

STARDUST: A study of transformation

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Abstract

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This thesis documents the creation of the capstone assignment for the Professional Actor Training Program - the creation and performance of a solo show entirely of my own design. The assignment was intentionally sparse: create a solo show between 20 and 30 minutes in length. I established personal goals for my show months before I began to write. I had three rules for my solo show:

1. The piece must be beautiful.
2. The content must be personal and heart-centered.
3. I must transform.

I employed several skills and techniques I learned throughout my previous two and a half years of training in my process, including multiple sessions with various professors throughout the show's development. This document chronicles my process from the first seeds of creation to the final performance. I include my various obstacles, failures, successes and finally the lessons learned after the last performance was done.

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*“In memory, everything seems to happen to music.”  
- Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie*

I have an interest in the risk of transformation. On the first day of graduate school, acting professor Mark Jenkins handed me a sheet of paper with a list titled “The Evolution of the Actor.” The list begins with “look at me,” the childish yearning for attention that drew me to performance in the first place. The list ends with “look at the divine,” a sort of artistic nirvana where an actor removes their ego from the equation to become a vessel for the deific spirit that is Art. There are several steps in between, steps that became my personal milestones and checkpoints throughout my graduate education. And somewhere in the middle, the list mentions the word transformation for the first time. This idea, what it is to transform and why (if?) it matters, became my quest in my final solo performance piece.

With my personal challenge for the form of my piece in mind, the seed for the show’s content began over the summer. At the Edinburgh festival, I saw two remarkable movement pieces exploring the subjects of loss and memory. The subject matter I landed on, dementia in senior citizens, is a personal one. STARDUST is an adapted snippet of my grandmother’s story as she progressed through advanced stages of Alzheimer’s before she passed away. This piece was a long time coming: I had often wondered how I could best tell the story of a tough-as-nails, often woefully wrong, Midwest-glamorous woman, a woman who raised me. This was my first obstacle in the creation of the piece: fear that I would fail to do her justice, and the constant voice in the back of my head asking the same question: who is going to care?

The second obstacle was finding Delores’ voice. I walked into the beginning of the school year with vivid, clear pictures for what the piece would look like. I knew the beginning moment and the end moment, and I never budged from those. The shaky part was the 22 minutes

in between, specifically the talking that was vaguely supposed to happen somewhere within those 22 minutes. My deadline for my first draft was January 10, and I put off writing anything besides stage directions for the entirety of Fall Quarter. So over Christmas break, I sat down to write...and found that I could not remember what my grandmother sounded like. The mantra that began (and ultimately became my way into her transformation) was: "I can't hear her." After a few days of panicking about it (and a solid conversation with my mother), I released myself of the need to hear my grandmother and began to write.

The piece began as a monologue. An elderly woman telling the audience about her life, lessons she learned, stories she often told, with moments of lapse. I quickly ran into some difficulties with that, as I had never known my grandmother (or many of the others in her assisted living facility) to talk for 20 minutes on their own volition. I reached out to Ed Roth, my neuroscience professor from Western Michigan University and a music therapist who specializes in memory loss. After several conversations and several days of research, I poured out the first draft of the play in two hours. It became clear to me that my piece was meant to be a conversation, not a monologue. And the person driving the conversation was not going to be onstage.

Cue obstacle number three, the obstacle I did not initially anticipate, and yet the thing I most commonly avoid in my own work if I can help it: technical complications. I wrote myself a script that was impossible to rehearse without another person in the room. I wrote a scene, with one character that happened to be invisible to the audience. Conceptually, as a writer, I thought it was beautiful. I would record myself speaking the other character's lines and play Delores onstage. I would essentially be talking to myself. It seemed very metaphorical for what I was trying to say in the piece, and also the concept was different and artsy. As a writer, I was thrilled. As an actor, I wanted to kill the writer.

This is the point in my process when I learned how to ask for help. I met several times with multiple different people and asked them to play the "voice," which later became Delores' granddaughter Emily. This was invaluable as an actor and a writer because I heard her voice in several different ways, which significantly expanded my options of how to respond. It ended up being the best research into how to record my own voice later in the process.

