

Creation & Performance of Solo Show *Their Eyes Get Big*

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Abstract

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*Their Eyes Get Big* is a solo performance about the reverberations of sexual assault and bystander responses in my life. In this performance, I attempt to bring the audience into my own experience of sexual assault, using stories from my life that have been abidingly influential, in order to offer a lens for current and systemic sexual violence that I and my academic community have been witness to. By all audience reports, I was successful: Audience members responded that they found the piece moving, and that they were still thinking and talking about *Their Eyes Get Big* much later. The success and impact of the performance can be directly attributed to synthesizing and application of learnings from the Professional Actor Training Program: Identifying and honoring my impulses; my expanded capacity for self-reflection, self-assessment, and constructively seeking and incorporating feedback; and using rehearsal and performance to learn, respond to audience, deepen work and make discoveries.

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In my final year at the School of Drama Professional Actor Training Program, through synthesizing and applying learnings made throughout the course of my program, I was able to create a solo show that I am proud of, that is an imprint of my perspective and values, and that I consider to be a new stage in my creative life.

Learning to identify and honor my impulses has been one of the greatest learnings that I applied to this thesis show. Through Solo Shows with Libby King and Valerie Curtis-Newton, I learned about breaking through indecision by picking an idea and going with it; and the importance of telling the story I want to tell. Through Alexander Technique with Cathy Madden I've learned about letting my desire lead and making the work I want to make. At first I thought I was following my impulses in pursuing a solo show about financialization of universities, and I was reading books and conducting interviews, before I was able to admit to myself that I didn't want to make that show anymore. When I was able to voice that I didn't want it anymore in Adrienne's class, I then had the space to be receptive to what was alive for me: The ways that sexual assault has influenced me and the ways I see people around me responding to sexual assault in their circles. Then I was able to write the first draft of my piece in one sitting, with excitement and recognition of the now-familiar sense that I was on the right track.

Because of the continuous invitation for self-reflection and self-assessment in the PATP, I was able to find and implement a process for this piece that is conducive to the ways that I think

and create. Libby King encouraged us to keep journals and describe how we created pieces, to retrace our steps. Adrienne Mackey had us map our creative process – so I knew I need a container and I need inspiration. These practices set me up to be able to trust and follow my own creation and rehearsal process, which also includes sharing: Using tools for gathering feedback that were learned from Jeffrey Fracé and Adrienne Mackey, I felt empowered to seek feedback during the script development and early rehearsal phase that informed my revisions. The feedback I solicited helped me understand how the show landed on audience members, and how to solidify elements (water, calls to action, vessels) that I had been playing with in the script.

Another crucial learning that went into this process was trusting that, with consistent attention and practice, work will be deepened and specified. This learning can be attributed to any faculty member but I especially associate it with Scott Hafso. Rehearsal with intention works. Re-reading the script again works. Through my week of rehearsal, I significantly deepened the staging and made discoveries about the piece. I'm glad that I chose to put up six performances. This was a scary piece to perform because of how personal and honest it was, so doing six performances in one weekend was emotionally demanding. However, I learned something in each performance because of how it was working in relationship with different audiences. I feel especially grateful for the show I got to share with an audience attended by friends whom I know to be survivors of assault, who actually laughed at the Impressions moment – I realized that they recognized the faces and the responses that I was reenacting. I am most grateful that by implementing all my learnings from the PATP, I could meaningfully connect with my desired audience in the most open and personal piece I've ever made.



