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Great Balls of Fire: Exploring the Theatricality of Professional Wrestling

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GREAT BALLS OF FIRE:
Exploring the Theatricality of Professional Wrestling

A Senior Project submitted to

The Division of The Arts

of Bard College

by

Paul Nicholson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

Dedication

To Jean Wagner, Andrea Thome, Gideon Lester, Jorge Cortiñas - for your invaluable guidance.

To Dorothy Albertini - for everything, everything, everything, but above all, keeping me honest.

To Jack Ferver, Jonathan Rosenberg, Joshua Lubin-Levy, Miriam Felton-Dansky, Lynn Hawley,
and all Bard faculty I've had the pleasure of working with in the past 4 years - for the tools,
inspiration, and passion you give your students.

Table of Contents

I. *GREAT BALLS OF FIRE*, Artist Statement.....3

II. *GREAT BALLS OF FIRE*, Script.....20

III. Work Cited.....47

ARTIST STATEMENT

For my senior project I wanted to stage a pro wrestling match. Yes, that silly cross between sport and entertainment where bodybuilders in tights pretend to fight over shiny belts that validate their status as being the best ‘pretend fighters’ in the world. Actually, that is taking it a step too far. Pro wrestlers may not be considered legitimate athletes, they are entertainers after all; however they are able to draw audiences that rival many sporting and theatrical spectacles. It is not just their incredible feats of athleticism, but something to this form that has captivated fans around the world for decades. My hope for this project was to learn about the attributes of this form of storytelling that have made it so popular. Are these attributes unique to pro wrestling? Could these traits translate in other mediums of storytelling such as a play?

Towards the end of my sophomore year, I had written my first pro wrestling play. The preceding six months had been marked by brooding, anxiety, and depression. My younger brother had been diagnosed in September with a form of Leukemia that would require aggressive and extensive treatment for the next three and half years, with those first few months of treatment being the most intense. It was hard to stay concentrated on anything back then without thinking about my brother’s health every few minutes. Finally, I decided I wanted to write something that was so goofy and fun that I could escape from the mess my life felt like. The silliest subject I could come up with? Professional Wrestling. It was a 30 page play that featured the most absurd combat sequences and cheesy dialogue I could think of.

My playwriting professor Andrea Thome gave me a pro wrestling play to read, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* by Kristoffer Diaz (hereafter referred to as *The Elaborate Entrance*). Diaz himself is a pro wrestling fan. Even though he, like myself and many other

wrestling fans, is troubled to say the least by the pro wrestling industry exploiting stereotypes for many of its storylines, he remains addicted to the sport (and yes, I will be referring to pro wrestling as a sport). Diaz's play was in direct response to that conflict wrestling fans have.

The main character Mace, who despite often being pigeonholed as a character fitting those previously mentioned stereotypes, tries to achieve wrestling stardom, in spite of the industry being stacked against both him and the ideals he strives for. I thought it was one of the most incredible plays I had ever read. Not because it dealt with the subject matter of pro wrestling, but because it was an answer to the seemingly unanswerable question every wrestling fan is asked...*You know it's fake, right?*

It's weird. That's a question you would never ask someone who had just attended a Broadway play. *Yeah it's fake but...that's not really the point.* 'Fake' is an adjective I have heard describe performances but not the actual concept of acting or performance. So why is it used so frequently in an effort to demean pro wrestling? For those that do not know, pro wrestling is a form of entertainment where violent matches are staged with predetermined outcomes. Some young pro wrestling fans remain mystified and believe the violence they watch is 100% real. But at a certain age, you stop believing that Santino Marella's maneuver *The Cobra* is as devastating as it appears on TV. Please stop here and look up 'Santino's *The Cobra*' before reading any further.

More than anything else, Diaz's play is a love letter to pro wrestling. That is what makes the play so special. He was able to capture how a fan's love for the sport evolves as they get older. As a child, a fan roots for the favorite superhero characters they see in the ring. As they grow older, if they remain connected to the sport, they learn more about the performers that

portray those characters. Take the case of Daniel Bryan of the WWE (the preeminent global pro wrestling company), a character whose backstory is that he is a “goat-faced” vegan internet darling who, despite all the odds and critics, became World Heavyweight Champion. A child would root for such a character in a heartbeat. The real story is not far off. The wrestler who portrays the character of Daniel Bryan is a man named Bryan Danielson, who really is a vegan and gained a large fan following on the independent wrestling circuit. In spite of him not fitting the traditional bodybuilder mold of a WWE wrestler, his popularity led him to being signed by the WWE in 2009. Although he was never expected by the company hierarchy to become a marquee name, he would go on to become World Heavyweight Champion in the main event of WWE’s biggest show of the year, Wrestlemania.

It requires very little suspension of disbelief to be a Daniel Bryan fan. That is also the reason it pains and infuriates fans so much when the wrestling industry instead produces storylines that exploit tired stereotypes, using performers and characters that lack that same connection to the fans. Diaz is able to so accurately capture that love-hate relationship fans have to wrestling in his play. I know it is accurate because that is exactly how my own wrestling fandom has evolved.

The first time I ever watched professional wrestling was when I was 7 years old. My family and I were living overseas in Beijing and I was over at a friend's house after school one day. In my house, my mother had a strict policy of no TV before 6pm on a school night. Naturally, I was giddy when my friend asked what I would like to watch on his brand new TV (at only 3:30pm) that I didn't care what we watched. He decided we would watch that year's Wrestlemania on DVD, specifically his hero Batista (real name Dave Bautista) defeating his

one-time mentor Triple H (real name Paul Levesque) for the World Heavyweight Championship. Both men had physiques that I had never seen before. The power and athleticism they displayed blew my mind, but what really gripped me was the emotion I saw on their faces as the two men battled. To me, Batista did not look human. He was the closest thing to the biblical Goliath I had ever seen, except he would not be vanquished no matter what Triple H threw at him. That's the magical lense a child sees pro wrestling through.

