

American Muscle

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BA (Hons) in Acting

Independent Study – Solo Performance

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Concept

Part 1. My Dad

About four or five years ago, I was riding somewhere in Maryland with my father and he was talking about a car, in a way which struck me as peculiar. I said, “Dad, your talking about the car like it’s a person.” He was silent for a few moments, before replying rather wistfully, “Car’s alive, son. It has lungs. It breathes.” I found this very bizarre, but interesting also, and began to think there was some whole weird Zen thing to automobiles, that I just didn’t understand.

About a year later I was taking a workshop with Olympia Dukakis, and I was very intimidated. She allowed us the opportunity to say something, before we were to begin working, and I was really nervous, but I felt that I should say something if this woman was going to be able to help me in three days. I figured I should let her know something about me. She’d been explaining things about herself, and her passions, and was in some way talking about plumbing - how she’d feel she would be a good acting instructor if she taught actors how to be good plumbers. I didn’t know what she was saying exactly, but I spoke up very nervously, and said something about being at the workshop because I was interested in this plumbing business.

She asked was I looking for technical efficiency, how to do intentions, and other basic things, and I said “Yes... well not exactly...” And I finally said, “M’am, my father’s an auto mechanic. And this is something that I was really ashamed of as a kid, because I lived in the suburbs during elementary school, and other people’s fathers were doctors and lawyers, and important jobs that made money and had class. And I felt very embarrassed to say that my dad was a mechanic. But, I’ve changed my mind about all this. I’ve recently began to think that being a mechanic is very interesting. I like watching him work on cars. I have no idea what he’s doing, but I find it fascinating. And I believe that if I could be as concentrated as he is when he’s working on a car, when I’m on stage, then I will go very far with acting.”

Part 2. The Cars and DeLorean:

I began noticing how much more interesting the older cars looked than today’s modern cars. Every time I saw a car from the 60’s and 70’s I’d kind of perk up a bit in my seat. I knew nothing about cars, but I wondered why they didn’t make such interesting and powerful looking cars now. So from this passing curiosity, I began reading about the muscle cars. This interest was still very embryonic when the solo performance was first offered as an option. I had an idea of tracing the birth and death of the muscle car and somehow relating that to the birth and death of the American Dream. I had no idea how to do this, if it was at all possible to stage, if it would be interesting, if it could make any sense, or if researching the matter any further would produce a story. I just had an image in my mind of projecting beautiful, powerful cars with invigorating music playing at the same time. That’s all I had to start with.

I began talking more and more with my father, who mentioned that he used to own a GTO, which I was unaware of. I was also unaware that John DeLorean created the GTO in 1964 for Pontiac. As I read more, and asked more questions, the key figures of my father, The Pontiac GTO, and John DeLorean gradually emerged as the main ingredients for my story. I just sort of kept this in my mind, and slowly images crept in as time moved along.

The Unknown

Well it soon became clear that I would be doing this thing, so I began to contemplate the story on a deeper level. There are some very important underlying influences that aren't necessarily apparent from watching the show.

I read *Words of The Dragon*, a book of quotations of Bruce Lee's philosophies on martial arts and life. The main thing I took from that book was a sense of a quest for purity of expression through the medium of fighting. Lee would not do fancy things when fighting. He would employ the most efficient and direct technique to kill his opponent, through his "style without style," and according to Lee the most important thing about martial arts was to at all times express oneself fully through the form. I decided that I needed a sleekness and efficiency to my piece – like a well-oiled machine, for lack of better expression. I needed a muscularity and sharpness that might allow for a certain beauty to emerge, if I was able to execute it properly.

The poetic, tumbleweed landscape of Sam Sheppard is something else I always had in mind as well. Something about guys wandering through the Western Dream, underneath bleak stars, and strange sounds of the night, and heat during the day -modern day cowboys. I had these types of people in mind.

