blanket story, but it was such a defining moment and no one really had heard that story before. By that I mean I don't usually tell that part of the story. No one cares that I lost my blanket. They care that I had a stroke, aptly and correctly. But I do remember that I wrote for five to ten minutes about it. So obviously that piece of cloth, whether it's still with us here or whether incinerated in a fire eight years ago is neither here nor there to me now, but it was at one time so important to me that I talked about it.

For a show that was about sickness I thought it was hilarious how much sickness just revolves around the show. When we had gotten back for the start of the spring semester I had caught COVID. Then I got sick for the second show which was very annoying, but I got through it nonetheless. I ended up on stage blowing my nose in my mask that I had come on with. It was pretty gross. By the end I was pretty fatigued, and I think I was sweating up a storm both nights from the sickness. If I'm honest I just think I was feeling the sickness even more at the second performance. As far as COVID goes that was, thank God, just an annoyance for me.

While my COVID days interfered with my writing process a tad, I couldn't write for a few days, it could have been a lot worse. It made me nervous more than anything. I get really nervous every time I get sick that I'm going to lose part of my "mojo." It was really good to give good performances and write "good stuff" even when sick because it was reaffirming to myself! As it turns out. It has helped to put to bed a bit of those long-held fears that I have about being

sick.

The decision to make my project funny was kicked around early, and I knew it was probably going to be the default setting, if you will, for this show. It is supposed to be a tremendous effort to get laughs and I think I did that. I know it's hard to joke about strokes and they're really not that funny. But I had one. That fact does give me the liberty to say what I thought about it. I know that stroke jokes, especially to a college audience which was mostly who I was performing for, may seem weird and out of place and out of context. I know that very few of these young people know people who have had strokes but I think on a very human level we all understand pain.

Additionally, I think we can all understand grappling with someone trying to make light of a painful situation. I think it's one of the most talented and best things about our generation. That is why I decided to make it humorous. Plus, all the laughs didn't hurt. The other option would have been a much more serious read. I did a version of a serious read for the second matinee performance. The matinee still got some laughs but I did some more serious talk which could have been approaching a sob story. The audience was not as young as at the evening performance and they seemed more serious. I was not as loud and raucous but met the audience with a more serious tone. However, I'm really glad that I still stuck with my original plan which was to include the funny twists. The first night the audience called for it. It was a receptive crowd so I'm glad I could bring the energy. At the second performance I brought the energy in a calmer, more serious tone.

IV. Performance:

The separate performances were each great in their own ways. I was really grateful for the chance to do it twice, even though I was noticeably sick and a bit uncomfortable for the second performance. The work on this Senior Project has forced me to think on my feet. The whole process has helped me to make important decisions about taking care of my mind and body when I am writing and performing. I was not feeling well at all on the day of the second performance and passing out on stage would not have been a good option for me. As it turns out, the discomfort of the sickness didn't really matter, as the show went great.

I'm going to start with talking about the second day of the performance as a lot of the pressure was off! That is because the first day, which I'm going to get to, went very well. I had received a lot of compliments so I was pretty openly cocky. My parents and many friends and young people were at the first show so it turned out to be a very full circle moment for me. None of the friends that I have made at Bard over the years had really seen me act before, largely due to the circumstances surrounding the time of COVID. It was rather cathartic to get to do something so similar to theater in front of them. And it had been quite a while since my parents had seen me act, so it was for them to see as well. Plus, they were there for all of the years of the stroke and its survival time. I feel like they got to see that all their money didn't go to waste and that I still got it.

As it turns out, the second performance took on a more serious tone than the first. There were a lot less laughs for one thing. I made that decision pretty purposefully when I saw the size of the audience, which was smaller and older than the evening performance. It was a safety net

decision that I made at the last minute just to sort of punch the ticket and not go full-fledged with some of the comedic aspects of the show. Ultimately it ended up working out. I got a few laughs here and there on the second day and that was certainly good. It was the amount of laughter that I was going for that day. The audience was fantastic for the show, pnce again, really responsive. I did get a lot more “Oooohs and Ahhhhs” on the second day. I think the audience was trying to express discomfort, not with me, but with the story I was telling.

Both performances went well. They were great fun for me. At the end of the day, that's what I was trying to achieve and did receive the reactions that I was hoping to get when I was writing this piece. I knew ultimately that it was going to be hard to follow the audience reaction of the first performance. I had to make myself remember that every show is a vacuum and therefore a microcosm of everyone who sees, hears and smells it. The way the audience reacts to it and how they are reacting during the show itself should set the set tone for your piece when it's in motion.

One thing that I would like to mention about the second show is the throwing of the blanket. That did not go as well the second day because I tried to do it the same exact way that I did it the first night. Something that I learned here is not to try to do anything physical the same way twice. It never comes out how I want it to. Especially in front of an audience. Each audience is going to react to things differently as each audience is sized and shaped differently.

Ultimately, I feel I could have improved at least the second show, (maybe even the first show), by knowing that each audience is going to react to things differently and you can't just assume that each audience is going to find everything equally funny or serious or poignant.

There were some lines in the second show that killed and got laughs when during the first show, they did nothing. The second show is supposed to be my more serious read. So I am wondering, are people's senses of humor messed up? Maybe, but I think what more likely happened is it was a different show, and it was a different audience. My voice probably had a different cadence each time and the second crowd laughed where the first crowd didn't a lot. Each performance of a show is its own thing. It's its own Frankenstein's monster!

