

Building Character: My Method for Creating the Solos

In 1980 I wrote and performed a piece I called *Men Inside*. It wasn't "stand-up comedy" or a "showcase" or "performance art." It was a play for one person. I had no intention of ever making another like it. I couldn't imagine that this initial exercise would morph into a series of solos that I (and others) would perform in venues across the United States and the world. *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee* is the sixth in this series of full-length solos. When I created *Wake Up*, I put it together pretty much the same way I did when I made *Men Inside* twenty years before. What follows is a description of how I first came to make these solos and my method for making them.

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Around 1978, having arrived in New York three years earlier, I met the actor David Warrilow, a charter member of the Mabou Mines theatre company. He had the most perfect speaking voice, so I asked him for some actorly advice on how to improve mine. He told me to get a tape recorder, tape my voice and listen to the results. He said I could be my own teacher.

I bought a cheap plastic cassette recorder and taped some off-the-cuff ramblings. I wasn't working off any particular text or play, so I improvised as I spoke. For instance, I'd "do" a southern-style voice. I didn't try for any specific dialect, I was just screwing around. I'd launch into a Sam Shepardesque monologue about fast cars and guns and liquor without thinking too much about what I was saying. The words flowed.

Later, when I listened to the tape I realized I had been improvising a little monologue. I hadn't consciously planned to create a character but someone waiting inside me had spoken up.

I made more tapes. As these improvs mounted up, I decided to catalog the "people who live inside me." I sorted them out and came up with twelve distinct male archetypes, ranging from a threatening street punk ("Nice Shoes") to a redneck deer hunter ("Rodeo") to a little boy playing ("Superman!"). All of these characters were the product of free-form vocal improv. I wasn't looking "out there" for characters, I was looking "inside."

This gallery of characters, this set of monologues, became *Men Inside*. I performed it first in 1980 at Franklin Furnace, a small loft space. Lots of people (fifty?) showed up and dug it. Later (after touring and playing clubs for two years), I

performed it in a more polished version, at Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival.

By then, I had become an exile from the traditional theatre (I had come to New York with a theater degree, planning to work Off-Broadway), making performance pieces and performing them in lofts and back rooms. Other pieces like *Careful Movement* (performed at Saint Mark's Poetry Project) and *Garden* (Artists Space) featured a few actors spouting chunks of text, some taped voices and slides. I also wrote "plays" like *Sheer Heaven* (The Kitchen) (performed entirely in Spanish for English-speaking audiences) and *The New World* (featuring fourteen actors and music by Glenn Branca). I had a nightclub act (*The Ricky Paul Show*) in which I played an obnoxious comedian who sang off-key and hurled insults at the audience.

During the *Ricky* show, fights would break out with the audience, sometimes bottles got thrown. I went to Berlin and goose-stepped onstage. In New York, an enraged feminist tried to throw me down a flight of stairs because I made bad jokes about woman's lib. I was always booed and hissed. Gigs were canceled because my stuff was thought to be in poor taste or too violent or "negative"! I didn't care. The energy was exciting. In my

own awkward way, I was trying to make a new kind of anti-theatre.

I hung out at places like CBGB's, Max's, the Mudd Club and Hurrah's. I embraced a "punk" aesthetic. I liked the energy. Aggressive and loud, there was a new attitude in the music. Antagonistic to the status quo, it didn't take itself too seriously, it liked to laugh. The new attitude said awkward was good, grotesque was fascinating. Punk was rough, it didn't smooth everything into lovely shapes.

In punk music, the chords were basic. I wanted to do the same thing with performance—make stuff that was straightforward, not precious, not effete. (I became a fan of Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater. His work was super-energized, sexual, multilayered to the point of madness, awkward, funny, beautifully designed and way too loud for most people.)

As fun as it was, by 1981 I had reached a point when I had to fish or cut bait. The plays, subsidized with my paycheck from The Kitchen, were not getting reviewed and they were expensive to mount. I couldn't afford to do them anymore (I paid the actors, paid for rehearsal space, made the posters and sets myself, etc.). And as much as I loved the punk club lifestyle

(late nights in the demi-monde, the frenzy of the shows, harsh personalities, beer-stink dressing rooms replete with cracked mirrors,), "The Ricky Paul Show" was a one-trick pony.