Fig. 1. Promotional graphic for *Their Eyes Get Big*

## THEIR EYES GET BIG

***Materials:** kiddie pool, chair, vessels of water, towels, cordless phone, radio, or a speaker with a microphone*

***Sounds:** Dream Weaver by Gary Wright, especially the intro and outro music and the chorus; Christmas music and 80s music was also chosen for flashback stories in the original production.*

*Italics are stage directions.*

**Bold text** is character dialogue.

*An empty kiddie pool center stage. The bigger the better. Maybe upstage, downstage, or to the sides, are vessels of all kinds full of water - vases, buckets, pitchers, cups, pots, etc. Throughout*

*the play, the pool will slowly be filled with water, and all of the vessels will be emptied one by one.*

*(Entering)* This will be one of the last shows to take place in Hutchinson Hall for a while! Because of the seismic retrofitting. They're moving everybody out of this building and into Condon Hall next year. Did you know this building used to be The Women's Physical Education Building? This place is old, built in 1927, with the original lead paint still up there! These studio rooms are the old gymnasium rooms – in the old UW yearbooks going back to the 20s, 30s, and 40s, you can see pictures of women playing volleyball and tennis here and in 202. And downstairs in the basement, almost underneath our feet, is where the old swimming pool used to be. There was a women's swimming team called the Silver Fishes. So many ladies, used to be swimming around down there. Swimming around and around in circles. Doing their laps and their configurations. So much has happened in this building that we will never know about.

*Pick up first vessel, pour it into the pool ceremoniously.*

This is my impression of people when you tell them that someone you both know was raped by someone you both know.

*A big eye reaction, alarmed and sad at the same time.*

*Eyes welling up, big and full of pity.*

*A sad shaking of the head.*

*Lowering the eyes and the head.*

*A face that hardens and becomes indecipherable. Jaw setting, nostrils flaring. A mask with a slight smile.*

WHAT?

Thank you for telling me.

WHEN?

Why are you telling me?

HOW?

What do you want from me?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

I just want to tell you up front there's nothing I can do.

ARE YOU SURE?

Have you called such and such and told such and such?

Have you talked to him?

HOW DO YOU KNOW IT WAS RAPE?

Have you looked into the resources and the school bodies and the phone numbers?

Are you sure?

That's terrible.

Have you considered forgiveness?

It's the "what do you want from me?" responses that get me. Can you imagine? If someone were running out from the woods screaming, missing an arm, crying for help, screaming THERE'S A MURDERER RIGHT BEHIND ME. HE JUST HACKED MY ARM OFF AND HE'S

FOLLOWING ME. Could you imagine if I said to them, and what do you want from me by telling me this?

I'VE BEEN HACKED LIMB FROM LIMB BY THE AX MURDERER AND I THINK I'M LOSING BLOOD well there is only so much I can do.

Isn't that fucked up?

Oh, also, something else people ask me, is WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS. WHY DO YOU CARE? Well,

*Pick up another vessel, pour it into pool.*

I haven't been raped. I haven't been raped myself. I haven't been raped. But it is all around me. Every woman in my life whom I love has been raped or molested. My mother, grandmother, aunt, sister, best friend, my cousin, and now my cousin's children – her little children are being molested by their father, and my cousin is forced by court order to hand her babies over to their father every weekend, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Because there isn't enough evidence.

*Pour vessel.*

A formative memory from when I was a kid: Christmas, at the kitchen table with my grandmother, my mother, my aunt, my other aunt, the women in my family. I was sitting and listening to the adults talking, about all of their rapes.

My Aunt Hanna: **In a parking lot, this guy pulled me into his car. He was trying to rape me but there was something wrong with his penis, it wouldn't get up, I wonder if that's why he felt the need to rape people.**

**Your cousin was also attacked by someone in a parking garage and he tried to pull her into his car but she fought him off. And then there's your mom, and our dad.**

My Grandmother: **I had something happen to me when I was young, a man...**

My mom: **Oh mom, I didn't know that. You never told us this. What happened? Who was it?**

*Transition to Grandma, looking at her daughters and granddaughter: I... I... covers her face, shakes her head.*

I will never know who hurt her. She has dementia now, and I feel lucky when she remembers my name. But someone hurt her when she was young, in her house, someone she knew, and I will never know. (*Opaque vessel, can't pour it into the pool?*)

My Aunt Hanna: **Emily. Never trust any man. Unless it's your brother or your husband – Not even your husband – Never trust any man. Don't let a child sit on a man's lap. Don't trust any man ever.**

*Transition to Emily slowly nodding yes to Aunt Hanna. Pour vessel.*

This is how I learned my mom was molested. After my mom divorced my stepdad, Todd Barbeau, who I hated very much and I was glad to see him go, my mom and I started spending more time together, we would go to movies, go to dinner, watch TV, and we would just talk— for the first time in my life, I could tell my mom about the ways that my stepdad Todd Barbeau had mistreated me, and my mom truly listened.