My first show was nearly nine minutes longer than my second show, and that's with no dialogue changes at all. That being said I think I did a good job making the second show its own thing. It was its own baby, but that being said, it also followed the success of the first show. I did try to clone some of the moments from the first show to the second show. In retrospect, I should not have as those moments just didn't translate.

As far as moments where I made a change: On the afternoon of the second show I did add one lone line of dialogue. I added one line that was "cursing at a matinee?" Just to lighten the crowd and just to make it its own thing and make it special because I was tired. I was blowing my nose into my face mask. It was actively gross that I had to do that, but I was sick. So I was trying to bring back energy however possible to the piece because I knew that without cheap one liners like that the second night would have been drowned by complete depression. That would not have been good for the people who went after me.

Performance one was an all around fun and nerve-racking experience. It was my first time performing in front of an audience of that size since COVID began. I wanted to appear both ramped up and excited from the first moment but also comfortable. I planned the script to be fast

paced. That's why I ended up writing the introduction with big hellos at the beginning and then credit to the location. I was quite nervous leading up to the show. I didn't really have anything to eat aside from at best half a bagel and one single slice of reheated pizza. It's weird I can never eat on show days. Regardless, I didn't exactly have the breakfast of champions so I had to paste that appearance of confidence on my facade piece by piece. If I am being totally honest, on the day of the show I tried not to think about it at all. I only gave my script a once-over and then went back to digesting media in the form of either YouTube or Netflix. I don't remember which. When you work something into the ground like I did with this piece I think it's really futile to get yourself worked up before a performance. Plus, media, at least in this form, just puts me and I think all people into a place where they are primed for communication at least in limited doses. It's something about watching the sentences fall out of the characters mouths. I don't think it's a coincidence that I don't remember what I was watching or even the media platform that I was watching it on. I was watching it for comfort, and to know that I wasn't going to chase myself up a tree before this performance. A good distraction.

Then I thought about how it's my responsibility to do this later. To take people out of their day, and that was comforting. Not only because it's been so long since I've been asked to do that but because I was just freaking out watching media, being comforted, and the idea that I might be able to do that for someone really loosened me up. I physically felt loose after that. I felt ready. I arrived at the Fisher Center just about jumping out of my socks. I thought it was amazing but also very hard that I was able to sit still at least for a little while until the cohort arrived. We sang songs, we quoted each others' pieces. We had an all around great time, sort of removed from it all. It is a great memory but it was literally just forty minutes before I went on. In retrospect, it is

probably part of the reason the show went so well. The time with the cohort removed me from the situation and the pressure dwindled. During the two shows before mine, I paced back and forth. It's something that I usually do when I'm looking for an idea. It's become a habit. The pacing seemed to be stressing one of the stage crew that was there for people's quick changes, so I took the cue and sat down. Ten minutes passed and I was out in the wing waiting to go on. I did take the time to quickly grab the coins before going on.

I ran on and bellowed out my hellos. Instantly I was greeted with a warm reception of applause and cheers. I knew it's going to be a fun night as long as I didn't mess up because that crowd was something else. They would not stop cheering, they cheered for lines I didn't even anticipate them cheering for! Basically they were cheering for straight-up everything. It felt great. It was awesome.

I had to be cautious because that type of excitement can bog you down, or make you lose your place. I did not want my joy and excitement to cause me to deliver things differently than I had planned. The blanket throw went great. I did it underhand from a Hamlet “Yoricks Skull” position”. That got a big laugh and that was the only time and that was okay . “Different shows for different folks”. While there were a couple of small missteps, I'm not going to be too hard on myself. I think that people cheering is a very good thing.

V. The Conclusion

My story, that I turned into a script, evolved into a jumping off point for neurotypical people and their understandings of what it can be like to live with a disability. Part of my goal was for the audience to understand some of the troubles and trials of one person who is neurodivergent and has an existing medical condition. I think I'm happy with the way the information was presented. I wanted neurotypicals to be able to understand the show and what life can be like if you are dealt a more difficult hand. I spoke at a volume that they could understand about situations that were part of my past and have shaped me.

I would have loved to have included a scene with a bully from gym class. But that's not overall a good scene for the neurotypical audience to understand. Like yeah, they'd understand that I was being bullied but I didn't want to have to walk them through why I put that scene in there. It would have shown the lasting effects of bullying a classmate with a disabled body part because of that disabled body part they have. I thought, no I better cut it. The neurotypical won't understand it, so I stopped writing it. That is a neurodivergent person cutting down his own piece out of the respect for the neurotypicals. I didn't want them to feel uncomfortable. What's new? Nothing!

So this was a neuro-divergent stroke story. I'm very glad that I did this piece alone. I didn't want neurotypicals messing this piece up. Riding through this piece was doable because I have a very unique writing system and an important wellness check-in routine. The performances were awesome when you consider each show, even if it's in the same performance as its own Automata. When you've worked on something good, good things happen. Especially when you

don't think about it too much. I hope, for the audience, it was fun and interesting and informative; like my media, a good distraction.

To go through all of the steps it took to production of this project was cathartic for me. There were some demons to face head-on and I did it willingly. Perhaps, narrative therapy at its best?