

*86: A Solo Performance of My Own Design

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Abstract

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*86 is a solo performance piece that questions the comprehension and practice of self-determination. This inquiry derives from my own repressive experience in the service industry and the self-reckoning it inspired.

Erika Vetter

Graduate Thesis - *86

Jeffrey Fracé

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The service industry has served—pun intended—as my “side-hustle” since I was a sophomore in high school. When I completed my undergrad and moved to New York City, it only made sense to me to snag another restaurant job while I pursued my dream. The Smith was a hip restaurant in Midtown, and one of my best friends at the time was a manager there. The people working there were fellow creatives, so everyone was really great about covering shifts for one another, and the pay was great. It wasn’t until about four and a half years into that job that I finally recognized just how miserable I had become and how toxic that environment really was. The significance of that exact moment inspired the framework and theme of *86: that I don’t need anyone else to give me permission to pursue my holistic welfare.

It was in that moment that I realized that my confines of despair and unfulfillment were self-made, and I started to make choices that aligned with my needs— including enrolling in UW’s Professional Actor Training Program. And as I leave the nurturing environment of academia in Seattle for the harsher reality of New York City life, I’ve been revisiting that moment with equal parts reverence and fear: reverence for how far I’ve come, and fear of history repeating itself—a duality that felt apt to share at the culmination of my time here.

My curiosity moved into research when I started conducting interviews with old co-workers, using the skills I was taught in Docu-theatre and Solo Shows to gather information and play with structure. My work in Solo Shows also helped me parse out the moments I needed my playwright, actor and director to show up in the process, and how to take my collection of findings and inspirations and transform them into a production. I employed the Integrative Alexander technique to build the world and embody the experience I was revisiting, and to move past creative struggles. One particular struggle I had was figuring out staging. With little directing experience, I worried about my staging serving clarity of story and environment. Val reminded me that if I focused on my strength—acting—I could vastly simplify my staging and serve the storytelling above all else. My work across Composition classes also helped solve this problem, as I realized that I could help establish environment without having to create elaborate blocking by taking my audience along with the soundscapes that live so vividly in my mind. Finally, I knew I wanted this version of the production to serve the hybrid of stage and camera, and since I had assigned such a specific role to the audience, I wanted to utilize the camera to create a bit more intimacy. This meant employing my Acting for Camera training to translate my acting to serve that intimacy, as well. It was helpful to be able to watch my rehearsal recordings the way we do in Film class, as well, and let my director step in to fix the things that weren't working with this medium of storytelling.

Carrying this process forward, I'd like to lean further into my main note from Jane Nichols to deepen the reactive sincerity in my work. I'd also like to continue to find more color and vibrancy at the top of the show to contrast the dimmed and disheartened value change of my character by the end. How exciting, though, to know that this piece is only finished when I choose it to be. And there it is again—choice. All of us are granted self-determination, and

sometimes we lose sight of that autonomy. This piece became an offering to those who feel stuck in a life that feels out of their control, and a reminder that that same life is theirs to change. This offering was the driving force behind my grad school experience, and the piece that feels most important to carry with me as I re-emerge into the arts industry and advocate for the life and career I desire.

*86

A Solo Show

Lights up on VETTER, who is sitting at a table, dressed in uniform, save for her apron which is wrapped and sitting on the tabletop with her server's book resting on top and open. She does her sidework as she performs. The light is dim. There is an unnerving ring as...

Oh, I'm so unhappy... I can't work, I won't work. That's enough! That's enough! I hate and despise everything that they give me to do... I'm already twenty four, I have been working already for ages, my brain is drying up, I'm growing old and—

...

She drops out.

Fuck.

Checks her book. There is a handwritten piece of paper tucked into the front.

ugly and old, and nothing I do, nothing at all gives me any joy. I'm growing ugly and old, and nothing I do, nothing at all gives me any joy. (*Lights up, ringing gone.*)

Hi. Yes, I'm Vetter. Sorry, I'm memorizing. Nice to meet you, welcome to The Smith!

She keeps working. The trainee/audience tells her she's training them today.

Oh no. I don't train. You're probably looking for Morgan or Corey or Kruger or (*stops abruptly*)—Paul said me, Vetter? He said me specifically?

