

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Ryan Millar, September 2010

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## INTRODUCTION

The first time I stepped on a stage I was five years old. I played Tiny Tim in a community theatre production of *A Christmas Carol*. I still remember the audition. My 'audition piece' was the following poem, which I'd memorized from the cartoon dinosaur poster on my bedroom wall.

*The Dinosaur Zoo*

*Allosaurus, Stegosaurus,  
Brontosaurus too,  
All went out for dinner  
At the dinosaur zoo.  
Along called the waiter  
Called Tyrannosaurus Rex  
Gobbled up the table  
Because they wouldn't pay their cheques.*

*- Dennis Lee*

However, I don't remember much about the actual rehearsal and performances, except: saying "God bless us, every one," at least thrice a night for a couple of weeks; bright lights and applause; and the feeling that I never wanted it to end. Although I've never dedicated myself to it wholly, I've kept performing. In recent years my time and drive to be on stage has lessened. Gradually, I've developed my love of language into a passion for writing. And that has been where I've been putting most of my creative energies recently. Until I moved to London.

I've been in London for barely a year. And in that short space I've been spending most of my time writing and performing – the two things I love most. Before arriving I knew that I would be writing: doing an MA in Professional Writing was my reason for moving to London. But I

wasn't sure how much (if any) performing I would do. The answer, as it turned out, was quite a bit. In fact, while this inaugural September-to-September academic-calendar year in London was ostensibly devoted to pursuing my MA, the second half of that year was really devoted to the pursuing my somewhat-latent dreams of being on stage at the Edinburgh Fringe.

And not just on stage at the Fringe as part of the cast of a play: doing a solo show that I had written. The show is *Roman Around: A Guided Tour of the Eternal City*, an educational historical comedy about the history of Rome, and my history in Rome. I now know what is involved in mounting a show and taking it to the world's biggest arts festival; it is a costly, time-consuming and very educational exercise. This is the story of that exercise, and the discoveries that I made along the way.

## **Monday 14 December 2009 – The Ball Bounces into Play**

*(I confront my fears and share a long-hidden secret)*

I was nervous. I had never let anyone read *The Tour Guide* before. I had been working on this one-person show since I left my job as a tour guide in Rome and moved to Brussels. In Brussels I worked in the communications department of a European agency – my first 'real job'. By 'real job' I mean an office job, where I got paid to remain seated, had access to Microsoft Outlook, and could take (a limited number of) days off and still get paid.<sup>1</sup>

My first week there I was desperate to make a good impression, so every small task I was assigned I finished rapidly. This caused problems. Office time is different than real-world time. Emails that require a one word reply can be shelved for weeks. Others must be dealt with immediately, but most tasks lie somewhere in the middle. This response system has been entrenched in office culture. And not just my office, I'm assured by others that the elaborate protocol surrounding the completion of tasks exists in offices everywhere. Of course, respond too slowly and you're a lazy no-hoper. Respond too fast too frequently and you're an annoying

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<sup>1</sup> Paid days off! What a concept!

busybody (or possibly insane).

When I arrived I had no idea about the system and, keen to make a positive impression, would just blithely complete tasks as soon as they arrived in my inbox or were requested by a co-worker in person. However, I soon realized that this behaviour was inappropriate. I quickly adapted. The trick is to respond *appropriately* slowly – something I discovered that I had a knack for. Soon I found my schedule opening up. Just me and a computer and nothing but time.

This allowed me, in my three-year tour of duty, to complete not just the work that was part of my remit, but also a one-act play called *The Power Force*, which won the playwriting contest I wrote it for.<sup>2</sup> Flush with the success of my first foray into playwriting, and with excess hours in front of a computer, I began writing *The Tour Guide*. I worked on it in short bursts (followed by long breaks) for three years, though never actually reading it out loud or thinking about staging it. In fact, I'd never shown it to anyone, or, for that matter, even really talked about it. And now I'd given it to a tutor, who also happened to be the head of the Performing Arts Faculty of my university. That was three weeks ago, and during that meeting I had presented the script like it was something that I was very confident about, and his opinion just something I was curious about. When in fact I felt no such confidence. And here I was in his office, about to hear what he thought of the script. I sat down in front of him, surprised by my own nervousness.

“This is really good,” he told me.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief, which I tried to play off as a small cough. I felt like a poker player who has just won a huge jackpot on the strength of a daring bluff. I'm not sure how I would've dealt with a polite but firm dismissal. If he had instead said, “There's not much here,” I may have abandoned the project then and there.<sup>3</sup> Instead we engaged in a discussion of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ever since, I've been able to refer to myself as an 'award-winning playwright', which I do on every possible occasion.

