

Tex: A Solo Performance Exploration of Queerness and Masculinity

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**Abstract**

Tex: A Solo Performance Exploration of Queerness and Masculinity

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*Tex: The Straightest Man in the West* is a solo performance exploring internalized homophobia and masculinity through clowning and bouffon. Set in a saloon in the American West, the audience plays the part of saloon patrons while an increasingly agitated Cowboy tries to prove his masculine bonafides. In the end, he surrenders to his queer instincts and allows the audience to see him as he is. Inspired by American depictions of queerness, cowboys and the West, and pop music, the piece asks the audience to investigate how they perceive straight or masculine behavior.

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Graduate Thesis — Tex: A Solo Performance Exploration of Queerness and Masculinity

Jeffrey Fracé

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In my thesis solo show performance, I wanted to call upon all the tools I had acquired in my graduate education to dramatize a deeply personal insecurity I carried into grad school; I wanted to fictionalize the transformation I had undergone at the UW School of Drama. Before starting the program, the question plagued me: "Who would believe me as this character?" Through my time in UW's PATP program, being tasked with playing such a wide variety of characters, I realized that I don't need to worry about audiences believing me. I could not control their reactions, and my insecurities were restricting me from reaching the farthest possibilities of these characters. Embracing my unique takes on characters and accepting that I can only be myself anytime I play a character liberates my performances and allows me to transform more authentically. I wanted to utilize these principles to create a story of a cowboy confronting society's expectations of him, dramatizing my experience and growth throughout the last three years.

In creating this piece, I was interested in the audience experience. I wanted to cast the audience members as society and to have the audience question their preconceived notions about masculinity and queerness. What does masculinity look like being performed? Why does the audience think that way? What preconceived notions of manhood do they bring into the performance? I was surprised by the audience's polite encouragement of any behavior Tex portrayed. In future productions, I will challenge their views even further, verifying if they were sanitizing their opinions to seem more societally polite.

The creation of this piece was a very new experience for me. Although we took a solo show class in our second year, I found the method taught not tailored for writing as an

actor. Instead of writing a script alone in a quiet room, I needed to find a way to write my script through performance. I believe in theater as a collaborative art form, and I needed to find a way to work with others to develop my show. Luckily, I had incredible collaborators who taught me an alternative way to approach writing a solo show: Adrienne Mackey and Iveliz Martel. In Adrienne Mackey's devising class in my second year, she explained a process of recording improvised sessions, transcribing, and editing. Using this process in creating my solo show was the basis of how I wrote my script. I also showed a draft performance to Adrienne and got many helpful tips that helped add specificity and clarify the relationship between Tex and the audience.

In the initial brainstorming process, I wanted to do a piece about cowboys and masculinity. I watched a bunch of westerns, researched cowboy imagery in pop culture, and did free writing about what I wanted to explore with my work. I realized that I had a few different sections of the piece: an entrance that would physically express the story without set text, a crowd work section in the saloon with Tex trying to prove to the audience how straight he is, and a section where Tex is outside on a starry night, away from the pressures of society. I explained these sections to my collaborator and director, Iveliz Martel, and we began filming my improvisation. We worked for about two hours to get the material for the first script. Iveliz would ask Tex questions or give physical prompts, and I would respond to them in character. I then downloaded the video, transcribed it, and cobbled together a rough first draft script. Since the original creation session featured Iveliz offering questions to craft the arc of the piece, I needed to remove her prompts from the script. I worked on casting the audience as the inquisitors of the performance, allowing their reactions to provide the motivations for the character and plot to unfold. I rehearsed, edited, and made a few more versions of the script using the same method until I came to the final product I presented.

I am passionate about clowning and play in performance, so I knew I had to utilize these skills at the forefront of my thesis project. A pivotal piece of my undergraduate education was Jane Nichols' Play class. There is no time on stage I feel as present or free as clowning; it embodies the most challenging and thrilling part of performing. While I love to

clown and play in a class context, I have no experience using clown techniques in a structured show. I knew that I wanted to take on this challenge, however. In creating this solo performance, I found places to have deeply scripted sections and sections for audience interaction and comedic lazzi. These evolved a lot- I would try a comedic bit for my collaborators, and if it didn't land, I would find something that would work better or make my point more clearly. My training in Brad Wrenn's Play class and his clown intensive gave me all the skills I needed to tackle this performance. A significant principle I worked to integrate from Play is allowing Tex to lose in pursuit of his objective and allowing that loss to hurt him. This open-hearted performance style allowed Tex's vulnerability to come through and allowed the audience to see him as a more dimensional, yearning character.