...

Fucking Paul.

She nods slowly in reluctant acceptance. The ringing is back but faint. She's struggling with this, but her spirits are higher today. She reframes it.

Sorry it's nothing against you, I'm just not ...I'm a little confused why they are suddenly making me—

That's okay! You know what? This is ironic.

Yeah, because I've been here for...yikes, four years...plus... but after the first two years of ZERO pm shifts and double brunches and basically having no time to audition which was the—CORNER—whole reason I moved here in the first place, I tried to quit— this is the downstairs locker room, that supply closet is supposed to be a changing room but I recommend using the guest bathrooms to change because the door doesn't lock and Back of House will “accidentally” walk in on you. (*She notices Dom.*) Right, Dom? (*Beat as she stares him down.*) — anyway, I tried to quit but they were short-staffed at the time so I moved to reg PMs and Sunday Brunch—employee bathroom, they only want you to use this bathroom, but we all use the guest bathrooms because there are like a hundred of us and it's disgusting. Like, pee always on the toilet seat, too many questionable hairs, I once found a half piece of bacon by the toilet— so I'm here a few days and then I do more actor-y work elsewhere, but I'm finally shifting towards full-time actor— walk-in 4 where all the sauces are, ranch, bleu cheese, vinaigrettes, habs and mins. It's also the best one to cry in—(*phone buzzes, her attitude shifts and she checks it frantically. It's clearly not who she was hoping for*—) I actually just booked an awesome show and they're sending me my contract today. Nope, just my mom.—CORNER— this is where Sachenka works. She's the sweetest lady. She does most of the stocking and folds extra napkins. If you pay her \$20 she'll fold yours for you so you don't have to at the end of your shift don't tell Paul that or really anything that I'm saying.—Or do! Fuck it, it's my last day what are they gonna do?— this is the prep kitchen, manager's office— they have a/c in there which is why you'll never see any of them on the floor when it's above a balmy 80 degrees. Walk-in 4 is also great for summer shifts.— Anyway when I get that email today it's all official so this is ironic because they're basically having me train my replacement.— Main kitchen here.— Hola, Saul! Como estás? Aww may buy cansado?! Ohhh lo siento. — Saul seems grumpy, but he's like a sweet young curmudgeon grandpa. Take care of that one. — Coffee station, bar, obviously— (*shifts into a vague eastern european dialect*) Oh hello. Hello, yes, this is bartender Sarah, formerly known as server Sarah, she is huge asshole you will hate. One more shift finally free of Satan spawn. Yes shoo shoo, nobody like you— just kidding, she's super cool. — you'll pick up bar drinks here,

you'll pour your own wine, soda, juice since its brunch—(*Phone buzzes. She checks it.*) Sorry I'm gonna be doing this all day (*Nothing. She puts the phone back.*)— uh, okay, water station, green bottles for sparkling, clear bottles for still, the faucets alternate— still, sparkling, still, sparkling— why? Like many things here there is no logic— fill em up, put em in the ice. (*Someone has joined in as she shifts into a 1920s snappy dialogue dialect. She's not as quick as her counterpart and she crumbles a bit, she's more entertained by Brent.*) Well, well, well, what do we have here? Ah yes, one last brunch, see! —Oh the audacity! The outrage!—(*Beat. Chuckling to herself.*) Brent is a clown. I will say it's a good group of humans. Some of them suck, I'll let you figure that out for yourself but most of them— good people.

(She sees the host seating her section.)

Awww. Okay, we're getting double sat because our very young, very green host is perpetually confused and overwhelmed by a simple table rotation. So we'll grab a few sets of waters and go greet—which, right I guess I need to teach you steps of service? (*She struggles. It's been awhile since she had to recite those. Beat.*) Well you've done this before probably. And really, once you ring food in you don't have to do much else. The runners and bussers sort of take over. (*She raises her voice, pointedly.*) Or they should, since they're getting 27% percent of my tips. Right, Dom? (*Beat as she stares him down.*)

Okay. (*Points.*) 71, 72, 74, 75, 76. They gave you a floor map? Egg-celent. That's a brunch pun.