I did not watch wrestling again until my family moved to the United States in 2011. I was flipping through the channels on a monday night when I came across *Monday Night RAW*. The wrestlers were different, but it was that same odd spectacle I had experienced six years earlier. I kept watching WWE for quite a while after that. I became such a fan in fact, that I convinced my parents to take our family to visit New Orleans in 2014 to see Wrestlemania 30 (the WWE's equivalent of the Superbowl). I remember my brother telling everyone we met down in New Orleans, "I don't like wrestling, I'm only here because my brother likes it." My parents did not have a very high opinion of my interest either. As we walked into the New Orleans Superdome, Wrestlemania's venue that year, I remember my dad turning to me and saying "Your mother and I are the only college graduates here." That turned out not to be true. As my dad later found out, several other college educated people who worked in his New York office had either wanted to fly down to New Orleans to see *The Showcase of the Immortals* or had in fact made the trip. My parents were confused most of the time. The Superdome had been filled by over 75,000 fans. Surely there could not be this many people who thought *wrestling* was real, could there? My parents were missing the point. This was not about legitimate competition or sport, it was about spectacle and entertainment. Yes, we were about to watch characters 'compete' for

championships that held no legitimacy as far as distinguishing the best wrestlers in the world. But that was not the point.

The worst kept secret in wrestling is that it is *fake*. But so what? Professional wrestling is a passion play designed to depict the basic never ending struggle between good and evil. But more than that, wrestlers winning a championship or being given a prominent storyline was validation of their skill as performers.

Wrestlemania 30 was the pinnacle of my fandom with respect to professional wrestling. I still tune in to the WWE from time to time, but you cannot appreciate the story professional wrestlers tell if you only tune in casually; wrestling has no offseason. The WWE's performers put on shows year round, writing new chapters for their storylines of their characters every week. But how is it that wrestling captures the imagination of its audience, week in and week out? It's not just the violence and athleticism, there is mixed martial arts for that. What is it about professional wrestling as a form that keeps generation after generation of fans so engaged?

I decided I wanted to make that question the focus of my Senior Project. My original intention was to stage Diaz's play in an effort to answer it. However, after agonizing for months over how to make such a project fit into the box of Bard College's Senior Project, it became clear that challenge would just be too great. I was not going to be able to stage *The Elaborate Entrance* for my senior project, not in the way the play deserved anyway. I would have to make significant cuts to Diaz's 60+ page piece in order to condense it into a 25-minute production. I feel every page of that play is essential in telling the story of its main character Mace and I could not make those cuts. Additionally, the play's characters and their respective physical appearances are very specific. The playwright did not leave room for actors that did not match

the physical description of the characters to play the role. The play directly dealt with wrestling commonly using racial and ethnic stereotypes as a cornerstone for its feuds and storylines, and so the actors needed to fit the bill. The lead character of Mace would need to be played by a Latinx actor with a slender build and incredible athletic ability. His foil, Chad Deity, would need to be played by a black actor with an almost Herculean physique. Mace's protege, VP, would need to be played by an actor who could pass for being of Middle Eastern descent. Most importantly, these actors would need to be proficient in wrestling in order to perform wrestling sequences that Diaz wrote into the play. I would need to be certain that I would be able to find actors with these traits for these specified roles if I was to put on a production of *The Elaborate Entrance*. Having been a part of many student productions at Bard, I knew at best I would only be able to hope to find a cast that comprised some of these traits, I could not guarantee all the specifications would be met.

Since I felt I would not be able to do the play justice if I was to attempt to perform it, I decided to write another pro wrestling play. My end goal was to perform that play at Bard. Though I never got the chance to do so due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus, it is important to note that I wrote the play with the intention of directing a production of it in April of 2020. To solve some of the issues presented by trying to stage *The Elaborate Entrance*, this play would be written without having so much of the narrative dependent on the physical traits of its characters. While I did give the characters fairly elaborate backstories (Bodhi being an obnoxious Californian surfing wrestler, Wolfgang being a legendary wrestling technician from Germany, etc) these backstories could be changed or adapted to the performers who would eventually play them without too large an impact on the narrative.

I also made the decision early on that the final act of the play would feature an actual wrestling match between Bodhi & Wolfgang. There needed to be a resolution to their feud, which would only happen when one of the characters would yield to the other during their epic clash. In order to accomplish this, the actors who would play wrestlers, as is specified by Diaz in *The Elaborate Entrance*, would need to have a general understanding of wrestling choreography. This was based on two reasons: first, a wrestling match can only appear convincing as a fight if the wrestlers have had time to practice the sequences of the fight; the second was for the safety of the actors. Even though pro wrestling is staged, it still involves people slamming into the ground, striking their opponents, and performing holds which if performed incorrectly could result in serious injury.

It was not a realistic expectation to ask actors to have that knowledge heading into an audition. That is why while I was writing the play over the summer of 2019, I began attending biweekly pro wrestling classes at the Create A Pro Wrestling Academy in Hicksville, New York. The first few classes consisted of learning how to take punishment during a wrestling match or taking bumps. A wrestling ring floor is padded but still requires specific technique to fall onto. We would run drills where we performed back bumps onto the mat for 30 minutes each class. Then we learned how to be struck by your opponent. One of the most important lessons I learned here is that you must always keep your head up; not to avoid getting hit, but so that the audience would be able to read the pain and emotion on your face. After a couple months, I was finally allowed to stage and perform a five minute match with a partner using the techniques we learned. These techniques would form the basic skeleton of the match eventually written into the second act of *Great Balls Of Fire*.

If the second act was to be the resolution to the feud, Act One would have to set up what was at stake in that match. Even though I had seen many wrestling storylines over the years, the pro wrestlers I worked with at the Academy in Hicksville helped me understand why so many of the same tropes get used over and over again. Modern professional wrestling has its roots as a form of entertainment in 19th century Europe and later as a sideshow event in American carnivals. At this time, pro wrestling was still a shoot - which meant wrestlers would use a combination of classic Catch Wrestling with striking attacks, submission holds, as well as acrobatics and tosses in legitimate competition to measure their physical prowess. The sport was quite popular at the turn of the 20th Century, with the rematch between George Hackenschmidt and Frank Gotch drawing a crowd of over 20,000 at Chicago's Comiskey Park - the highest attended sporting event besides horse racing at the time. However, wrestling matches were becoming quite slow and boring, dragging on for hours on end. By the 1930s, Shoot Wrestling had become a thing of the past in favor of wrestling performances in which the outcome would be predetermined; wrestlers now gave performances, in which their skill was no longer measured by wins and losses, but by how much they entertained their audiences. Wrestling promoters would book the participants of a match, as well as the match's eventual winner and loser, and it would be up to the individual wrestlers themselves to choreograph a match that would lead to the desired outcome.