A considerable challenge with play and clown I found in Brad's class was my tendency to perform specifically to the audience members I knew, resulting in me performing to only half the audience. I see now that this tendency is a defense mechanism to protect myself onstage. I have skills in clowning, but I was only playing for the safety of audiences I knew. In approaching performing *Tex*, I continued structuring opportunities to interact with the entire audience and rehearsed interacting with specific audience members throughout the house. I worked on rehearsing these moments from the first iteration to ensure they were baked into the foundation of this show.

I am always striving for authenticity onstage. As an actor, I am interested in being as myself as possible in front of an audience, an act that innately creates a more performative version of self. Cathy Madden's wisdom and my practicing the Alexander Technique helped me realize that I can never truly become a different person. Accepting that we can only expand into different versions of ourselves liberates the artist and allows for a more authentic, realistic performance. Utilizing and rehearsing the Alexander Technique in every step of creating this show allowed for more ease onstage. Accepting the performance as a part of myself allowed me to find ease onstage and inhabit characters, even while characters are distressed onstage, as Tex was in my show.

As I mentioned, one of the most significant challenges in creating this piece was finding a creative writing method that was useful to an actor. Luckily, I had to do a fair amount of searching and had amazing collaborators, including Adrienne Mackey, Iveliz Martel, and my cohort members, who graciously helped me, including big picture help structuring the piece and precision work crafting jokes and lazzi. Once I finally cracked the methodology, the more nefarious challenge set in: DOUBT. Creating my first solo show in my second year of the program, I was riddled with doubt, questioning my work. I realized far too late in my second year that questioning the quality of my work paralyzed the creative process. This time, I spent a long time in the research phase: dreaming, gathering inspiration and materials, and brainstorming. Once I decided to commit to the story of Tex, I had to stop thinking about how audiences would receive it. Per my Alexander Technique training, I committed to telling the story and invited the future audience in at every step of the process. Still, I never allowed myself to question the quality. I freed myself from the need for a "well-made play" structure and allowed myself to imagine this as the first draft of a show featuring snippets of the future full piece. Although I eventually found a linear structure in my story, I started by working with snapshots and strung them into a cohesive arc.

I feel successful after writing, rehearsing, producing, and performing this piece. I have experience producing, so the idea of actually putting this show together is where I was most prepared. Writing was where I was most insecure when I began, but I am thrilled with how the creation and writing of the piece came together. It stretched me to write and perform a scripted portion of the piece and allowed me to find a method for performing a semi-improvised portion. I told a personal story, allowing myself to be vulnerable to my audience, but also had conflict and arc. After performing this, I imagine creating an extended version in the future. I imagine a full-length version with more comedic bits and longer plotting and defensive behavior that would make the sentimental moment under the stars at the end more impactful. I did not think I would feel as accomplished as I do now- it is a great feeling as I head out into the world after my education- to have the confidence and ability to make my solo show when I want to.

# Tex: The Straightest Man in the West

Written and Performed by Nic Morden

## A Cowboy's Entrance

*Sounds of high heels walking powerfully in the hallway.*

*Tex appears in upstage vaum, backlit. Cowboy music: the theme of The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.*

*He enters as a swishy little cowpoke.*

*He gets to center stage, notices two audience members looking at him (or reacting strangely), doesn't like their reaction, throws a hissy fit, sprints offstage and around the Penthouse to try his intimidating entrance again.*

*The theme of The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly starts from the beginning again.*

*He enters again, this time starting backwards. Once he gets down to the stage, he twirls around and reveals a Cowboy Hat. He menacingly wanders into the space and attempts to intimidate the two audience members that looked at him funny on his first entrance. It doesn't work, he throws a fit and sprints off.*

*Tex enters one final time. The theme of The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly starts over one final time. This time he enters quickly with a balloon gun.*

*He aims it at the audience, intimidates, finds it successful. He pops the balloon.*

*Now the show can begin.*

## Getting to Know Tex

Now that I have your attention!

Y'all know me. Y'all have heard of me. I'm Tex. The baddest, manliest man on this side of the Mississippi. I see my reputation precedes me.

So here we are in the saloon.

*Lights up in the saloon: house lights come up and a general wash on stage. Saloon sound effects come up.*

It's a pretty rowdy joint.

I'm just here for a drink. That's it.  
I was here last night. It's no different.  
All my friends at the saloon.  
This is normal Saturday night. Everyone knows me.  
Cause I'm the toughest guy in town, NO MATTER THOSE RUMORS ABOUT ME.  
I'm gonna pull up a chair.

*Lights come up on a balloon man sitting in the saloon with a cartoonish smile across his face.*

Oh him? We'll that's my riding partner, Ennis. He's a man of few words, but profound thoughts.

We're gonna kick back, we're gonna shoot the shit. We're gonna tell stories about the WEST.

About our time out on the plains, right?