<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this means I have a long way to go as a writer, as I've heard that dealing with rejection is really the key to being a successful writer. It also means I have a long way to go as a performer, who also should not pay attention to their critics.

possibilities for the script.

As the conversation progressed I learned that he actually read the script more than once – three times in fact. This was encouraging. He also seemed genuinely interested in helping me find a place to perform it. He mentioned a couple of university-associated events and assured me he would look into the possibilities and get back to me.<sup>4</sup>

There was some constructive feedback, as well. The two key points were: rethink the staging so that I'm not addressing the audience directly; and read the book *Re-thinking History*, by Keith Jenkins.

### **Wednesday 30 December 2009 – Taking History Home**

*(Re-thinking History gives me license to re-think the history contained in my script)*

I grabbed a dog-eared copy of *Re-Thinking History* from the library just before the Christmas break. The main tenet is that history is written not by the winners, but by historians, and historians can (and do) write whatever they want. By creating *Roman Around* I am essentially a historian, ergo, I can write whatever I want. The facts and concepts are not something I'm trying to 'get right', because history is not a thing; it is material that I have at my disposal, and can use as I see fit. This revelation has allowed me to relinquish many of my primary concerns with the historical accuracy of the show. As with most types of writing, there is a balance to be struck between facts and 'the story'.

Since many of the historical tales I tell in the show don't even purport to be 'the solemn declaration of events as the unfolded' and are rather mythological tales (such as The Fall of Troy, and the story of Romulus and Remus), it's not even rational to be concerned about getting all the facts right. And so I'm allowing myself more freedom with the material. This has

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<sup>4</sup> For one reason or another, none of these things came to pass, but at this point it hardly matters, as what did come to pass was much more exciting and gratifying than performing during the lunch break at a convention of history lecturers .

already given the stories the space they need to become more theatrical.

As for my tutor's other key piece of input? I abandoned it shortly after our discussion. We discussed bringing a fake tour group on stage, perhaps as tiny cut-outs. He said the idea of speaking directly to the audience was tired and cliché, and perhaps he's right, but it's exactly what I want to do. The show is a recreation of my time as a tour guide, and that's what I like about it, it's not a representation of 'tour guide' being performed for an audience. It *is* a tour guide giving a tour to the audience. That's a distinction I'm not willing to blur.

## **Sunday 10 January 2010 – The No Pants Subway Ride**

*(I begin to seriously consider taking this 'show' to the Edinburgh Fringe)*

Today I went to the No Pants Subway Ride.<sup>5</sup> The point of this event is... well there is no point. It is organized silliness on a large scale. Beginning with some hundreds of people in New York eight years ago, riding around the subway in your underpants on 10 January has become a global phenomenon, with 44 regions in 16 countries participating this year. The event is organized by Improv Everywhere (IE), a group that “causes scenes of chaos and joy in public places.” Like most IE events, the No Pants Subway Ride is meant to surprise, confound and hopefully put a smile on the faces of the onlookers.

Almost forty participants and four or five photographers spread out along the platform at Leicester Square and entered different cars of the Victoria Line train. After the first stop, the six of us in my carriage all casually de-trouserred. The reaction was mild surprise. Finally the guy next to me asked me why I took my trousers off.

“It’s hot in here,” I explained.

“But what about them?” he asked, gesturing to the other bare legs in the carriage.

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<sup>5</sup> Pants in the American sense i.e. no trousers. Here in the UK it is called a 'No Trouser Tube Ride', which is not quite as catchy.

“Yeah, they took theirs off too,” I agreed. For some reason this seemed to satisfy his curiosity.

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After the ride, we went to the pub.<sup>6</sup> While there, I got to chatting with one of the photographers. I discovered that she was involved in the comedy scene as a producer and photographer. This news impressed me greatly, and I pressed her for details.

My state of being impressed reached epic heights when she told me that she was going to Edinburgh in the summer – for the Edinburgh Fringe! “Well, in August of course, everybody is up in Edinburgh,” she said, in the middle of making a point.

I interrupted, “Golly! The Edinburgh Fringe? That sure is a big deal.”

“What? Yeah... I guess. It's August, everybody goes.”