We shared our dreams. I had recently had this very vivid dream, where I was a famous, sought after healer. A long line of people wound around this low red brick wall waiting for me to lay my hands on them. A child, whose skin was charred from head to toe, was brought to me to be healed. When I did lay my hands on his scorched body, a stream of smoke began to rise up out of his chest, then he burst into flames, and then I woke up. I was haunted by this dream. I thought that perhaps this was God's way of telling me that I actually had the power to heal with my hands? I told my mom, and we both realized that there was only one way to find out: We had to call the Dream Weaver! (*Dream Weaver by Gary Wright plays, chorus that fades into instrumentals that play underneath*) The next evening her show aired, and we heard the invitation to call in, my mom dialed. She had had a recurring dream of her own that she couldn't shake. We shared both of our dreams to the screener, and then soon we were on the air talking to the Dream Weaver! I listened on the radio, my ear pressed against the speaker, listening to my mom's voice, while she sat right next to me talking into the telephone, telling the Dream Weaver her dream live on the air!

*Dream Weaver fades out during cross to Mom, speaking into the microphone:* **Hello Dream Weaver. So in my dream, I'm a little girl. I'm with my uncle, my dad's brother, and I'm tied to a chair in a room and I can't move or escape. And I'm watching all of this from a bird's eye view, above the action, as if I'm floating up there seeing myself tied to the chair, seeing my uncle, my dad's brother, pacing around the room, pacing around the room with a gun. He points the gun at me, fires it, and I watch from above as time slows down and the bullet creeps towards my little body. Minutes pass, I watch the bullet barrel closer and closer towards my head. The bullet gets closer, closer, closer, it's between my eyebrows now, it's touching my forehead, and then I wake up.**

**And I don't know what it means. I've had it so many times, and I just don't understand it!  
What could it mean?**

*Cross to the radio.*

**Lydia**, the Dream Weaver said to her with a gentleness that I can also hear live on the air, **Have you ever been molested?**

Silence. My mom freezes. My eyes get big.

*Cross to mom.*

**Yes.**

*Cross to radio.*

**Well, Lydia, dreams like these are very common in victims of molestation. The third person perspective. Being bound and helpless.**

*Cross to mom.*

**But my uncle didn't molest me. It was my father. But maybe that was my brain protecting me from the reality of what my father had done.**

The Dream Weaver was very kind, and patient, and caring, I could hear it in her voice. **Lydia, thank you so much for calling in with your story tonight. I know there are so many people out there who are benefiting from you sharing your dream on the air tonight. With your permission, can I post your dream to my website, so that it can reach even more people?**

My mom said **Yes, of course, thank you, good night.** *Hang up the phone*

*Sit in Emily seat.*

**Mom did that really happen?**

*Cross to Mom.*

**Yeah. What a bastard, huh?**

**It was after your Grandma had already divorced him. The five of us were visiting dad in his trailer. And he separated me from my brothers and my sister, and took me into the other room. At some point your aunt Hanna started pounding on the door and got me away.**

**I've read that people who do this do it to show their love, to show their love for the person, it's how they show that they love you.**

**When your Grandma found out? Oh she was furious. At me. She yelled at me for letting it happen. God, she was so pissed.**

My grandmother told me all the stories of her life, over and over, all my life, until she forgot them all, but this one never entered the rotation – and it wasn't that this was too inappropriate, she told me all kinds of things I shouldn't have heard – When she would talk about Elmer Clive Wells, her ex-husband, she would say how handsome he was, how blue his eyes were, how he swept her off her feet the moment she locked eyes with him in a cafe in Armenia Colombia, the only American man to pass through there in ages, her ticket to the United States. She would say that my brother has Elmer Clive's blue eyes and good looks. She never talked about this. That makes me angry.