To enhance the audience's viewing experience, wrestlers would also be given fictional personas and be assigned heroic or villainous roles for a storyline. Wrestling is after all a passion play. In wrestling jargon, a match's protagonist is called a *Babyface* and a villain is called a *Heel*. Wrestling's heroes and villains are not defined so much on characteristics befitting classical

heroes and villains, but by how they serve as foils for their respective opponents. A promoter could choose to make Wrestler A the babyface and Wrestler B the heel, when another promoter could use the exact same two wrestlers and flip their roles in the match.

One such example is the classic larger-than-life wrestler versus the comparably less large wrestler dynamic. Most wrestlers would be considered large by average human standards, but even they could be made to look like small weak underdogs when they would stand in the ring with wrestlers so large that they were considered special attractions. Perhaps no one wrestler embodied the phrase larger-than-life more than André René Roussimoff, better known as André the Giant. André stood 7ft 4in and weighed in the neighborhood of 500lbs. His wrist measured one foot in circumference and he wore a size 22 shoe. One promoter might have tried to have André look like a monstrous heel who could not be stopped while other promoters would make André appear as a God-like babyface, who no matter what the dastardly heels may try, would not be denied.

Another trope commonly used in wrestling storylines would be pitting the foreigner against the established homegrown star. Arguably the most successful babyface wrestler of the mid 20th century was Bruno Sammartino, an Italian immigrant whose rags-to-riches story was the embodiment of the American Dream. American wrestlers (if they were Heels) might say someone like Bruno did not deserve to be successful because he was not a real American. Wrestling frequently utilizes a wrestler's ethnicity to create sympathy from the audience. But for every time the wrestling industry played on the American Dream ideal, they would also play on American xenophobia by introducing characters that would embody the idea of a foreign menace. In the early 1950s it was Hans Schmidt, the unreformed Nazi, who was played by a

French Canadian. In the 1960s and 70s it was Ivan Koloff, the Ukrainian Communist, who was also played by a French Canadian. In the 1980s it was the Iron Sheik, an Iranian, who was in fact played by an Iranian, that praised the Ayatollah and denounced America every time he walked down to the wrestling ring. It is a trope that time and time again has been used in pro wrestling to create animosity or *heat* for a wrestler.

As incredibly cheesy, and in some cases xenophobic, the use of these tropes may be, it allows wrestlers to craft a simple persona for themselves. The guiding principle for creating a pro wrestling character is to ‘create an identity that an audience can completely understand and connect with in thirty seconds or less’. Thirty seconds is the standard amount of time a wrestler is given to introduce themselves to an audience in a promo. This was also a daily exercise we did at Create A Pro Wrestling. The exercise is designed to simulate how wrestlers set up the stakes for their matches. At any given show, there might be an audience member who has no context for what a wrestler’s persona is supposed to be. So, a wrestler is given a microphone, put in front of a camera, and they have thirty seconds to introduce themselves, give the audience a reason they should care about the wrestler, and what to expect of them in their upcoming match. The simpler the message and the simpler the character they would tell us, the more likely the audience will be able to connect. Just after WWII, the unrepentent Nazi would be a character that would be easy for an audience to hate and would also give the audience a reason to cheer and hope for victory for the Nazi’s opponent (the babyface). The same could be said of The Iron Sheik who was so good at the art of the promo, that all he had to say in order for an audience to start drowning him in an almost deafening wave of boos was deliver his signature catchphrase: *Iran number 1, The Sheik number 1*. If a wrestler can achieve that kind of emotional resonance

with their character, even if it means tapping into an audience's xenophobia, they have perfected their wrestling character.

A great actor would be someone who is extremely versatile and could play many different characters. In wrestling, the dynamic is the opposite. A great wrestler perfects one character, their character, a character whose gimmick does not stop at the end of a night of wrestling. If a fan were to meet the wrestler on the street, the wrestler would have to remain in character, or as it's called in wrestling, not break kayfabe. Kayfabe is the convention by which stories of wrestling characters are presented as true. A single character, if they become popular enough, could get a wrestler booked anywhere in the world to earn a decent living. A character is a wrestler's true currency. If the audience is no longer able to connect with a wrestler's character as they once did, that character's currency has lost its value.

The same rule applies for a character's credibility as a wrestler and so wrestlers guard the integrity of their characters very closely. Perhaps there is no greater example of this in pro wrestling than the incident that came to be known as *The Montreal Screwjob*. In 1996, Shawn Michaels defeated Bret Hart for the World Heavyweight Championship. Hart did not mind being defeated because the understanding was that at some point he would be allowed to beat Michaels and regain the championship. However in the months that followed, Michaels refused to have his character lose to Bret Hart, culminating in Michaels supposedly faking a knee injury to avoid losing the championship in a match against Hart, who took the slight as personal. Hart eventually regained the title, though not through defeating Michaels. His employer, Vince McMahon could no longer afford to pay Bret Hart's contract and reached an agreement with Hart where Bret would be bought out of his contract and subsequently leave the company. There was still the

issue of the World Heavyweight Championship to resolve. McMahon asked Hart to lose the title to Shawn Michaels, again, this time in his home country of Canada. In Hart's eyes this was the last straw. If he were to lose to Michaels again, without Michaels ever returning the favor with the title on the line, his character's credibility would be ruined. As Hart said on the documentary *Wrestling With Shadows*, "I'd be blowing [my character's] brains out, from a credibility standpoint."

McMahon decided he needed Michaels to become the champion for future storylines and proposed every conceivable scenario by which Hart could drop the title to Michaels; Hart refused every single proposal. Bret eventually proposed that the match in Montreal would end in a double disqualification (a tie) and Bret would retain the title and then vacate the championship the following night on the WWF Television show, Monday Night RAW (prior to 2002, the WWE or World Wrestling Entertainment was known as the WWF or World Wrestling Federation). McMahon had no choice but to accept the proposal. Hart was no longer under any contractual obligation to appear on WWF TV after his match in Montreal at the WWF event Survivor Series. Years earlier, McMahon had allowed the contract of then WWF Women's Champion, known as Alundra Blayze, to lapse. Blayze subsequently left for a rival wrestling promotion, WCW, and took the WWF Women's Championship with her and threw it into a trash can on national television. This tarnished the WWF's Women's Championship so much that the WWF would not have another Women's champion for another three years. In Vince McMahon's eyes, he could not risk the same thing happening with the World Heavyweight Championship. There would be no kayfabe reason for his wrestlers to work in his company.