There was also the matter of playing a 75-year-old woman with dementia. This was my original challenge to myself, and I learned to ask for lots of help with this element. I started by

meeting with Cathy Madden to begin work on Delores' physicality. This was an educational moment in the process where I had to remind myself that I was not mimicking my grandmother, but rather building a different Delores for my piece. We found physicality that was drastically different from myself, but sustainable and grounded in circumstance. "Acting old" was not going to get me to the transformation I desired. So with Cathy's help, we designed specific history: past injuries, current weaknesses, external physical obstacles for Delores to fight against. This was one of the most technical pieces of the work, and where I used several different aspects of my training at UW. I heavily involved Alexander work, as well as many Suzuki principals of stillness, density, and fighting an impossible battle. Jeffrey's often-used phrase about "the profundity of our need to be onstage" translated to Delores' profundity of her need to remember, to connect, to be seen and heard. Finding the way to keep Delores brutally active was essential for me to flesh out and define, as I was building a 25-minute piece where, for 23 minutes, the only character onstage barely moved from her walker. Profundity of need became my actor brain's mantra.

My next piece of the puzzle was back to finding Delores' voice. I met with Bridget Connors, and we played with what became a miniature physical action score for the entirety of my piece. Delores' voice and speech patterns were again deeply rooted in her history. The way her jaw moved mimicked how she used to chew on pork chop bones. The way her tongue formed words came from how she would lick McDonald's ice cream cones. Her variation of pitch and tempo, though foreign from my own, was entirely comfortable for me to assume when I knew specifically where and when each variation came from in her history. Through all of this work and research and consultations with several different experts, I learned more deeply than ever that specificity is the door to freedom in an actor's work. The collage of memories and pieces of history became the safety net between me and my ego's doubts and fears for the success of my performance.

This fear was my final obstacle, and the most valuable lesson I learned in this process. As I mentioned, I brought my script and my performance to many different people for notes and feedback. I received a lot of negative feedback and no's about my script, from professors and outside experts in memory loss and music therapy. I am grateful for all of the feedback I received, and there were many moments of doubt when several voices would suggest different routes for my script to take or a new really cool concept for the piece's ending. I listened to all, I

considered all suggestions, and I made my own piece. Sometimes that was in direct contradiction with feedback I received. I mention this because three years ago, I do not believe that I would have been able to forego appeasing more educated voices and confidently (and stubbornly) make the piece I knew was mine. Today, I am able to recognize the value of thorough research and consultation from multiple voices, and then from within that educated stance find the value of my own voice. I have found a balance between the benefit of community and the importance of strong individuality. I consider this to be one of my greatest lessons learned through this program.

The performances of STARDUST came with their own challenges. What started as a small fear about imbedding technology into the fabric of my piece became my worst nightmare for the five days of tech through the solo show performances. I did not get a perfect run of the show. There were mistakes made in the sound cues during every performance. That was not a successful execution of what I think is a successful concept. I look forward to someday finessing and refining that piece of the puzzle that is STARDUST. And my fear of whether or not anyone would care resurfaced in full force when it came to getting in front of an audience. But I set out to make something beautiful and joyful and personal, and I succeeded. The more specific the story and the work, the more universal it can be. This was my final lesson in building STARDUST.

I am touched and deeply grateful that my huge risk was so well supported by the network of people around me, from start to finish. My confidence in this art form and my trust in its community revived during this process. There were successes, there were definitely failures. But overall, this document is a reflection from a place of gratitude and a promise of revitalization for the work ahead.

STARDUST

Written and Performed by Tamsen Glaser

*LIGHTS UP on an old woman, seated on the seat of a brightly colored walker. The walker is decked out, with stuffed animals galore. A purse is stored somewhere, closed up tight. She wears a hat to keep her ears warm, an oversized t-shirt and cardigan, comfy maybe-pajama sweatpants (velour is ideal), and socks. A blanket across her lap. She stays there, almost catatonic but definitely awake, shallow breaths for a long long while.*

*A voice is heard (her granddaughter) and will continue to be heard throughout the piece.*

EMILY: Hey Nana! How are you? It's good to see you.