It was around then that I realized I needed to recalibrate my opinion of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.<sup>7</sup> To a Canadian inclined in the way of comedy and fringe theatre, the festival in Edinburgh is like the Lost City of El Dorado – people know about it, they want to go, but the rumoured riches and abundance and beauty are just far too much to be true. In fact, I realized I didn't really know that much about what the Edinburgh Fringe was all about – I just knew it was amazing! Which is why the conversation was so exciting – I was talking to someone who had been there!

This conversation caused other snippets of dialogue and snatches of other conversations to come rushing back. In all of these conversations everyone had expressed a certainty that they were going to the Edinburgh Fringe in August. The conversational tone ranged from

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<sup>6</sup> It's worth mentioning that at this point we'd all put our trousers back on.

<sup>7</sup> The official name is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, or alternatively the Edinburgh Fringe. According to their website it is important that you never refer to it as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

resignation to elation, but nobody seemed to regard themselves as remarkable for going.

I started entertaining the idea of going to see what all the fuss is about. But not just as a viewer – I knew that would irritate me. Twenty years of performing – but more importantly twelve recent years of comedy, theatre, filmmaking and impro instructing – had prepared me for a bigger and more ambitious project. The move to London had given me the creative environment I needed, and the discovery that everyone and their one-trick pony show went to Edinburgh helped me realize that I should do the same. I even had a script: a script that I had been encouraged to develop.

## **Tuesday 9 March 2010 – The Game is Afoot**

*(I am accepted into the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Whoa.)*

The idea of going to Edinburgh has been occupying quite a lot of my thoughts of late. The positive feedback on my script had given me the push to investigate how and where to perform it, and the encounter at the No Pants Subway Ride has made me seriously consider the Edinburgh Fringe. Unfortunately, even a cursory investigation reveals that taking the show to Edinburgh is a very expensive proposition.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, there are alternatives.

There are two different 'Free Fringes' that run in Edinburgh as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Peter Buckley Hill (PBH) Free Fringe original is the original, the competition is the Laughing Horse Free Fringe. Both programmes remove much of the financial burden of mounting a fringe show by providing performers free venues in Edinburgh in August. The stipulation is that the shows are free for the audiences, with a 'pass-the-hat' collection at the end. This system immediately appealed to me in that it removed much of the costly underwriting and presumably bewildering negotiations of a fringe show.

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin F of the cult hit Scottish Falsetto Sock Puppet Theatre estimates that to run his show for the month, "Let's say I don't get much change from 8 grand, and then I have my living costs."

After debating the two options I elect to apply to the Laughing Horse, on the grounds that I like horses and laughing. I was scrambling to put together an application that would present me as an act worthy of programming. I had a script, which I knew would count in my favour. I also had taught improv comedy workshops, which – while the show is neither a workshop nor improvised – seems to me to be the kind of thing that adds a certain amount of gravitas to my application. I send my application at 3:01pm.

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At around 7pm my phone rang. It was Alex Petty of Laughing Horse. I had not expected a response so quickly. He offered me my choice of two spots in the festival. One is the Big Cave, the other is the Little Cave. Preferring to keep my expectation firmly grounded I chose the Little Cave. After consultation with my wife, we decided that I would do a one week run at the very start of the fest. That way I can get home in time to get to work on my dissertation. Doing a free show keeps the overhead and financial risk low, but also keeps me from being in a position to earn money. However, some research has taught me that almost nobody makes money in Edinburgh. In fact, it is basically an opportunity to haemorrhage money, demean yourself, brutalize your liver, fight for audience, and also, the best time you'll ever have. That settled the matter. It was going to happen.

## **GOING IT ALONE**

*There's a great excitement and freedom to being the sole creative force behind a very public project. But not only excitement and freedom, there is also terror. The stakes are higher, and there's nowhere to shift blame. To compound the pressure: I've never done stand-up comedy before. I've tried to market this show as some sort of mildly educational stand-up show, but it may not be that. It may be more of a theatre piece, or a lecture with some acting and jokes. I'm not sure – there's a lot of guesswork involved in my production. So not only am I the sole force behind it, but the public coming in may have been misled by my promotions. They may, of course, be pleasantly surprised by what they find. Or they may not. Either way, there's only*

*one person who's going to hear about it.*

## **April 24, 2010 – Fringe Double & Rewriting History**

*(I send an extremely belated application to the Camden Fringe)*

I've been busy rehearsing. Or more accurately, I've been editing the script, trying to match the words on the page to what comes out of my mouth. It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario: which comes first: the words or the speech? Actually they seem to take turns. But what is remarkable is that the structure of the script itself hasn't changed that much since the very first draft – although it's now at version 36. Only one really significant change has been made, and that is the removal of the story of Emperor Constantine and how (and why) he became the first Christian Emperor. This has been edited out of my history of Rome, and replaced by the story of the seventh and final sack of Rome.