## The Straightest Music

Oh y'all want me to put a song on?  
Alright, but I'm gonna play something I really love.  
I'm gonna play something really tough.

Kamden! (*Or sound person's name*) You mind playing that song I've been into lately!? You can play it loud!

*(Plays "Music" by Madonna.)*

*However the audience reacts to the song:*

What? This is pretty straight. Right? Yeah this is what straight guys listen to.

*To a specific audience member:*

This isn't a cowboy song? But have you seen the music video? She's wearing a cowboy hat.

*To the whole audience.*

Well if this weren't a cowboy song, a cowboy couldn't dance to it! So maybe I'll just prove it to you.

*Starts to dance, it's small and scared and straight.*

Actually, you know, all these eyes on me, JUDGING ME, you've got me feelin' a little self conscious. Maybe y'all can help me?

*To a specific audience member:*

Do cowboys dance with their hips?

*Ad libs with audience member and hip movement is determined by audience member.*

*To a different audience member:*

What about with their shoulders?

*Ad libs with audience member and shoulder movement is determined by audience member.*

*To a new audience member:*

What should I do with my feet?

*Ad libs with audience member and feet movement is determined by audience member.*

So this is how cowboys dance, ya reckon?

Really? This is the straightest dance y'all can think of?

I'm gonna trust ya on this one!

So this is a pretty straight song! As I've demonstrated! Thank you!

Because you all know me! Most macho man this side of the Mississippi.

*Catches an audience member looking at him in any way.*

I don't like ass stuff.

That's crazy if you think that.

But I don't. I don't like that. I like boobs.

Tits

Just four months ago I was... with... I was with the MADAM.

YEAH!

And you knooooooow she means BUSINESS.

BUSINESS

SEXUALLY!

## WIFE

Yeah I've got a wife, but don't tell her.

And we have kids.

Well, they're cats.

Yeah, we call them our kids. Yeah, we call em our kids.

Not not because we don't fuck.

We do! You can ask her.

She's got big boobs.

Very nice boobs.

I like a lot about my wife. I like that she is fine with me being gone most of the time.

I like that a lot.

CAUSE YOU CAN'T TAME ME!

A MAN LIKE ME?! STAY AT HOME??? PERISH THE THOUGHT!

GOD DAMN! Y'all have got me heated!

I need a damn drink.

Let me get some water.

*Reveals that he is going to drink out of a martini glass.*

## Drinking Water

*Off of any audience reaction:*

WHAT?

It's a martini! A man can't enjoy a martini?

*To a specific audience member.*

Is there a way I can drink this to make it look more straight? TO NOT GET MOCKED?

What if I just gently sip it?

*Sips out of the glass, it's all pinkies.*

This is straight?

Or maybe if I toss it back?

That's hard, that's bad.

*Tosses the water back. It spills all over his front.*

Don't laugh!

I'm NOT QUEER! Why does everyone think that? I've given no reason! For you to think that!

This hurts me!

## Riding a Horse

How can I prove to you I'm fucking straight?

Oh I know, I'll show you what a good rider I am.

Yeah. I can show you how to ride a horse.

Okay, I'll demonstrate on my horse Fabio here.

Y'all don't mind if I bring my horse into the saloon for a demonstration, right?

*Leads Fabio (a balloon horse head attached to a chair) into the saloon. He speaks less forcefully with Fabio, allows his true voice to shine through.*

Come on boy, it's okay. I know you don't usually come inside, but we're making a point!

*To the audience.*

Everyone say hello to Fabio.

Now I've rode a lot of horses in my life.

Rode a lot of ponies.

Wrote a lot of stallions...

It takes a certain kinda man to ride a stallion.

First, you might have a good relationship with the horse that you're about. You're gonna ride. You gotta have a good relationship.

You gotta talk to your horse like a lover. Like how I talk to my (looks at Ennis) WIFE.

Ad lib: bad romantic talk- you hair is very brown tonight... or something like that.

Great! He's already trusting me more.

And you gotta touch your horse like a lover.

Like I touch my wife.

Because I do touch her all the time. Yeah.

I do. I do.

*He makes strong eye contact with an audience member, firmly grabs the horses' chest like boobs, quickly moves on.*

And now you're ready to sit on the horse.

You gotta come in reeeeealll gentle.

You take their haunches in their hands and you gotta take it real slow. Yeah, take it nice and easy.

Takes a second to adjust. You gotta sit real nice and slow. You gotta just ride em and you gotta breathe.

*Mounts the horse, takes breath, adjusts, and starts to slowly scoot the horse across the stage.*

"Come on, Fabio!"

*He starts to ride the horse across the stage. It's frantic and sexual and odd. It starts slow and gets more frenetic.*

"Come on, Fabio! Come on, Fabio! Come on, Fabio! Come on, Fabio! Come on, Fabio!  
Come on, Fabio!"