(Shallow breath)

EMILY: Nana, have you had breakfast? Has she eaten anything yet? (whispers) ...okay. (whispers) Okay thank you. This seemed to help last time. I'll call if we need anything. Good morning Nana!

(A delay. She rouses slightly, looks around, blusters)

DELORES: Where's the....door...

EMILY: Nana?

DELORES: Home is – I need to find. I called a I just the cab is waiting...

EMILY: This is home. We're in your room right now.

DELORES: I just need to take a...find the... station. That bitch across the hall she took my dog and. Where's my purse I ... (tries to stand, fails. Tries again. Fails.)

EMILY: Nana let's just sit and have some breakfast. Do you want some coffee?

DELORES: I need my purse is here in the...ohh look at you. (sees one of her stuffed animals. Picks it up. *kiss kiss kiss gesture*) Such a good boy.

EMILY: Nana.

DELORES: Yes you're a good....

EMILY: Delores?

DELORES: Hm? (Delores sees her granddaughter for the first time.)

EMILY: Hi!

DELORES: Nancy! Did you—?

EMILY: No Nana, I'm Emily, I'm Nancy's – Are you hungry?

DELORES: We cannot eat. Without Nancy. She'll be here any minute... I want my dog.

EMILY: Okay.

(she hugs her dog)

EMILY: Until then, I brought something—

DELORES: (to the dog) shhh. Oh no oh no you're okay (*kiss kiss kiss*) you want cookies? Nancy is bringing Oreos and Chips Ahoy. (to Emily) do you want cookies? Nancy is –

EMILY: No, no thank you. I thought we could listen to some old – to some music you might know.

DELORES: Music? Oh, no. Don't...much care.

EMILY: Well, I brought a couple things along –

DELORES: Not a big...fan of. I want to go home to –

EMILY: I know you do. Here, let's just try this first song I picked out for you. You might recognize it.

ELVIS – HOUND DOG

(this first song, and all of the songs following, will be heard for the audience, but with a tinny, sort of faraway sound. This is not meant to be utilizing a sound system well. It's meant to sound like it's being played off of a phone or a boom box. Delores' eyes get wide, she starts to ooh along at first, slow and small movements that grow. This should be a gradual progression, from a near-catatonic state to lots and lots of life.)

DELORES: (sings along for awhile, then...) Yow! The KING! Let's go dancing.

(gets up to dance from walker)

DELORES: I'm having fun.

EMILY: Yeah?

DELORES: Yeah! And then he'd go (tries the knees hips thing Elvis does [*the Elvis gesture*], falls into walker. The music cuts abruptly.)

EMILY: Nana! Are you okay? Do you want --

(she comes up laughing)

DELORES: Wowee what a HUNK.

EMILY: Oh yeah?

DELORES: He can put his shoes under my bed anytime! I used to say that to Tom, and wowee would it piss him off! I'd watch him on the television during the day. And then I'd change the channel real quick when I heard Tom's car in the drive way. Those HIPS. You know it was the kind of thing we all you know...well...

(Sings) Wise men say only fools...but I can't...falling in love with you.

(She relaxes into her seat, takes a good look at V) Emily.

EMILY: Hi.

DELORES: I'm...I'm forgot.

EMILY: Are you hungry? Do you --

DELORES: No. I have... Can we do Elvis?

EMILY: ...well, actually I have another song for you. If you want to hear it.

DELORES:...Maybe. I don't know how you're going to beat Elvis. What is it?

EMILY: I can't tell! But I think you'll really like this one.

DELORES: Tell me!

EMILY: How about some coffee, and then I'll tell you.

DELORES: Not without Nancy. Play it!

EMILY: ...alright.

NOTRE DAME FIGHT SONG

DELORES: Oh wow! Yeah! *(whatever this gesture is, it's big. She's at a football game as far as she can tell.)*

Cheer cheer for old Notre Dame

Send a volley

Thunder from the SKY!

Do it with me!

Loyal sons are....TO VICTORY!

GO IRISH! *(as song ends)*

EMILY: Nana, I think you're still their biggest fan.

DELORES: Darlin, I will always be their biggest fan. Honest to Pete, I've never lost faith in em, not once. Too many people, they give up on em, they don't do so hot in the first, second quarter. I know though. They're just warming up. They always come back.