The primary reason for this is that there was too much middle in the show and not enough end. The Sack of Rome story will be the last historical tale. Constantine will just have to content himself with being mentioned in passing, and not getting an entire story to himself. Committing to this change felt weird, as it's the first big structural change and rewrite in months. But a big part of re-thinking history is re-thinking what to include.

Some idle internet searching the other day led me to the discovery that there's a whole other Fringe Festival in August – The Camden Fringe. I sent along a hastily assembled application, and today I heard back: I'm in. Now I'm going to be in two Fringe festivals. I've just doubled the opportunities for success and failure.

## **Saturday 5 June 2010 – A Sleeper Hit**

*(The first quasi-public performance, during which my dad falls asleep)*

There's lots of both personal and Roman history in the show. So many little things that I want

to say. But I've been realizing that the show needs to be cut down, and I've been hacking and cutting away great swathes of texts. Many darlings are dead.

And yet, I still can't get the show under an hour. Ideally the running time would be fifty minutes. But the first few times I've run it through, script in hand, it's been seventy-five minutes. I've even cut out a whole bunch of stuff, and still, somehow, seventy-five minutes.

I haven't been working on it much in the past couple of days, as my dad and brother have been in town. I've promised them a performance; the first out loud performance of my show for anyone other than the bathroom mirror.

They were seated in front of me in the living room of their rented apartment. My brother and dad relaxing on the plush couch, Chiara nestled into an overstuffed easy chair. They are calm, I am not. Even though I'm familiar with the script, I perform with it clutched in my hand, reading more of it than is strictly necessary. I was very nervous. There weren't a lot of laughs. I panicked and just tried to get through it as fast as possible. Around the time that Michelangelo begins frescoing the Sistine Chapel ceiling, my dad fell asleep. My brother kicked him, and he woke up with a start, acting as if he hadn't been snoring the second before. In fact, I'd watched him nodding off for a few minutes.

I'm disappointed in him, and in myself. Though this presentation was little more than a demonstration for the people nearest to me, I failed to stop my dad from nodding off – either with the show or by saying “Hey! Dad! Stay with me, we're almost done!” An improviser should be able to address what's going on in the room, and 33 per cent of the audience nodding off in the middle of a show is a concern that should be flagged up before it actually happens.

I try not to let it bother me, but of course it does. However, the feedback (including the falling-asleep vote) let me know that the show is far from ready. Too many false starts, according to my brother and Chiara. It seems to be getting underway, and then you circle back to the beginning again. I realize they are right, and cut a few sections in which I'm initiating the tour

group. They were right, it was overkill.

Learn the script, my brother says, and of course he's got a point. And slow down, Chiara adds. Yeah, my brother and dad chime in. I realize the crucial error I have made. In my desire to not bore them with a script that's too long and which I don't know that well, I have plowed through it, not allowing it to breathe and flow naturally. This is a valuable lesson: instinct can steer you wrong sometimes.

## **ODYSSEUS VS ACHILLES**

*While I was performing the story of Troy for my father, brother and wife, I said, as I had been doing for months, "Odysseus, played by Brad Pitt in the movie, comes up with an idea to get past the impenetrable walls of Troy." Chiara, my classically-educated Roman wife exclaimed "It wasn't Odysseus, it was Achilles." I change that section of the script, feeling sheepish that I had wrongly attributed the battle plan to Odysseus. Only later on, after some public performances, do I actually figure out what happened: Chiara's quibble was not with my interpretation of the classical text (it was in fact Odysseus' plan), but rather that in the movie version of Troy Brad Pitt played Achilles. I have swapped a pop culture mistake for a historical one. I opt to keep the historical error, though I occasionally have to explain afterwards that "Yes, I'm aware that it was actually Odysseus who came up with the plan, but people pay more attention when I talk about Brad Pitt." To my knowledge it is the only piece of misinformation in the entire show.*

## **Thursday 24 June 2010 – Performing for Nobody**

*(Putting in long hours in front of the empty classrooms)*

I've spent more time in the bathroom in the past couple of months than I usually do. And as a toilet reader I tend to spend a fair amount of time in the bathroom anyway. But in the past two weeks I've been spending at least an extra hour (or two) everyday, running through the show.