That night, my mom also told me about the ghost of Elmer Clive, about the forgiveness of Elmer Clive Wells. **I was driving in my car late one night. My dad had already died years before. I was in my twenties. This was before I had you. And suddenly my car smelled like cheese, like the stinky cheese he used to eat. I knew it was him. I could feel him sitting in the backseat of my car, I could smell his stinky cheese smell. I knew he had come for me, and he wouldn't leave until I forgave him. Okay! I forgive you! I said. I forgive you! I forgive you!**

But still she had the dreams. Years later, despite the demands of Elmer Clive's restless ghost, she was still haunted. What a bastard, huh? *Pour vessel.*

I think that maybe the Dream Weaver listened to me tell my dream first. I said, **I think that this dream means that I have the power to heal people with my hands. But perhaps my healing power is too powerful? I am concerned that this means that I have the power to heal people with my hands,** I don't really remember what she said, but she did assure me that **you probably do not have the power to heal people with your hands, but it does seem like you have a very strong urge to help other people and you can certainly exercise that desire as you get older.**

It was a little disappointing.

I tried to find the Dream Weaver recently, I remember her website, and the archives, was a very popular radio show. But her website and any trace of her is gone. The archives are gone, and so that recording of my moms story is gone. The only trace of the Dream Weaver that I could find was her legal name - Stephani Doran.

So that's my story about how I've never been raped but I come from a family that has been horribly wounded by rape and sexual violence and the silence that comes with it, that is being horribly wounded right now.

I've learned a lot in grad school. I've learned a lot about what people like to see on stage. I also learned that people don't really want to see ugly things on stage, at least right now. I learned recently, from a head of new works development at a theater far away, that comedy is what is selling. So if you have a tragedy or a family drama that you're working on right now, maybe hold off on trying to shop that because right now people want to laugh. They want to be distracted.

Something else that I learned in grad school is that people really like to see water on stage. In one class last year, we all filled out forms on what kind of art we wanted to make and what we wanted to see. Almost everyone wrote that they wanted to see water on stage. People love seeing water on stage. *Pours vessel or perhaps has been pouring a vessel throughout this section.*

When I got to this school, I started learning about the history and prevalence of sexual assault in this department. I learned about incidents of sexual assault in every year of my grad program going back several years. Some of those incidents happened in these rooms. When we talked about past years, and past people, there was some intrigue as we gossiped and we would say, "well thank goodness we don't have anything like that!" Then I learned that we do have something like that. That's when I learned my hardest lesson. In the words of one very brave and kind friend, **the only correct response when someone comes to you with a story of sexual**

**assault is to say, I'm so sorry that happened, thank you for telling me, what can I do to help.** But sadly, that response is very rare. Their eyes all get big at first, but then most people look away.

*Step into the pool.*

I think that there needs to be another flood. There used to be a swimming pool in the basement of this building. Let it fill with water again. Let it rise from the basement, into the grad student lounge, into the studio spaces, let it seep up the stairs, let it spew between the floorboards and the cracks in doors. Let the water rise, let it rise up, let the swimming pool envelop this building. Let the ladies swim laps in circles once again, in beautiful, strong formations. Let the water get so high that it streams out of the high windows from 303. Let it rise. Let it rise.

That's the show. Thank you all for coming. I have an invitation for you before you leave. If you would like to, if you have a story of your own or just one that you hold in your heart, if you would like to, I invite you to take a vessel and pour it into the pool before you leave. Thank you.

*A lot of people will most likely participate. Let them take their time. Say thank you.*

*End.*