Unbeknownst to Hart, McMahon instructed Michaels and the match's referee Earl Hebner, to negotiate a moment in the match in which Hart would be placed into submission in a position where Hart's body would be out of view of the camera. Hart believed the plan was for him to then reverse the hold and have the match end in a double disqualification. However, McMahon would have the ring-side bell ring as soon as Hart was placed into the hold, signaling that Hart had submitted and lost the championship to Michaels. No one was fooled by the tactic, it was obvious to anyone who watched the match what had happened.

Bret Hart had been screwed out of the title. Fans and wrestlers alike were outraged at the outcome. Some wrestlers threatened to leave the company because of Vince McMahon's blatant disrespect. Some fans threatened to stop watching the WWF altogether. Vince McMahon had now become the most hated man in professional wrestling. McMahon would capitalize on the heat he had generated and created a new on-screen persona for himself, Mr. McMahon; the maniacal dictator of the WWF who no one should cross. He would go on to have several on-screen feuds with wrestlers like Stone Cold Steve Austin and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, catapulting the WWF into its most popular period in history, The Attitude Era; a period in which the WWF began featuring more adult-oriented content on its programming that allowed its TV ratings and pay-per-view buys to skyrocket between 1997 and 2002.

In many ways *The Montreal Screwjob* embodies the perfect wrestling feud. One, it features on-screen rivalries and stakes that are not too far a departure from real life and therefore not requiring too much suspension of disbelief. Two, the participants are such masters of physicality that they can perform what would appear to be a highly competitive fight throughout. And three, it concludes in a fashion that all its participants have garnered an incredible amount

of fan interest for their next respective storylines. This was the wrestling storyline that I used as the blueprint for *Great Balls Of Fire*. The ending of the feud was what is known in wrestling as a double turn, which was also an element I wanted to include in my play. The double turn is where the roles of a heel and a babyface flip mid-match. By the end of the match, the crowd should be cheering or booing the opposite wrestler than when the match began.

At this point I knew what I wanted to have in my wrestling match play. It would feature two wrestlers, who would have to connect with the audience at the start of the play and by the end they would have to execute a double turn and their respective roles as Heel and Babyface swap. I am proud of how the play finally turned out, but as far as meeting that original outline for the play, I would have to say I failed. Wolfgang is the play's babyface and Bodhi is the heel and that dynamic does not change, at least in the portion of their story that I chose to depict. My play follows these characters over the course of one evening, but the downfall in both characters takes hold over the course of their entire pro wrestling careers. The need of both characters to protect their characters at all cost has become instinctual by the time the play starts.

In the final version of the play, Tatum requests that Wolfgang return to the ring for one final match to validate Bodhi as the World Heavyweight Champion. Wolfgang arrives and is initially very accommodating and willing to do whatever his boss wants him to do. Bodhi in turn is a jerk to Wolfgang and is not willing to give any ground, protecting his character at all costs. In my initial few drafts of the script Wolfgang was still the champion when the play started and the wrestling match would be the passing of the torch to the new generation, Bodhi. In those versions, Wolfgang was written as the arrogant jerk who was not willing to compromise his character for the sake of the next champion, as protecting his character had become a golden rule

for him. This is not too dissimilar from the true story of legendary wrestler Hulk Hogan, who after arriving in WCW (WWF's main competitor between 1988 and 2001) and being given creative control over anything involving his character as part of his contract, refused to look weak or lose to almost any opponent. In the early drafts, Wolfgang had envisioned the final match of his career, standing over his opponent victorious before riding off into the sunset. Bodhi and Tatum realized that Wolfgang only cared about himself and that he did not give a damn about the plans for Bodhi as the next World Heavyweight Champion. Bodhi and Tatum would then orchestrate circumstances, similar to the match written in the final draft, where the match would break down into a shoot and Wolfgang would lose control and cost himself the title. Bodhi's vicious assault on Wolfgang was written in a way that an audience who witnessed it would be uncomfortable to the point that they could not support Bodhi and he would become a heel.

However, no matter how I wrote or rewrote that original version of the story, two elements that I felt were integral to the narrative kept getting lost on the page. One, the relationship between Wolfgang and Tatum. The idea was that these were two characters who had worked together for years, much in the same way Bret Hart and Vince McMahon had. Almost to the point that they had a surrogate father and son relationship. It was important to show that the two characters had that sort of trust in one another, but that trust still came secondary to Bodhi and Tatum's ability to make money off of one another. Now that Wolfgang had come to the end of his career, Tatum could no longer make money off of him. And so, Tatum wanted Wolfgang to do the favor for Bodhi and validate his championship reign. However, be it because of Bodhi's disrespect or an instinct to protect his character, Wolfgang's vision for the match was in

opposition with the very thing that Tatum needed it to be. The other element that felt lost originally, was the fact that Wolfgang was supposed to be the babyface by the end. Bodhi may have undergone the babyface/heel flip by the end of the play, but Wolfgang had been a jerk throughout the play and by the end may have pity from the audience, but has not earned the right to now be the babyface. Any attempt I made to add a scene to fold those elements back into the narrative felt convoluted. Instead I decided to have the characters begin in the same babyface/heel dynamics that they would end in, but give them a story that would cement those roles as well as creating an expanded story for Tatum. My goal was to write a play that could be performed over the span of 25-minutes. To give enough depth to the transformation in both the characters if the double turn was to be included in the play, an additional act could be written that precedes Act One. But my desire was to follow the characters over the course of one night and so I kept the heel/babyface dynamic consistent throughout the play.