Lights dim. There's a soft, unnerving ring as she approaches her first table of the day. She takes a deep breath. Gears up.

Lights up. Her voice goes up an octave into server voice. She has done this maybe three million times before.

Same inflections. Same jokes.

With unnerving positivity:

Hi folx, how's it goin?

House purified water to get you started:

Green is sparkling, clear is still.

Table 74 look like a couple of aspiring Instagram influencers, so I probably could have saved some time and just greeted them with sliced lemon. Be prepared for them to share the avocado toast and a side of brussel sprouts. I could try to up-sell them on booze, though! Our bloody marys look good on the ‘gram. Oh, and don’t take it personally if they keep flagging other servers down— they don’t remember what we look like. They’ll never look up from their phones.

Her phone buzzes. She checks. Nope.

As she gets back to her tables, her volume goes up slightly.

Hi folx, how’s it goin’?

House purified water to—diet coke! Okay.

Table 76 are Upper East side housewives. Lean in, reading lips will not help us in this scenario because they have had too many lip injections to move them. The extra fun ones will point to where we have ingredients listed on the menu to show us that we can in fact make their off-menu dish. Just fake their unreasonable requests like turning down the a/c in the middle of a heat-wave just because their starving, miserable bodies are cold.

Hi folx, how’s it goin’?

House purified water to get you started:

Green is sparkling, clear is still.

Table 75 is...fine.

Hi folx, how’s it goin’?

House purified water to get you started:

Green is sparkling, clear is still.

Okay. This new table at 71 are American tourists. Now we have an opport—

Ohp! So table 76 needs something immediately. Possibly the reassurance that the plate in front of her is in fact what she ordered. We cannot let her bully us back to the kitchen. Have you met Chef Chuck? (*Shudders.*)

Okay look at this beautiful six-top in treat-yourself-mode. It is up to us to take full advantage of them. We're talking fancy cocktails, spiked espresso drinks, snacks and starters, get them in on that raw bar, bottle service, table pancakes, I mean UP-SELLING like my rent depends on it.

“How’s it going here, folx? Orange you glad you got that second round of mimosas?” (*Gives a knowing glance to the trainee.*)

Alright, you can tell it’s starting to get loud in here—shout out to the brilliant bath tile design—and Brent’s getting sat with a 6-top of mommy manhattans with their Hulk-sized-baby strollers.

Now what does this mean for us— did you ever see that movie Man on Wire? Also adding screaming children roaming the premises like tiny unsupervised poltergeists so STAY. VIGILANT. (*She grabs a loaf of bread and a ramekin of butter out of her apron.*) Actually, let’s fortify. Nine hours straight means finding time to shove food in your face and occasionally shit— more than occasionally if you choose to eat family meal.

She takes a short break, sitting in the coat check closet, stuffing her face with some bread and butter. The ringing and dim light is back, this time they both grow (in volume and in darkness). We remain in the discomfort of the ringing as she quickly inhales this bread and stares into the abyss. Her phone buzzes, she checks. It’s the email!

She scans it excitedly. Stumbles upon something off, re-reads it a few times. Dials a number quickly.

Hey, sorry I only have a minute. I was just looking through the contract and it says I will be providing my own housing? I thought they knew I was a non-local hire.

Okay. Yeah, let me know! No, not at all just let me know! Okay, sorry, thanks!

She hangs up. Houses the last of her bread. Back to work.

Hi folx, how’s it goin’?

Uhm...House purified water to get you starte—HOUSE—WATER, FREE—free—green, SPARK— bubble—uh, fizzy— YES! clear, still—STILL, YES! Free! Uh, no, FREE! YES!
(*Turns. Exhausted.*)

Table 72 are European tourists. They’ll order the “Smizz barsteak...well done.” And when they ask for a coffee, they mean americano but they want you to charge them for a coffee. Just do it, you won’t want to mess with an already pathetic 5% tip. It is what it is.

Hi folx, how's it go— oh!

Table 75 is...still fine.

Phone buzzes. She checks her phone.

Ugh, mom. Come on.

Puts her phone back.

Where's Brent, I need some comedy.

She notices someone at the bar.