So when the opportunity came up for me to tour as a solo act with a group of other performers, including the original Rock Steady Crew and Fab Five Freddy (the first rap/break-dance/deejay gang to hit the Midwest), I grabbed it. I decided "Men Inside" was the best piece to do. While on tour, one venue billed me as a "comedian." Because the audience expected to laugh, they did.

I liked this. I liked the idea of acting-out a dozen obnoxious characters, pissing off the audience but drawing them in as well. I liked the energy level of solo, it felt limitless. I kept working on the characters, refining them, giving them more dimension, finding the comedic beats, the aggressive beats.

I decided to give focused attention to my solo work, treating the pieces as one-person plays. I wasn't always sure where I was going with the new material. To paraphrase Wallace Shawn: "I find out what I want to write about by writing it."

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I want to get theoretical here for a page or two and talk about acting and character and, ultimately, writing for the stage, at least as it applies to what I do.

Theatre is character, everything else is window-dressing. It's not the terrific story that makes Shakespeare great, it's the characters. It's not the atmosphere that makes the Greek tragedies awesome, it's the characters. And the same is true with Ibsen, Chekhov, Williams. (The exceptions might be Beckett and Pinter. Maybe.)

Character is not only a device in drama, but a device in the way we think. We see ourselves and those around us as characters. "Character" is our way of conceptualizing who we are. Character is what we create every time we interact with another. In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Irving Goffman says we learn how to act to be the people we are. "Acting" in day to day life is more than behaving, it is imitating, it is constructing. When I am interacting with other people, I am consciously or unconsciously imitating the behavior of other people I've known. And to take it one step further, because I live in a world of mass media, I experience all sorts of people who are not only in my life but who I "know" from movies or TV.

A doctor models his behavior after other doctors. A truck driver behaves like a truck driver because he's familiar with the way a truck driver "should" act. In fact, if you visited the doctor and he behaved like a truck driver (gruff, for example), you'd wonder what sort of doctor he was. We tell each other who we are through our behavior. Not only do we hone our behavior according to the role we are playing in society, we spend a lot of time fine-tuning our act, especially in dynamic social situations, like trying to get laid or while doing business. This information about how I should behave is not innate, it comes from outside myself.

I consider this when playing a part. For example, I am given the role of a soldier, Buchner's *Woyzeck*. I have no "sense memory" of being a soldier. I *do* have the memory of being in fist fights or being hurt or being scared. And, of course, when I act, I access those feelings. But I also have a memory of soldiers and how soldiers behave in the dozens of war movies I've seen, not to mention TV. So, in fact, I'm recalling a memory of an actor playing a soldier. And that's as real as anything else in life as far as my subconscious is concerned. The point isn't to replicate life onstage but, as Picasso said,

"create a lie that tells the truth." And truth is what everybody agrees truth is.

All of us have built little theatres in our respective minds. The whole world is replicated there. The way we imagine ourselves and other people is a cornerstone to the way we act in our daily lives. We carefully create representations of people in our mind and when we think about people we play out imaginary scenes with these imaginary people. From these mental exercises we feel we can predict how someone (say, our mother or father) will behave, and we act accordingly. The interesting thing is that the mother in my head has just as much to do with the real person as she does with the way I think about her. People are conceptual.

The goal of the theatre artist is to take the imaginary "mother" and establish her on stage in such a way that when the audience arrives to see the play, they see a mother they recognize. If an audience doesn't *recognize* what they see, then the play doesn't work. The audience sees things laid out in front of them and they compare the mechanisms of behavior (the acting, the behaving, the plot) to the way they think about them, as opposed to the way they "really" are, which is unknowable. We can't know what we can't see.

Theatre is powerful because it works in exact concordance with the way our minds work (not the way reality works). To quote Samuel Johnson (via Harold Bloom in "Shakespeare: Invention of the Human"): "Imitations produce pain or pleasure not because they are mistaken for realities but because they bring realities to mind." The truthfulness of the theatre is determined by the audience. Theatre is consensus. And that consensus is a function of characters who speak and act the way characters in our collective minds speak and act. In other words, we deal in *archetypes*. Success can only be measured by the ratio of what I (the artist) see, versus what the audience thinks they see. Marcel Duchamp, a great lover of science, suggested this ratio. He said the closer to one-to-one this ratio becomes, the greater the artist. But of course, this ration cannot be measured. Typically Duchampian.