EMILY: Like last week? That was a good game.

DELORES: Oh. I watch the games every week. My television doesn't always work, I have to call what's-her-face across the hall to help. She doesn't like the noise. *(raspberry)*

EMILY: You know which game is next?

DELORES: No...

EMILY: It's your favorite.

DELORES:...USC?!

EMILY: That's right.

DELORES: Holy cow! I need my shirt. I need my...I always wore it to the USC game. Ohhh and they didn't like that. But I went to home games and we had Touchdown Jesus right above us so those sons of bitches couldn't do a damn thing.

EMILY: Nana!

DELORES: I need my gameday shirt that says “the four horseman are looking down” – the four horsemen of Notre Dame, Stuhldreher, Crowley, Miller and – what was I...Gameday shirt that says “the four horsemen are looking down” on the front...Stuhldreher, Crowley, Miller, and – and then on the back it says “AND THEY STILL HATE USC”.

(She laughs. She closes her eyes.)

DELORES: Do you see the lake? I can see the lake. Two lakes. St. Mary and St. Joseph. And the grotto, the most beautiful. I love to go there. The Virgin Mary and candles for my Tom. For my...

(Eyes open.) Nancy. (calls for her) Nancy? Have you seen her? She should’ve been here by now.

EMILY: Uh...not yet

DELORES: The food is getting cold, Chips Ahoy, she was...she would bring more and I thought—

EMILY: You do like your Chips Ahoy, don’t you?

DELORES: Well, the kids like ‘em (gesturing to stuffed animals), I don’t much mind...oh hush up (to the stuffed animals) No nothing here. The food here is terrible. I wish I could...

EMILY: You wish you could...?

DELORES:...I wish I could drink. And I wish I could cook.

EMILY: I wish you could cook again too. Do you *like* cooking?

DELORES: Like? It was what was expected. I did cook. Had recipes the kids liked.

EMILY: Like chili?

DELORES: Chili. Stew.

EMILY: Porkchops with –

DELORES: Savoy, creamed corn. Goulash.

EMILY: Goooolash. Twice baked potatoes!

DELORES: Ohh, Tom loved twice baked potatoes. That was his favorite. He'd come home from work, decide he wanted them that night right away, and then complain when it took me two hours to make em.

EMILY: What was your favorite thing to *make*?

DELORES: Ohh. Hm.

(She thinks of it)

DELORES: Oh. I'm bashful to say.

EMILY: Now you have to tell me. What was it?

DELORES: You promise you won't laugh?

EMILY: Promise.

DELORES: The tray of...of cold cuts for /Christmas Eve.

EMILY: /Christmas Eve.

DELORES: /Ham, turkey, roast beef, cheeses, everything for sandwiches. A cold dinner before Midnight mass. Every Christmas Eve. *(A sandwich gesture I think. She folded the meats and cheeses so precisely.)*

EMILY: The house was full...

DELORES: The kids. Their kids. And your mother let you open one present on Christmas Eve.

EMILY: Pajamas. Every year.

DELORES: Hush up, missy. It's important that you wake up in fresh pajamas on Christmas morning. (beat) And we'd make a fire and eat our sandwiches and watch Christmas specials with the little clay people on television and....there was a little singing dancing statue next to the fire...we used to sing with...the little...little...

EMILY: Little Drummer Boy! That's right.

(Delores hums)

EMILY: Do you know the words? I'll sing with you.

*(Delores and Emily)*

...I played my drum for him pa rum pa pum pum  
I played my best for him pa rum pa pum pum  
Rum pa pum pum  
Rum pa pum pum  
Then he smiled at me pa rum –

*(Emily falters, cracks)*

EMILY: I'm sorry.

DELORES: Mmmm

*(Opens her purse, pulls out a balled up Kleenex.)*

DELORES: Tissue?

EMILY: No, I'm alright. Thank you.

*(Delores blows her nose)*

DELORES: And then we'd go to St. A's for Midnight mass. Even though Tom would always fall asleep.

EMILY: That does not surprise me. Well, speaking of Grandpa, I have one more.

DELORES: Elvis?