The bathroom in our flat is surprisingly large, with a mirror covering one wall, and it's far enough from my wife's study centre that I don't disturb her. The convenience of having a bathroom rehearsal studio is almost too much. Bathroom breaks don't even interrupt the flow of the show. However being at home makes it too easy to get distracted. I did some runthroughs in the park on a couple of nice spring days, but as rehearsals have gotten more physical, my embarrassment has dictated I find new spots.

The university has served as the go-to spot. As it's summertime there are plenty of empty classrooms and it's the only public/private place that I have regular access to. One room, on the top floor of the B wing, near the back of the Holloway campus, is particularly suitable. It has windows on either side of the room, providing a nice cross-breeze, and the two doors at the back of the room are windowless, affording me some privacy. It's here that I've been coming two or three times a week, for the past month.

Usually rehearsal would require focus on individual sections, but as I'm unable to watch the performances while I'm doing them I elect to concentrate on ensuring that I'm capable of getting from the start to the finish. As a bonus, running the show at the front of a big empty classroom will prepare me for the possibility of having extremely small audiences. If I can run it for nobody, I can run it for one or two people.

## **Thursday 8 July 2010 – Anxious Mental Somersaults**

*(My pre-preview imagination and anxieties run riot)*

The first preview is just four days away. I've put full energies and effort into the show and am finally feeling confident about it. But it's pretty easy to be confident when there's no audience. So the doubt is creeping in. Now that I have most of it memorized and prepared, I'm worried that my best might be not that entertaining, or not that funny.

It's very reassuring to have a piece of brilliance tucked away in my brain, unbeknownst to

anyone else. That way I can always know that it is brilliant, and I'll never have anyone to challenge that belief. I have complete control over the critical reception of things I never share. How will that change once there are real live people watching and judging?

I have no experience in trying to entertain a crowd of people by myself. For an hour. I've done improv, hosted shows, acted in plays, delivered workshops, and given public speeches, but I've never done even five minutes of stand-up comedy. And here I am, about to jump onto stage and deliver a whole hour of – well, not exactly jokes, more of a story, though I'm hoping it'll be funny – comedy.

But, it may not be. It may be boring, or hard to follow, or unsuccessful in some other as-yet-undetermined way. I could still perform my show to its utmost potential, and it may yet land with a dull wet thud on an empty stage, in front of an audience of resentfully indulgent friends for whom I'll need to buy drinks afterwards.

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I've just returned from a session in front of the mirror, telling myself that no matter what the reaction, it'll be a useful learning experience, etc. It's better to love and have lost, than to never love at all. And a couple of other rah-rah phrases. This has been in order to stave off the panic. But, if I'm being truly honest, I need to acknowledge that there is something even more sinister lurking underneath.

This secret hope that the show is somehow superbrilliant. It's silly, but... who knows? It could be the case. I'm pretty sure that the show is pretty good. And it's unusual. Maybe it's so good and so unusual that word of it will spread through Edinburgh like lice through a kindergarten and people will be lined up outside my venue in Edinburgh clamouring to get in. I'm tempering these expectations certainly, but still, I can't block the door against all hope. It's like light; it just creeps in. And hope can be almost as dangerous as despair.

## Tuesday 13 July 2010 – Under the Belt

*(The first preview fills me with quiet confidence)*

It was thrilling to get the show out of the bathroom and in front of an audience. Everything went as well as or better than expected. The laughs came fast and frequently, and attention never seemed to waver. The only part I'm uncertain about is the very beginning. Greeting the audience as they come in, as if they are showing up at the meeting spot for a tour, seemed such a unique way to begin. And it fits well with the conceit of the show. However, the first ten minutes of last night were pretty awkward, as people came in to find the stage lights on, and me asking the audience questions such as "Is this your first trip to Rome?" and "Where are you from?"

Needless to say, they found it disconcerting. Which I expected. But I wasn't expecting that I would find it so disconcerting. However, once we moved on from that part, the show felt good, and the audience was responsive. A good metric of a show's success is how quickly the audience leaves afterwards. In this case, everybody stuck around for almost two hours. And most of them had questions and favourite parts. So: success!