People don't remember what actually happened in life, they remember what they *believe* happened. People don't see things, they see what they *think* they see. And they don't know people, they know what they *think* they know. To tangle with all that thinking, well, that's what art is all about. Effective art agitates the certainty that what you know is the truth. Art turns things upside-down and inside-out.

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So enough theory. Here's how I make a solo: I start with a tape recorder and an empty room. I work in a space where I'm completely isolated and no one can overhear me. And I make sure there's enough room to move freely around the room. When I'm alone, I can let go and fantasize without self-consciousness. I can improvise freely. Self-consciousness ruins creativity. I can become the character and let him loose. I turn on the tape recorder, I note the date and the piece I'm working on. Then I begin.

Once I get a chunk of improv down, I review the tape and try to find good parts, parts I like the sound of. I transcribe these. I keep collections of these transcriptions and revisit them later. Then I select pieces from the transcription that I like, sample them and commit them to memory. I then use these segments as a launch pad for another improv. Then I start the process all over again. The final edited piece of monologue is maybe three minutes long, after hours of improvs.

Good things happen when I do it this way. First of all, when I'm speaking out loud I'm looser with language than when I

write. There isn't as much editorializing going on. Secondly, the arc of the story of the finished monologue (and every monologue has a beginning, middle and an end) is not as predictable. This is the way people talk. They wander, they get interrupted, they think of ancillary ideas as they speak, they listen to the other person and react.

In my daily life, I overhear all kinds of conversations: people gossiping about their friends, lunatics shouting out at passersby, people swearing at each other from their cars, people sitting at a meal, lovers arguing on a subway platform, me yelling at my own children. When I hear something interesting, I note it, and I might use it later as a launching pad for an improv.

Sometimes I begin the improv by using a fragment of overheard speech. I repeat it like a mantra, using the phrase to invoke an attitude. For example, take the phrase: "Fuck you!" The improv might go something like:

"Fuck you." "Fuck you!" "No, man, fuck you!" "You saying, 'Fuck you,' to me? Well fuck you!" "Come here and say that." "No, you come here." "I'll come there if you come here." "What, you're telling me what to do now? You

think you're better than me?" "As a matter of fact I do, shithead." "Who you calling a shithead? Fuck you!" Etc.

In "Upgrade" from *Wake Up*, I riff on the kind of officious check-in counterperson. The key word here is "sir."

Here you go, sir, you're all set. You have a seat on this flight, it's leaving in ten minutes so you better hurry up!. Nooo, a coach seat. Yes, I know you had a fully paid-for first-class ticket, but this seat is coach. Well, let me see what I can do, OK? (*Taps into keyboard*) Alright, I do see a first-class seat on a 3:30 A.M. departure with a six-hour layover in Saint Louis. How's that sound? Yes, 3:30 in the morning, sir. I understand that sir. Yes, I can see that you have a gold card. All the people in this line have gold cards, sir. Well, sir, sir, sir, why don't we do this—step aside, I'll get everyone on board, get them seated, let the flight leave and then we can see what we can do, OK? (*Signals to next person*) Next in line?

The trick with these improv is not to aim for anything in particular. Not to try to make it funny or poignant. I just want to become the person behind the counter and get into the situation and see what happens from there. The most important goal is to play and cut loose, to let the character speak for himself. This is not the time to worry about final performance, how inarticulate or articulate the character might sound. The following is a fragment of the verbatim transcript of the first improv I did for "Harmonious."

[I've just finished telling a story about a farmer who has a pig with one leg.. The story was not included in the final piece.]What do we learn from this story? That we are either in harmony or we are in disequilibrium and alienation. So let us make a list in our minds: what are the things that make us happy, what are the things that make us sad. Happy? Buying a new car. Sad: Doing our taxes. Happy: Swimming in our swimming pool. Sad: Paying the doctor's bills. Happy: Being on vacation. Sad: Having to go to work. If we look at these things and we understand what they are telling us, we find a deep spiritual principle coming into play. And that is this: Alienation is simply a lack of money. If we have money we don't have these problems. So our first goal is to make sure that we understand that money is the thing we must have above all.