Oh fucking hell. Okay that's JJ, our beverage director. He's not here all the time, thank god, but he's a 44-year-old narcissistic, misogynistic man baby who still lives with his mother in Jersey and spends most of his time hitting on our underage hosts. Before I leave, I'm going to show corporate the dick pic nobody asked for of his little chode resting on top of a cocktail book.

She lets that sink in.

And that probably won't even do anything. Our director of operations is a bigger creep and our owner's beloved dad was the defense attorney for Jeffrey Epstein.

Beat. Maybe laughs.

Yeah.

There's a new table. Back to work.

Hi folx, how's it goin'?

Green is sparkling, clear is still.

Our new 72 is some more patriarchal hell: the self-entitled “corporate” men looking to use their privileged and undoubtedly undeserved non-existent credit limit to excuse the many forms of abuse they are about to unleash on me. Listen— it's far from ideal and it will invoke some egg-ceptional self-loathing... but the farther I bend over the better the tip. (*Beat. Wincing at her own words.*) See? Self-loathing.

She leaves the table only to swing back around.

Ohp! And we are *86 Passion Fruit Punch because fucking JJ— who is currently on his phone probably swiping his way through Grindr— forgot to order more passion fruit purée. So I'm going to swing by and drop off table 76's glasses of red before heading back to table 72 to endure another stupid joke about what a disappointment I am. And because I'm accidentally butt grazing 72's back as I try to squeeze through, he'll take that as an invitation to—oh! (*she gets spanked. The surprise causes her to fumble her tray, spilling the wine.*)— all over my tray, my white shirt,

and... Table 76's designer purse.

Tension builds as she tries to rectify the situation. She is rejected.

She is drafting her Yelp review now.

So our manager Paul— Paul, whose mere presence makes my asshole tighten up. Paul, who's actually enjoying how idiotic I look right now—yes, that Paul take over their service, and I will be told to go “pull myself together” in the coat closet.

But, hey! Table 72 was just playing around—he has a wife so obviously he respects women, and Table 75 is still fucking fine because they're still fucking here. And now's not the time, Brent!
Sorry, just...

She retreats to the closet, wiping off her phone, pens, server book, and scrubbing her shirt with a tide pen.

Her phone buzzes.

Hey!

Oh.

Well...uh...I mean I don't have a place lined up and I can't really afford—

I mean I said I was non-local.

Okay. No, I understand. Uhm...yeah, sorry, I don't know, uhm, can I call you after work around three your time?

Okay, thank you. Sorry

She hangs up. She picks up the tide pen. Puts it down. Picks up her phone, starts to text. Stops, puts it down. Picks up her tide pen and scrubs her shirt. Rigorously.

A guest opens the door looking for the bathroom. Her voice goes back up and she assumes her role as "server".

Ohp! Sorry! Oh no problem yeah head towards the host stand and you'll see the bathroom sign on the left. Absolutely, yep! Sorry—(*Waves and door closes again. She explodes.*) —
ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuaghhhhhh.

She notices the audience/trainee. The ringing stops.

I'm sorry.

...

God. I'm really sorry. I'm like a monster. I'm not usually like this. I'm usually—

That's not true.

...

To be honest this is a pretty normal shift for me.

She chuckles. It turns into a full out laugh, though at times you're unsure if she's crying.

I'm so fucked if I stay here, aren't I?

After a bit, the laughter dies down. She becomes sobered by it.

So how are you liking it here?

She smirks. Beat.

Why don't you go grab Brent and have him check in on our section with you. And tell Dom to bus something, for the love of God. I'll be on the floor in a minute.

The ringing is gone.

There is something different, intense in her performance of it this time. As she speaks she removes the apron. It's as if she's in a new space.

Oh, I'm so unhappy... I can't work, I won't work. That's enough! That's enough! I hate and despise everything that they give me to do... I'm already twenty four, I have been working already for ages, my brain is drying up, I'm growing ugly and old, and nothing I do, nothing at all gives me any joy, and time goes flying by and all the time it seems as if you are abandoning real life, life that is beautiful, you are going farther and farther away from it, over some sort of precipice.

She smiles, maybe even giggles. Lights down.