Despite Bodhi's kayfabe character being pushed as a babyface, he behaves as a jerk for the entire first act of the play. As we learn at the end of the play, Bodhi really respects Wolfgang and in fact idolizes him. But Wolfgang is the bigger star between the two, and Bodhi must be able to hold his own ground and feels he cannot show any respect to Wolfgang. By the time he is finally willing to show some respect, it is too late. He chooses the coward's way out and betrays his hero like his boss tells him to.

But what made *The Montreal Screwjob* so memorable for fans was the surprise that it actually happened. Fans were aware that Bret Hart was going to leave the WWF following the 1997 Survivor Series, it had been woven into his kayfabe storyline, but they were equally aware of his real disdain for Shawn Michaels. It meant fans were unable to predict how their kayfabe

feud would be resolved. If I was to include that element of unpredictability into *Great Balls of Fire*, then Tatum and Bodhi's betrayal could not be revealed until after the fact. I felt it would create a sense of false hope that Wolfgang could actually win his last match that turns into confusion when he actually does not win. The audience would be left somewhat puzzled and hopefully want this match not to be the end of the story of Wolfgang. Hoping that there is still more to come.

That is why wrestling audiences tune in week after week. Even if they are unhappy with the characters and performers that have been scripted into successful positions, they hope that it is not the end of the pro wrestling story. That there is still more to come in the bizarre gladiatorial spectacle. That is the key to understanding pro wrestling's success, the story does not end. Each and every pro wrestling storyline must in some way set up future storylines. Even wrestlers like Wolfgang or Bret Hart who are at the end of their careers, kayfabe or otherwise, cannot conclude their individual story-arcs unless those endings in some way help shape the story of the characters that will duel after them inside the squared-circle. The story must not end.

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

by Paul Nicholson

Characters:

Tatum - The executive producer and in-ring referee of the *Great Balls of Fire!* Pay-per-view.

Wolfgang Von Mecklenberg - The undefeated World Heavyweight Champion.

Bodhi - A young high-flying wrestling daredevil known as 'The Buddha from Bermuda'

Charlie Donovan - Play-by-play commentator and interviewer.

Mason 'Thunder' Storm - A former wrestling star turned color commentator.

Ring Announcer- The ring announcer for *Great Balls of Fire!* Pay-per-view.

The centerpiece of the set is a 12x12 professional wrestling ring raised 3ft off the ground. The ring is to be placed in the center of the stage that is designed to either be In-the-round or a thrust. A commentary desk should be placed to the side of the ring in a position that keeps the commentators visible to the audience but does not hinder the movement of the wrestlers or audience's view of the action inside the ring.

Font should indicate to actors when their dialogue should be performed as their Wrestling-Persona or as their Outside-the-Ring-Character.

ACT ONE

1.1

[Act One opens with THUNDER, CHARLIE, and TATUM on stage making preparations for the 'Great Balls of Fire' broadcast that is scheduled to take place later in the evening. THUNDER and CHARLIE are by the commentary desk. TATUM is standing by the ring, looking over notes.]

CHARLIE

Shark Tank?

THUNDER

Shark Tank is 4.

CHARLIE

The Voice?

THUNDER

The Voice is number 3.

CHARLIE

Huh. What else airs on Mondays?... Oh, The Bachelor!

THUNDER

Bachelor's number 2.

CHARLIE

Number 2? What? Wait, then who's number 1?

TATUM

Charlie come on isn't it obvious? I mean who else could be number one on Monday Nights? It's us.

CHARLIE

This Is Us?

TATUM

No not This Is Us! Us! We're number one! Right, Thunder?

THUNDER

Uh, no. We're not number 1.

TATUM

We're not number 1? Then who's number one?

THUNDER

9-1-1: Lone Star.

TATUM

Goddamn it! Ok, so Lone Star, Bachelor, Voice, Shark Tank? Ok, not great but at least we're number 5.

THUNDER

SVU is number 5.

TATUM

Motherfucker!

CHARLIE

Wait, that doesn't make sense. SVU is on Thursdays at 10.

THUNDER

Yeah but they show reruns on Mondays at 8-

TATUM

Reruns? We lost out on the top five to SVU reruns?

[A brief pause before TATUM starts kicking and cursing anything that comes to mind]

TATUM

This is worse than I thought. I mean football season's over, we gotta capitalize on this. And we're not in the top five?

1.2

[Bodhi enters singing along to his own theme music (think Shawn Michaels' Sexy Boy)]

TATUM

Bodhi!

BODHI

Oh, hey boss. Hey, who's my opponent for tonight?

TATUM

Well, that's what I wanna talk to you about. Listen, we've not done as well as we would've hoped. So, we're gonna spice things up with your opponent tonight.

BODHI

Alright, alright. Hey, spice is what I'm all about. They don't call me the Buddha from Bermuda for nothing.

[pause for cringe]

TATUM

Yeah, so, what I'm thinking is we have you wrestle someone that no one is expecting. Someone who will make people say 'I've got to tune in to see this because I may never see it again'!

BODHI

Hey, I feel like people would already do that since I'm the headliner. But hey, you've been advertising the show as 'Bodhi versus Mystery Opponent'. How are people gonna know they have to tune in?

TATUM

Well, we reveal who your opponent will be at the start of the show. That way by the time the main event comes around, word will have spread and everyone will be tuned in.

BODHI

Alright. Sounds good to me. So, who are ya thinkin'?

TATUM

Wolfgang.

[BODHI throws a similar tantrum to the one TATUM threw previously].

BODHI

Anyone else. You could've pick anyone else-

TATUM

There is no one who is as big a star as him. Plus he hasn't been on TV in months, so he's the last person that people would expect-

1.3

[WOLFGANG's entrance music plays. WOLFGANG makes his in-ring entrance dressed in full gear]

WOLFGANG

Oh, sorry boss. I just haven't done that in so long I was afraid I'd mess it up so I just wanted to get a practice run in. Phew, feels good.

TATUM

Ah, don't worry about it Wolfy. I was just telling Bodhi about the plans for tonight and we're all very excited about what tonight could be. Ain't that right, Bodhi?

[BODHI has been looking off disinterested, spitting out his before looking up at WOLFGANG.]

BODHI

Welcome back.

[BODHI exits]

1.4

TATUM

Hey, look uh, I'm sorry about that. I mean, I try talking to him but sometimes there's just no getting through to him.