Another influence was taken from the films of Terrence Malick: *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The Thin Red Line*. I wanted to steer away from sentimentality. In *Badlands* we follow a couple on the run from the law. Martin Sheen's character (Kit) has killed Sissy Spaceck's (Holly) character's father in order that they may be together. Things happen sort of matter-of-factly. Malick commented on the oft misperceived coldness of Holly by explaining that her southern gentility is such that she may have cried buckets of tears over her father's death, however she doesn't feel the need to tell us that. And therefore, the movie being her story, as she is our narrator, you never see or hear mention of how she felt about that incident. I wanted the same deal with my piece. I didn't want to tell the audience that this particular guy was great, or this particular event was sad, and I wanted to be very clear about the characterizations. I played DeLorean as an innovator and a visionary. I left it for the audience to decide whether he was a great guy, or a genius, or an egomaniac, or a swindler. Neither DeLorean, nor Rick the auto mechanic, feel any need to *explain* to you how they felt about any events. They just tell you about the events.

Also in these Malick films, there are strange hints of a greater relationship to nature and landscape, than what we are used to acknowledging from day to day– for fear of feeling silly, mostly. In *Days of Heaven* the 11 year old narrator explains how much she likes the new farm she is on, and how she could bowl in the lawn and, "talk to the wheat patches." She says, "At night they talk to me. They go in my dreams."

It's one of those moments that are obviously weird, but I still knew what it meant, anyway. Therefore I was adamant about the wolves that appear in my story and the airplane dream at the end. My Dad has peculiar dreams, almost like visions. I'm not saying I believe them to mean anything necessarily, but they might, and they were without doubt absolutely integral to the landscape I was creating.

I wanted to capture my unique vision of American, with this piece. I see America as a place of big concepts, and big ungraspable dreams, fast things, a place of muscle and sweat, but always with this strange force underneath, and always this mystical landscape. I believe there's something mystical about it, that's an actual physical phenomenon and not imagined. It's out there in the desert, and in the forests, out on the plateaus, and in the rivers. Sometimes it's destructive. Sometimes it provides an inner calm. It's unpredictable, and uniquely American.

I also read *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in preparation. This spoke about the importance of underlying forms in context of man relating to machine. I knew that I would have a Zen mechanic warrior within the piece. I didn't learn anything new from the book. I'd never read it or heard anything about it, yet I knew when I bought it, that it would provide me with certain confirmations of ideas I was forming. I knew this before I read it, and the whole while reading it through, but these confirmations were essential to me carrying forward with my ideas.

Another key component of essence was a Jimi Hendrix tune called *Castles Made of Sand*. Basically it starts off telling a pretty common story about a man and a woman having an argument, and essentially breaking up, with some poetic flourishes. Then there's of verse about an American Indian child that dreams of being a great fierce warrior. He dreams of this for years and years, and just when it's all about to happen, his first battle, he gets killed by a surprise attack in the night. The final verse is about a little crippled, deaf, and mute girl, who decides to kill herself by drowning in the ocean, seeing that she has no hope in life for anything. But at the last moment, she sees this golden-winged ship in the sky and it makes her jump up and say something. The chorus throughout the song keeps referring to castles made of sand being things that keep eroding with time into the sea. But the point is, each castle is different, but by this same indifferent force of time and the sea, each will fall. Sometimes a romance ends that you thought would last forever, sometimes a dream is killed off before you even get a proper chance to try to live it, and sometimes your whole life changes for the better, just by seeing something inspiring. It's very important lyrically that the golden ship doesn't stop for the girl, and do some magical thing. It just keeps going. Its existence is enough.

I wanted the same sort of thing in my piece. I didn't want to explain why anything was a failure or a success. I just wanted to explore the American Dream. I wanted to show that there's this incomprehensible force with several faces. Sometimes you can create a great machine and people win races. Sometimes you get put into receivership and busted with drugs. Sometimes your friend dies in a car wreck before you even make it to the race. Sometimes you never even know your own father. You just don't know how it will work out, but it's always there. This thing - this incomprehensible thing, that erodes good castles and bad castles.