EMILY: Maybe not quite that special.

*(STARDUST plays)*

DELORES: Is this

*(she hears Nat King Cole)*

DELORES: Oh

*(Eyes widen til they're large as dinner plates. She starts to ooh along. Maybe sways maybe clutches the dog. Conducts a little.)*

EMILY: Remember? You danced to this song at your wedding –

*(Delores interrupts, sings along for awhile)*

DELORES: Oh. Oh yes. Oh.

*(Cross stitch gesture)*

DELORES: Lilacs.

EMILY: Lilacs?

DELORES: ...Nancy, you were meant to be cross stitching. Sneaky.

EMILY: Nana, I'm not Nancy. I'm Emily.

DELORES: Summertime. We sat in the breezeway... Nancy walked in with a huge bouquet... that twinkle in her. She stole lilacs off the neighbors' bush for me. I thought she was cross stitching but she had been hiding it, a surprise. And the radio played...

And now the purple dusk of twilight time  
Steals across the meadows of my heart

EMILY: Stardust.

DELORES: Stardust.

*(the music cuts out)*

EMILY: I...I didn't know that story.

DELORES: Of course that was before...Nan? Where's Nancy?

EMILY: I-I haven't seen her.

DELORES: Where's Nancy? You haven't? I should be with her at the hospital I told her I'd bring her some food she should resting.

EMILY: Nana, please –

DELORES: I'm sorry I need to go take care of Nancy, she's been gone too long I've been gone too... What if she needs someone to—

EMILY: Delores –

DELORES: No please where is Nancy? Will she let me in her hospice room now? Can I go in now? I don't care how she looks I need to...I need to... (cries)

EMILY: Delores can we –

DELORES: (sees Emily clearly) Emily? (she crumbles) Tell me.

EMILY: Oh Nana –

DELORES: Please.

EMILY: She's gone, Nana. Mom's gone.

DELORES: She promised. She promised. I promised.

(She gets the dog, kiss kiss kiss. Kiss kiss kiss. She mourns like it's the day Nancy died.) *(I think maybe a mourning gesture. Whatever it is, it's a sizeable moment)*

EMILY: Nana, let's listen to Elvis again –

DELORES: No. Don't do that.

EMILY: What?

DELORES: I'm not leaving this world without... I want to know. I want to remember. I...I fight. I'm here. I have something left. And she's still here, in here. And I'm here. Do you know that I'm still here?

EMILY: I'm sorry Nana. I... I understand.

*A beat.*

DELORES: God bless you sweetie. You don't. You're young, you're still...you don't. And pray to Heaven that you never will.

*A long beat.*

DELORES: I'm going home now.

EMILY: Nana –

DELORES: I'm going home none of us have eaten I need to make dinner for Tom.

(She grabs her purse, goes to get out of her walker. Sees the dog. Kiss kiss kiss.)

DELORES: Are you hungry too? That bitch had you all day, but Madame Queen neglected to feed you. (kiss kiss kiss) Don't worry. Nan will be here soon. (to Emily) Excuse me dear, have you seen her?

EMILY: ...

DELORES: She was supposed to bring cookies...

EMILY: ...I haven't seen her.

DELORES: Oh. Well, she'll be here soon.

EMILY: Nana—uh, Delores?

DELORES: Hm?

EMILY: Would you like to listen to some music?

DELORES: Music? Well, I don't much care for music.

EMILY: I know one song you might like. Nancy...Nancy asked me to play this until she gets here.

DELORES: Nancy?

(It's Stardust again)

*Delores listens, eyes wide, like when she heard it before. Softly, then gradually getting louder, far surpassing the quality of any of the other music. She sings along, poorly. We hear the sound of a screen door. Delores sees something no one else can see. She gasps.*

NANCY: Mom? I brought you something.

DELORES: Lilacs.

*From here, the music should flood the room. We are in her head, we see what she sees. She rises, unchained by limits of an old body. We see the limited gestures we witnessed earlier, but with full range of motion, full extension – what she thought she was doing from inside her mind. The lights fade as STARDUST ends, Delores caught in a circular repetitive movement sequence. Before the lights fully go down, she sits in the walker again.*

END OF PLAY