*Ginuwine's Pony starts to play softly, but builds to a crescendo. The lights change. He's gone somewhere beyond the saloon.*

*People are reacting. He jumps off.*

WHAT?!! I'm riding a horse!

Can't a man enjoy riding his horse?

*An audience member questions his horse? Or maybe it's just his insecurity.*

IS MY HORSE GAY!?!?!?

Everyone thinks my horse is gay?!?

What do I have to do?

What do I have to do to impress everybody. I'm not gay and my horse isn't gay.

WHY DOES EVERYONE KEEP SAYING THIS ABOUT ME? Why do I have to keep convincing you?

I just need everyone to leave me alone! Look you've upset Fabio. Now I gotta calm him down! I gotta do our meditation to calm him down....

*He strokes his horse as he starts whispering this next section. What starts as a meditation slowly becomes the reality around him.*

## Out on the Range with Ennis

*He takes off some of his cowboy accouterments. The house lights dim. The campfire roars, and crickets chirp. Lights like stars come up on flats. The lights are dim and it's romantic and beautiful. His accent and tough voice fades away as this scene goes on.*

*Starts as a meditation for Fabio, but becomes a description of the beautiful night unfolding around him.*

It's always the same.

We'd be out under the stars.

We just enjoy each other's company.

We're looking up at that Milky Way.

By the campfire.

And it makes you feel like.

*Grabs Ennis and moves him down next to the campfire.*

You're not alone all the time.

Makes you feel like you don't have to work so hard every minute of your life.

To... be... something.

And maybe it is some...some part of me.

But...

It's not your baseline.

With him, it just feels like you're at your basement.

And it gets pretty cold pretty fast.  
And we might like to huddle up a little bit to enjoy each other's warmth.  
We're real cozy, real close to fire.  
And Ennis might bring out a nice blanket.

*Grabs the saddle blanket off of Fabio and tenderly drapes it over Ennis and himself.*

We might put it over the two of us.  
And be nice and warm together.

And his hand might graze my hand. And his hand is rough, but it feels nice.  
It feels like... like he's been somewhere.  
Like he's held the world in his hands.

And his hands might, his hands might... curl around mine.

Feels warm.  
It feels like all the light in the world is just right between our palms

Makes you feel seen.  
Makes you feel like someone understands you.  
Like you don't even have to..  
You don't even have to explain it all. He just gets it.  
It's not even a question of behaving as myself.. I just am. I just am.  
It's just.  
Together.

And the fire, we just let it burn out.  
We let it go out whenever we want.  
We like to. Ennis, he likes to sit and watch the embers. Glow.  
I like to build fire, he likes to watch it go down.

Watch the orange slowly fade to black and grays.  
He does this cute thing in the mornings, when it's all burnt out like.  
He likes to...stomp on the embers and the wood.  
Likes to kick up a cloud of smoke. Puffs of ash.

And we go back to our tent.  
And we get real close.

*Tex moves Balloon Ennis to a sitting up position. Tex holds him from behind.*

And I hold him.  
And he never makes me feel small.  
I know I'm a small guy, but he never makes me feel small.  
And my arm fits just.. right under his arms. And I hold him real close.

And it gets so warm  
It's so warm, and I'm hot blooded. I am hot blood. I am hot blooded.  
It's hard for me to always want to snuggle like this, but  
But ultimately, it feels so right.  
My chest pressing against his back.

I love that feeling. That little divet in his chest.  
Where his soul just pours out.

*They position themselves to lie down.*

And this is my favorite time at night.  
I'm a bit of a night owl.

My brain starts taking off when his starts shutting down.  
But its my favorite time to talk.  
Chat about the things that are on my mind.

And he starts to really crash at some point.  
So talk at him for a while.  
And I know he wants to sleep, and he drifts, but he listens to me.

He listens good.  
And sometimes he'll tell me to go to bed.  
But usually he lets me talk.

And it's nice to not have to.  
Put anything on.  
Just be exactly who I want.

Exactly who I am.  
I don't have to, you know, talk, a certain way.  
We just are.

## The Decision

*The lights abruptly come up back, house lights at all. The audience stares and Tex is mortified.*

*He has to make a decision. Deny? How much did they see?*

*He reaches for his hat and boots. His old instincts kick in.*

*But he hesitates. He stands. He sees Ennis, his love, laying there.*

*He dares the audience with his eyes. Allows them to really take him in indignantly. He gently lifts Ennis to slow dance with him. Tex signals to Kamden to play the music.*

*Cher music plays: "Song for the Lonely".*

*He begins slow dancing as he wants in front of the audience and watches them. His watching the audience goes away as he savors the moment.*

*Lights go down on him dancing with Ennis.*

**End of play.**