WOLFGANG

It's okay. I mean, I don't know why I expected anything less but I've just always expected whoever is the champion to carry themselves with some respect.

TATUM

Yeah, I wish I could get him to think like that. Anyway, what I'm thinking is...we announce tonight is your return and then we cut to a promo of you on your thoughts about coming back, facing Bodhi, yada yada yada. Then we cut to a promo of Bodhi and get his thoughts on facing you to get everyone hyped, huh? What do you think?

WOLFGANG

Sounds good boss.

TATUM

Outstanding. Ok, Charlie come in here. Let's shoot this right now. I'll go tell Bodhi to get ready for his promo.

[TATUM exits. Overhead speaker counts down from 5 before interview background music plays and the promo commences]

CHARLIE

I'm joined now by the former Heavyweight Champion of the World, Wolfgang Von Mecklenberg. Wolfgang, 9 months ago your undefeated reign as champion came to an end at the hands of Bodhi. After that, you haven't been seen since. Fans feared they might never see you wrestle again being that your contract was set to run out in just a matter of days. Does your return tonight mean that you have signed a new contract?

WOLFGANG

I wish I could say the answer to your question is yes, but I'm confident the powers at be and myself will iron out the new terms of my contract in short order. In the meantime, what matters is that tonight I have a chance to regain the World Heavyweight Championship and there isn't a force on this earth that can stop me from doing that!

[TATUM and BODHI enter off-camera]

CHARLIE

Let's talk about your opponent now for a moment. The last time you two fought, Bodhi took every punch you gave and just kept on fighting. He's only improved with every match he's had since. What is your strategy heading into tonight in hopes that you can regain the title?

WOLFGANG

Well, the last time I faced Bodhi, I made a mistake. My mistake was underestimating him. You see, I knew all about his talent but what I didn't see was guts to go with that talent.

[BODHI looks stunned off-camera]

WOLFGANG

I didn't see the testicular fortitude that I believe you need, to be able to call yourself champion. But I was wrong, evidently you can still be a degenerate and still have the ability to

overcome that lack of... guts. I won't underestimate him again, and tonight I will show him as well as the entire world why I am what a real champion looks like.

[WOLFGANG exits]

1.5

CHARLIE

Wow! The challenger sure sounds confident heading into tonight's match! Joining me now is the World Heavyweight Champion, Bodhi.

[BODHI enters the shot]

CHARLIE

Bodhi, you just heard Wolfgang say he will not make the same mistake of underestimating you that you made last time. Any response to that?

BODHI

Well let me tell you something brother! Wolfgang, you can make all the excuses you want. You can say you underestimated me, you can say I don't have the same huevos that you have my friend, but the fact is what I do have is the World Heavyweight Championship, and that eats away at you, doesn't it? It's all you've thought about, isn't it? That's how bad you've become obsessed with me. You haven't been able to go to the gym, without thinking of me. You haven't been able to play with your

kids without thinking of me. You haven't been able to make love to your wife without thinking of me now, have ya? I mean hell, you probably weren't the only one thinking about ol' Bodhi when you and the Mrs. were getting it on. I bet your wife was wishing it was me she was with instead of you. Matter of fact, I know it. How? Simple. Because she told me. She told me how when I beat you, I took away the loving man she had married; that you had now become a pitiful excuse of a man and a pitiful excuse of a husband. For that Julie, I am truly sorry. But don't you worry, the next time you start feeling lonely, just call the ol' Buddha himself, and just like last time, he will show you how a real man treats his women-

[WOLFGANG, now enraged, shoves BODHI violently. A fight is about to break out between the two men before TATUM, THUNDER, and CHARLIE hold the two men back.]

TATUM

Enough! Bodhi, go back to the locker room! I don't want you two in the same room again until the match starts!

[BODHI is escorted backstage by CHARLIE and THUNDER]

1.6

WOLFGANG

This is what I'm talking about! That little prick has no respect, none! He has no right to be carrying that title! The World Heavyweight Champion has to represent something! He has to be

someone people can look up to. That clown shouldn't be a role model to anyone! Look I wasn't gonna say anything because I hoped I wouldn't have to ask, but I am winning tonight, right? I mean, that is why you brought me back? You can't take anymore of his bullshit either can you?

TATUM

Not exactly.

WOLFGANG

Wha- not exactly? What does that mean no exactly?

TATUM

Well I-

WOLFGANG

No, no, no. Don't give me that. You look me in the eye, right now, and tell me you think he deserves to be champion more than I do. Look at me.

[TATUM looks up at WOLFGANG. The two say nothing and just stare at each other for a moment]

TATUM

You're not winning the title tonight. Bodhi's gonna hit you with the frog-splash, then he's gonna cover you for the 1-2-3.

[pause]

WOLFGANG

How can you say that? How can you justify that little piece of shit carrying the title, that me and so many of the guys before me, helped build a legacy for and just piss it all away?

TATUM

Because it's what's right for business. Is he a piece of shit, yes. Would I prefer not to put up with him as champion, yes. But it's not about what I want or what you want. We're struggling to get people to watch this show. People don't wanna watch wrestling like they used to. What they wanna watch is entertainment, and like it or not that prick is entertaining. Whenever he comes on the screen, whether you like him or you hate him, you can't look away. And that's what we need right now. We don't need a champion who everyone respects, we need one who is... transfixing, gripping, must-see-TV. That's what Bodhi is. That's not what you are.

WOLFGANG

So if this is what your plan was, why do you want me back? If you're telling me Bodhi is gonna be champ as long as he wants to be, what's even the point in me coming back? Coming back for anything other than being in the title picture is a step down.

TATUM

You're right. It would be a step down. Which is why I'm not renewing your contract. I want you to lose this match, and then call it a career. What could make Bodhi a bigger star than ending the career of the star that came before him, you.

[pause]

TATUM

It's what's best for business. There's just no getting around that.

[pause]

TATUM

It's almost time to open the doors and let the fans in. Go backstage and get ready. I know you'll make me proud.

[TATUM is about to leave and make final preparations for the show]

WOLFGANG

No.

[TATUM turns around]

TATUM

What was that?

