

## **Inhabiting Minds and Bodies: An Exploration of Solo Performance**

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I approached my summer research project with the aim of writing a first draft of a solo show that I will continue working on in the fall of 2021. I drew inspiration from works by Sarah Jones and Anna Deavere Smith in which the performers played multiple characters that were connected through one central storyline. Not only was I impressed by the plots of these shows, but even more so by the ways in which Jones and Deavere Smith transformed themselves into other people. Every hand twitch, verbal tic, and nervous laugh made their distinct characters come to life, and I was in awe of how fully they embodied the people they portrayed. I hoped to develop a similarly character-driven show and weave a plot around the core of characters I created.

I began my summer watching other one person shows and observing how those solo performers addressed audience engagement, pacing, and staging. I watched autobiographical shows such as Heidi Schreck's *What the Constitution Means to Me* and Spalding Gray's *Monster in a Box*, as well as fictional shows like Lily Tomlin's *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life* and Whoopi Goldberg's early character monologues. While watching all these performances I took note of creative choices that I wanted to employ in my own show, such as using audio to suggest an environment when there was minimal staging or props. In these early weeks I also read David Ball's *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* to gain a more strategic perspective before I began my writing process. Ball's manual stressed the significance of action in a play, the central nature of dramatic conflict, and the importance of placing many forwards—nuggets of information that suggest future conflict—in scenes. Once I had a greater understanding of past solo shows and the more technical elements of a play, I was ready to begin my own character-building process.

I knew that I wanted all my characters to be residents of a small town, and I hoped to embody a variety of ages and personalities. The quasi-protagonist of my show was one of the first to be developed: a New York City native with a strong accent and an even stronger will who owns a dog grooming salon in town. She carried with her the central conflict of the show, namely that after uncovering some very unforgivable information about her late husband, she makes it her mission to get the name of the memorial town square changed—a square which has recently been named in her husband's honor. Once this core conflict took shape the other characters followed: a nervous intern working for the town manager's office, a bubbly and fiercely committed waitress at the local diner, the recently memorialized husband's self-righteous son, and many more. In the weeks where I was developing my characters, I spent hours taping myself improvising. I played out various scenarios: the local singing teacher meeting a new student, the intern applying for his summer job, or the waitress speaking at a convention about the service industry. If I said something while improvising that I liked, I would jot it down, and these notes became the foundations of the scenes I later wrote.

After developing my nine characters in all their specificities—their speech patterns, the way they introduced themselves, their pet peeves—I began the actual writing process. As the show centers around a town square renaming contest, many of these scenes were contest submissions. I spent much of my scene writing strategizing how to naturally incorporate my characters' personality traits and biographical details, while also keeping the scenes humorous and realistic. I finished the summer with twenty scenes and a basic outline of the culminating, and very chaotic, final town hall meeting. I so enjoyed my creative research this summer and I am excited to continue editing the material I have in preparation for a performance of the show this November.

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