The final script goes like this:

The second thing you must understand is that we exist in two states. We are either in synch with the universe or we are out of synch with the universe. When we are in-synch with the universe, we call this being harmonious, when we are out of synch with the universe, we call this being alienated. We are either in-synch or out-of-synch, harmonious or alienated. How do we know which state we are in? (pause, smiles, shrugs shoulders:) We just know!

So let us now clear our minds and still our centers. And let us contemplate upon these two aspects of being: harmony and alienation.

I am happy, I am warm, I am harmonious.

I am cold, I am angry, I am alienated.

I am swimming in my heated swimming pool. I am harmonious.

I am doing my taxes. I am alienated.

I am buying a brand-new Lexus with all-leather interior. I am harmonious.

I am working three jobs to pay for health insurance. I am alienated.

I am flying first-class to Saint Bart's. I am harmonious.

I am going to jail for food stamp fraud. I am alienated.

If we carefully meditate upon these two states of being, we find a deep and abiding spriritual principle becomes obvious:

"ALIENATION IS SIMPLY A LACK OF MONEY."

And, of course, the corollary:

"MONEY BRINGS DEEP AND ABIDING HARMONY."

When we have money, our days are full of sunshine, the air is fresh and clean. We love everyone we meet. And everyone loves us.

When we lack money, we become empty and angry. We listen to loud music. And we are frequently constipated.

Thus each and every one of us is on a path and must answer the eternal question: "How do I get more money?"

This is the path that I am on. That is why you are here tonight.

I move from the original to the final version through transcription, memorization, repeated rehearsals, discussions with my director, live "workshop" performances and performances as part of the run, as well as touring. Every time I perform the piece, I look to see if its logic, tone, humor and rhythm is what I want it to be. Coincidentally, the more consistent and clear the piece becomes, the easier it is to memorize and perform.

Another way in is to find a physical aspect of the character and work with that. The way a junkie lights a cigarette for instance, nodding into the flame as he tries to puff. That can get me started. The way someone holds a beer bottle or a coffee cup. The way an old man might shuffle across a room ("The Meeting"). At one point in Danny Hoch's great solo piece *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop*, he sweeps a floor with a push broom. We see the anger with every swipe.

Finally and most powerfully would be to assume a vocal stance. Not outward mimicry, because mimicry is hollow, but letting the vocal posture shape the improv from within. Try reciting "The Gettysburg Address" in a Minnie Mouse voice and you'll get the idea. The medium is the message.

Taking a piece of the character, a way of speaking or a posture, or a vocal intonation sets me on the path. From this beginning, the world of the character can be discovered and a story line can develop. (To see where all this might lead, check out "Our Gang" or "Stag Party," two earlier monologues from *Drinking in America* and *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*.)

Harking back to the way we perform in everyday life, behavior in front of an audience is always performance, no matter who the audience is: a teacher addressing a class, a preacher preaching, a trainer running a gym class or a lunatic yelling at passersby on the street. So I collect these natural situations for performance and use them to launch an improv. (I was influenced here by the late great Brother Theodore, whose whack comedic rants were always presented in the form of a sermon.) This is one place when in film actors cross over into the truly theatrical. Check out Burt Lancaster in *Elmer Gantry* or Alec Baldwin in the film of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Public

figures make great performances; a public speech is an easy way to work with themes. In my first show, I played a preacher giving a sermon on "Looking Out for Number One." He was enormously fun to play. The New Age Guru in "Harmonious" in *Wake Up* does the same thing.

This guru, like many of the characters I play, says the opposite of what you expect. This is a device, akin to playing devil's advocate, which I use often. I can't think of anything more boring than telling the audience what "I really think" because, in fact, I'm not sure myself. Playing against the grain of expectation is one way of doing this.

But I want the character to make a point. There's usually some angle I want to get at with each monologue. For example, I may want to show how even the biggest jerk has *his* side of the story. Like in "Breakthrough":

Well, I went to the ball game with my kids on Sunday. Oh yeah, it was fun. They're so great. Acting up, throwin' Cracker Jacks at each other. Yelling, screaming. And I'm like, "Chill out guys. CHILL OUT!" I'm good with them. I mean I lose it every now and then but...Oh! And this busybody behind me is like, "Stop yelling at your kids I'm trying to hear the game." And I'm dealing with boundary issues today, so I'm like, "Are these *your* kids? Or are these *my* kids?" Right? "You don't hear me telling you to put a bag on your wife's head cause she's so fuckin' ugly." And from this, the guy gets an attitude. You know? All indignant. Gets in my face. Now I'm in a fight. How did I get here? And I can

walk away, I can walk away. But I have my needs today. And I've learned to respect my needs. And my need is to kick his ass, so I did.