WOLFGANG

I said no. If you're telling it's my time to go, fine. But I'm not gonna go out like this. I'm not gonna let some punk get one over on me, twice, and let that be how I go out. We're gonna go out to that ring and we're gonna tear the roof off this place. But he owes me. You owe me. All I'm asking for is one last chance. One last chance to show how important it is to have a champion that people respect. I let Bodhi get one over on me, now he needs to let me get one over on him. Tell him that. Tell him that I'm the one winning. And when I do win, and I'm holding the title over my head, that crowd will cheer like nothing you've ever heard. If after that, you don't think I'm good enough to carry that crown, I'll forfeit the title. But I demand that you let me show you what me as champion means to the people. I'm not gonna take no for an answer. Tell Bodhi, I'm winning. I'm taking the title tonight, we'll figure out the details in the ring.

[WOLFGANG exits]

ACT 2:

2.1

[Rules of the match are announced. TATUM is in the ring wearing a referee shirt.]

RING ANNOUNCER:

The following contest is scheduled for one fall and it is for the World Heavyweight Championship. If a participant leaves the ring, they will have until the count of ten to return to the ring. If a participant performs an illegal maneuver, they will be given a count of five to halt their action or be disqualified. This match can be won by pinfall, submission, knockout, countout, or disqualification.

[BODHI's entrance music begins to play as BODHI makes his entrance to the ring.]

RING ANNOUNCER:

Introducing first, the champion, from St. George's, Bermuda, weighing in at one hundred and seventy five pounds, The Buddha from Bermuda, BOH-DI!

CHARLIE:

And the champion, making his way to the ring. And what an incredible honor this must be for Bodhi to not only have the chance to defend his championship against such a worthy opponent, but to also be potentially the final opponent of, who I personally consider the very best to ever do it, Wolfgang Von Mecklenburg.

[WOLFGANG's entrance music begins to play as WOLFGANG makes his entrance to the ring.]

RING ANNOUNCER:

And his opponent, the challenger, from Frankfurt, Germany,
weighing in at two hundred and forty two pounds,
WOLFGANG-VON-MECKLENBURG!

*[As WOLFGANG stands in the corner of the ring saluting the fans with his back turned to
BODHI, BODHI attacks WOLFGANG from behind causing WOLFGANG to fall to the floor.]*

CHARLIE:

And oh my, Bodhi wastes no time getting this match under way,
attacking the challenger from behind.

*[BODHI begins to stomp away at WOLFGANG pinned up against the ropes in the corner of the
ring.]*

STORM:

That is great strategy by Bodhi, Charlie. When you're going up
against an opponent like Von Mecklenburg, you have to create an
advantage.

*[TATUM begins to count to five, giving Bodhi five seconds to stop stomping on WOLFGANG.
BODHI stops stomping after TATUM counts to four.]*

STORM:

And look at this Charlie, Bodhi not relenting even for a moment
on the offense, not allowing the challenger any chance to gather

himself. This is what you gotta do. And now halting his attack before the referee reaches the count of five.

CHARLIE:

Oh come on, Thunder. Anybody could do that to a man whose back is turned. This is just cheap. No class being shown here by the champion.

STORM:

What do you mean, Charlie? This is a championship fight. These guys have to do whatever it takes to win.

[BODHI lifts WOLFGANG from the corner and goes to throw WOLFGANG into the ring ropes, but WOLFGANG reverses the throw and throws BODHI into the ring ropes.]

CHARLIE:

Von Mecklenburg now reverses and throws his opponent. He's setting him up but...

[BODHI bounces off the ring ropes, WOLFGANG bends down preparing to perform a back-body drop on BODHI. BODHI anticipates WOLFGANG's plan and hits WOLFGANG in the face with his knee, visibly stunning WOLFGANG.]

CHARLIE:

Oh! A knee to the face! Von Mecklenburg is visibly shaken up.

[Seeing that WOLFGANG may be hurt, BODHI climbs on top of WOLFGANG and starts punching him in the face. This being an illegal maneuver, TATUM begins to count to five. BODHI halts his assault at the count of four.]

STORM:

And Bodhi now wisely not wasting any time and pounces on top of the Champion like a rabid dog! Oh this is great!

CHARLIE:

Oh come on Thunder, don't you think this is taking it a bit too far. I mean, Von Mecklenburg might be concussed. At least give him a moment to compose himself.

STORM:

Absolutely not! This is wrestling, this ain't ballet. Bodhi is facing one of the greatest champions in the history of this sport. If he sees an opportunity, he has to take it.

CHARLIE:

Bodhi, now breaking off the attack before the count of five. Von Mecklenburg gets back to his feet but...

[BODHI lifts Von Mecklenburg to his feet, but then WOLFGANG jumps into the air and dropkicks BODHI to the floor.]

CHARLIE:

Oh! Dropkick to the jaw!

[Due to WOLFGANG still dealing with the effects of BODHI's knee to his face, BODHI gets up first from the dropkick and puts WOLFGANG in a sleeper hold, trying to knockout WOLFGANG.]

STORM:

And again, Bodhi jumps on his prey like a hungry animal, not relenting even for a second! I love it!

[With BODHI still hanging on his back, WOLFGANG stands up and runs back first into a corner in an effort to break the sleeper hold.]

CHARLIE:

Von Mecklenburg, still hanging on, trying to break that hold. Trying to get back to his feet, he does, still trying to break this sleeper hold and... Oh! Driving Bodhi's back right into the turnbuckle!

[Once free, WOLFGANG drops to his knees gasping for air. BODHI then hits WOLFGANG from behind and positions him for a suplex.]

CHARLIE:

Von Mecklenburg, now trying to compose himself. This does not look good. I have never seen Von Mecklenberg dominated in this fashion. He might have a concussion. The referee might have to call off this match.

STORM:

If he does, then Bodhi will win by TKO!

CHARLIE:

Bodhi back to his feet first, and jumps right back on top of the champion with a relentless assault. He gets the champion back on his feet now, setting him up for a suplex and...

[WOLFGANG then reverses the maneuver into a stunner. Despite the effectiveness of the stunner, BODHI is the first to rise to his feet due to WOLFGANG's exhaustion and possible concussion.]

CHARLIE:

Oh! The champion reverses into a Stunner! Both men are down!

STORM:

What the hell was that? I thought this guy had a concussion? Now he has the wherewithal to hit a move like that! That's phoney! That's a load of malarkey! I can't believe this!