Doing It

Well I basically tailed my father around and attempted to get him to talk about fixing and driving cars. I ended up with over 5 hours of tape, which I narrowed down to 2 hours. Dave Foister in Audio-Visual assisted me with transferring the tapes to CD, which I narrowed down to 45 minutes eventually, which I finally narrowed down to what made the final cut. So I spent all this time listening to sounds from the drag strip, sounds of him working on cars, and stories about his GTO with other auto mechanics, until the main elements finally made themselves apparent. I basically let the soundtrack - both the music I had chosen from my collection and the sound bytes, shape the outline of the narrative structure.

I always had an image of my process, as moving from a long shot (which would be too vast and soupy for the show), to a collage of several extreme close-ups, bound together. I hoped that by being meticulous with my tracking and my zoom lens, all of the greater landscapes that influenced the piece, (from Bruce Lee and beyond), would still survive the editing, through implication.

I was always looking to make the piece sleeker and trimmer, while taking extreme care not to just chop the mountains out of the picture completely. The idea was that the audience would see a glimpse of the metaphorical rock formation in a corner of the final picture, so that one is always aware, even if it's subconsciously, of something larger behind - literally, and figuratively - the face of the person being observed.

The end bit of the process was spent trying to desperately find technical assistance, which somehow came through at the last minute. That was a terrible feeling. I'm never leaving that until so late again. Lisa Morby in stage management was a life saver. I gave her some flowers.

Finally I got to working with Wendy Allnutt the day before. I wanted Wendy from the start, because I knew her sense of mechanics would suit me. I knew she wouldn't know what I was talking about, but that she would force me to get my hands dirty with the specifics of the performance. I nearly broke down the night before. I thought to myself, that I couldn't do it. I'd wasted all this time writing and listening to music and tapes, and I couldn't perform the show. I sat for a minute, and realized that I wasn't frustrated, but scared of failure. Then I realized the only way I would fail was to allow for it to be a heartless piece. So I decided I couldn't do that, and stayed up working Wendy's notes, and fine-tuning the script. I had a vision in my mind from the start (or at least for months on end), and I knew with Wendy's relentless style of coaching that it might be possible to realize this vision. That didn't mean that I would succeed, but I knew that it could at least be possible with her help.

So, I ran it twice more the day of, with Wendy giving me notes, and me going off and churning them over, on my feet in a space. Then I did it.

A lot of my father's words were verbatim, with me making slight alterations and adding some poeticisms to weave the story together and get a certain rhythm and feel I was aiming for. I wanted to create room for my idiosyncratic visions and ways of performance, leading from Zen warriors, to wolf packs, to Chuck Berry within

three minutes. That sort of synthesis is uniquely me, but the stories and philosophies and observations of my father, and the visions of John DeLorean, were indispensable conduits for this expression.

These were the songs used:

Cross Town Traffic performed by Jimi Hendrix

Lust For Life performed by Iggy Pop

Light My Fire performed by Erma Franklin

L'America performed by The Doors

Search And Destroy performed by Iggy Pop

No Particular Place To Go performed by Chuck Berry

Shake Appeal performed by Iggy Pop

You Gotta Move performed by The Rolling Stones

Freebird performed by Lynard Skynard

Cars performed by Gary Numan

Nervous Breakdown performed by Eddie Cochran

Dream Brother performed by Jeff Buckley

Memories Can't Wait performed by The Talking Heads

Voodoo Chile (Slight Return) performed by Jimi Hendrix

All projected images were found on the internet, except for those of my father, which came from my half-brother's personal collection of photographs. I had never seen these photographs before in my life, so it was odd discovering my own father at this age. I don't think that the piece is finished, but I think I have a very good start to what I'm trying to say.