I want the character to feel like a live person to the audience. Ninety-nine percent of this is intuition and can't be taught. Scientific accuracy won't make a more compelling character on stage. (Although research might make a more grounded actor.) For me, being somewhere safe when I improvise helps me find this intuition. I want the character to be energetic, to be worth watching. One way of looking at this is to imagine performing in front of an audience that doesn't speak the character's language. Would these people, who don't understand a word, still find what's happening on stage worth watching? With that in mind, I try to create characters who are active: standing, moving, engaged. I stay away from mime because I find mime (and costumes) distracting for an audience. I want the essence of the character, not the hat. I don't want the audience distracted by judging me on how well I mime driving a car.

Characters in my shows vary in how broadly I play them. A broad character, played for laughs and very emphatic is a "sketch" character, the sort of thing you might see on *Saturday*

Night Live. But characters can also be so intense they frighten the audience (because they are so phenomenally interesting). Or they can be so grounded, the audience forgets that they are watching an actor. I use all these approaches to acting, because they are all part of the world of pretending to be someone else. The only question I can't answer is: "What is good acting?"

Another monologue I do is called a rant. It's a direct, emphatic, not quite logical address to the audience with some sort of theme. Here, the character I'm playing is me. But of course, once I'm on stage, there's no such thing as "me," there's only character. I started doing stuff like this back when I did the *Ricky Paul Show*. I would go ballistic and rant about women, life in the city, injustice, etc. Later I played with the rant as Barry in the play, *Talk Radio*. In the "rant" mode, I discovered voices of characters who lived within me, not so much as archetypes, but as purified attitude. Usually this attitude was anger.

For me, characters are not static, set creations, they are more like quantum particle clouds of behavior, attitudes, statements. One character merges into the next. Characters are contrivances, synthesized from my mind, my imagination. There is

no outside objective reality with which to compare them.

Ultimately, a "good" character is the one who possesses the most force. So I will borrow and steal and experiment until I cobble together a character who has the most "truth" in and of himself. It's like each character is a small universe and must work according to his own laws of physics. I experiment, like Frankenstein, until I get the character who sits up and lives.

As I rewrite and polish, rehearse and perform, I am honing facets of the piece: rhythm, humor, character, pace, verbal imagery, even theme. Once I know I'll be keeping a monologue in a piece, I try to take it to another level. The words must be organized in almost a rhythm, the music of the words. The way words run along on top of one another is, for me, part of the pleasure of performing. Finding the right combination takes time and rehearsal.

Live performance, trial and error, get the humor and pace right. Humor is a matter of taste. What makes me laugh isn't necessarily going to make you laugh. Laughter is perhaps the hardest element to control. And laughter works differently in a theatre than in other art forms, because there are always some people who "get it" and they trigger other people. And there are those who don't and act as a brake. Again, consensus rules.

I keep polishing with Jo in rehearsal. This is a matter of continuing to look at the basic character I'm playing and asking fundamental questions which the initial improvs may have missed. For instance, "What was this character doing ten minutes ago?" "What is the character wearing, carrying?" "How old is this character, how does that affect his voice, posture?" "Are we outdoors? Is it warm? Cold?" And so on. These are almost standard acting class questions, but they work to jog my imagination, helping me find a new way to approach the material. Finally, there is just a question of right-ness: what feels right and what feels wrong. This happens in rehearsal with the traditional use of blocking and gesture.

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So that's it. I don't think anyone can learn how to make another person's "art," but hopefully, if you're someone who writes or performs or makes theatre in any way, maybe all this is helpful by simply revealing how I get from A to B to C.

Ultimately, there's no way to really tell you how I actually find any particular arrangement of words, postures, themes, voices. It feels right or it doesn't. But I do look for the "right" arrangement, the configuration that best says what I have to say. And I do discard pieces if they don't feel right.

Making art is about singing the song one's meant to sing. Or
another way of looking at it is this: I put onstage what I would
most like to see if I were sitting in the audience.

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