[BODHI rises to the top rope and delivers a Corkscrew Shooting Star Press. BODHI goes for the pinfall but WOLFGANG kicks out at 2½.]

CHARLIE:

Bodhi gets back to his feet first! Climbing the top rope...

STORM:

Uh oh, here we go! I can't wait to see this Ree...

CHARLIE:

Oh! The Bonzai Drop! From the top rope!

STORM:

Ball game! This-this is over! Cover him! Cover him!

CHARLIE:

Pinfall cover as the referee counts one... two... NO! My god! Von Mecklenburg stays in it! Look at the eyes of the champion! He-he can't believe it.

STORM:

What! Wha- that never happens! I've never seen anyone kick out of the Bonzai Drop! Wha-what is the champion supposed to do now.

CHARLIE:

Bodhi gets back up to his feet and...

[BODHI stands himself up with the support of the ring ropes when suddenly WOLFGANG does a kip-up.]

STORM:

What! How did- how did he-Bodhi turn around! Turn around! He's right behind you!

[WOLFGANG performs a comeback sequence on BODHI before preparing to set up his finisher.]

CHARLIE:

Wolfgang, blocks the right hand! And here comes the champion! Oh there's the boot to the face! It could be over!

STORM:

Come on Bodhi get up! Get up- oh no! Oh no!

CHARLIE:

He's setting him up! He's setting him up for that big finisher,
or as Wolfgang calls it...

STORM:

[His voice filled with dread] Das große Schnitzel!

CHARLIE:

Ready to strike and... A little head pump and Bodhi begs off.

[At the last second BODHI staggers back into a corner, WOLFGANG follows. Desperate, BODHI resorts to spitting a large loogie in WOLFGANG's face.]

CHARLIE:

Oh! Oh my god! Bodhi, I think, I think he just spat in the face
Von Mecklenburg!

STORM:

Ooooooooooooooh my god!

CHARLIE:

Blatant dis-respect! And now the challenger goes after the
champion, Wolfgang's gotta be careful here!

STORM:

You gotta calm down Wolf, you gotta calm down...

[Enraged and somewhat delirious, WOLFGANG punt-kicks BODHI in the groin.]

CHARLIE:

Oh! And a blatant low blow. A blatant low blow. Is this what I
think it is?

[TATUM calls for the bell. Bell rings.]

RING ANNOUNCER:

The winner of this match as a result of a disqualification and still World Heavyweight Champion, Bodhi!

CHARLIE:

Bodhi, sent the champion off the deep end, when he spat in his face!

STORM:

Von Mecklenburg wasn't thinking straight and Bodhi knew it! Wolfgang was reacting purely on instinct and when Bodhi spat in his face, he forgot that if he got disqualified he would lose the title!

CHARLIE:

Not like this! Not like this! This- this can't be how this match - this magnificent career - ends?

[Realizing what has happened, WOLFGANG goes nuts and starts tearing apart the set before storming off in an inconsolable rage. The show ends with BODHI on stage, in a lone spot light, hunched over still in pain from the low-blow, lifting the Championship over his head with a smug grin on his face]

2.2

[This scene chronologically takes place right after scene 1.6 but before 2.1. Tatum is sitting on the ring apron with a stunned expression. Bodhi enters.]

BODHI

Boss? Hey, boss? Hey, boss I'm sorry. I might have stepped over the line there. I didn't mean for Wolfgang to take all that shit I said personally. I was just trying to hype the match up. I mean, I didn't appreciate the shove but I should still go apologize, huh? What do you think?

[pause]

TATUM

No need. Wolfgang just told me he's not letting you win tonight.

BODHI

What? What do you mean he's not letting me win tonight? I thought you said I was gonna have a two to three year run with the title at least?

TATUM

That's what I said.

BODHI

So does that mean you changed your mind? I mean, if you did, I'm cool with that. At first when you told me he was coming back tonight I was upset because you had re-signed him and you were gonna put the title back on him. But, now I actually think that would be great. We could get a nice long run out of a feud between him and me, you know.

TATUM

I didn't re-sign him. His contract runs out in a couple days. But he wants to prove a point by winning tonight.

[pause]

BODHI

Oh? Ok, but you are gonna re-sign him, right?

TATUM

No. I made up my mind.

BODHI

But, why would we give him the title then? It doesn't make sense.

TATUM

You're right. It doesn't.

BODHI

Then why let him win the title?

TATUM

Did I say I was gonna let him win the title? No, no, no. He's not winning the title. Not after pulling this stunt.

BODHI

But you just said he's not letting me...

TATUM

Not gonna let you win? Wolfgang does let anyone do anything around here. I do. So if he thinks he's gonna hold me hostage like this... ugh ugh, no way. Here's what we're gonna do. I want you to go out there, act like you're gonna do exactly what he wants. Then, I want you to embarrass him. I want you to hurt him. I don't want him thinking straight out there. I want the last image the fans have of him to be of a man, out of control, helpless.

BODHI

You can't ask me to do that.

TATUM

Oh yes, I can. And you will do it. You will look him in the eye with a smile on your face as you're about to stab him in the back. And you're gonna do it, or so help me god, I will make your life a living hell. Are we clear?

[pause]

TATUM

Are we?

BODHI

Yes.

TATUM

Good. Now I want you to go back there and-

[WOLFGANG enters]

TATUM

WOLFGANG! I was just telling Bodhi what we talked about?

WOLFGANG

You were? So, we're clear on what the plan is?

TATUM

Yep.

WOLFGANG

Oh, thank god. That means the world to me. And Bodhi listen, for what it's worth, if this is my last match, I'm really honored you are my last opponent. I don't agree with everything you do as champion but I will say this, you are unbelievably talented. Quite possibly the best I've ever worked with and... I know we're gonna paint a mutherfuckin' Van Gough out there.

[WOLFGANG reaches out for a handshake with BODHI. BODHI hesitates before shaking WOLFGANG's hand.]

WOLFGANG

Alright. I'll see you out there

[WOLFGANG exits]

BODHI

See you out there.

[BODHI looks back at TATUM and exits. TATUM stares intensely back at BODHI, as if the gaze is into BODHI's soul.]

CURTAIN

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