## SETTING THE CLOCK

*In every rehearsal I've been glancing my watch as I perform, trying to will the show to fit into the one hour slot. I began setting my watch forward or backward to be on the hour or the half hour at the start of each runthrough. I don't consider myself superstitious, but the habit has become something more than that. The overwhelming consideration is simple practicality: the math of trying to figure out times on my big hand/little hand watch distracts me from the show, whereas starting on the hour – or even the half hour – keeps it simple. This worked quite well in terms of timing the show, but afterwards I would inevitably forget to reset the clock back to 'real-world' time, resulting in a few occasions of me being from fifteen to twenty-five minutes late (or early) for events, including a late arrival for my final preview, and one missed doctor's appointment. I now know that "I reset my watch to be twenty minutes off-time and forgot to set*

*it back to normal time” is an excuse that never earns me anything more than a puzzled expression on a tilted head.*

## **Saturday, July 17, 2010 – A Live Show is a Living Thing**

*(This metaphor can probably stretch pretty far)*

Before the first preview I had everything ready to go: a whole hour of two interwoven narrative arcs, peppered with jokes and asides. But when I got in front of an audience the show was different. Some parts or lines I thought were funny, they didn't. Some things that I thought were only kind of funny, they laughed wildly at. I was surprised, but pleasantly so. I even improvised some bits in and around some of the stories, because it seemed to be what the audience was looking for. I also added in some more acting bits for some of the stories, because it seemed to be what they (the audience and the stories) needed. And I think I got it mostly right. Because, at the end of the show, we were all happy. And the audience taught me what the show was about, what parts were funny, which parts they really enjoyed. But on Wednesday I performed it again. For a different audience. This is where it got a little tricky.

That audience also enjoyed it, but they didn't laugh as much, and when they did, it was not at the same parts as the audience on Monday. For example, I have what I would call a throwaway line in which I explain that, at a certain point in history, Jesus was dead, and "not Easter dead. Really dead." In the writing of it, I thought that this line would be amusing. But on Monday the audience could hardly contain their laughter. It started as a snicker, became a general roar of mirth, and then, when that subsided, even brought out a couple aftershocks of chuckles. I realized that I had written a bigger winner than I had first thought. On Wednesday, that line brought out a few minor giggles and nothing more. I carried on, but that moment only crystallized what I had been suspecting since I started the Wednesday show: this live show is a living thing. It is not something I've written that I recite in front of an audience. It is something created by me, that I perform to *and with* the audience. I had suspected that before, but now I know it, and know that the show will continue to change as every new

audience comes in. Each show will be much different than the one before it, and the one afterwards.

The performing of it is something I do with the audience, I'll be listening to us both, and get clues from my paternal instinct, and the audience's laughter as to how to care for and nurture the show so that it continues to grow, as all living things need to do.

### **Sunday July 25, 2010 – Fool Me Twice...**

*(I realize the dues I've paid have been non-metaphorical)*

The theatre system for independent and fringe shows does no favours for the performer. I have performed *Roman Around* in three different London venues: The Etcetera in Camden, the Canal Cafe Theatre in Little Venice and Theatre 503 in Battersea. From a producer point of view these seemed like real coups: three well-established theatres in three different areas of the city, all interested in my little show. In each case there were small differences in the contract, but in general it works like this: you rent the theatre (above a pub). The venue provides you with the space, and a listing on their website, and they sell tickets for you. You provide the show. I was pretty proud of myself for making this all happen. However, I'm pretty sure I got screwed.

Part of this was due to my own circumstances. As a newbie on the 'comedy/fringe scene', with no media contacts or reviews, and very few other performers (and friends) familiar with me or my work, it's tough to drum up business. I thus expected to lose money. However, I can't say I feel like the venues really went out of their way to publicize my show. It's tough to say for sure though, because if I had years of experience and a list of television appearances on my CV, maybe just putting my name on their website would be enough to ensure I would be playing to packed houses.

As it was, I played to an audience of 13 people at the Etcetera (one of whom I had never met)

at the Canal Cafe Theatre the audience was 14 people (six of whom I had never met – not at all a bad turnout, considering). And my final preview of this type was at Theatre 503. The audience was 12 people (two of whom I'd never met). That means that I convinced 30 people to come to my show (29 actually, because my wife came twice). But if you remove the Canal Cafe Theatre from the mix (and I do),<sup>9</sup> that means that the Etcetera and the Theatre 503 collectively managed to get three people to come to my show. But my bitterness doesn't really extend to the Etcetera, it focuses mostly on the 503.

This is because Theatre 503 charged me 100£ be part of their FEST (all capitals) of pre-Edinburgh previews. This event was decidedly low on a festival atmosphere, and decidedly high on the ticket prices (all shows were 10£ or 8£ for concessions). For previews. They also keep 30% of the box office takings. If I'd read the contract (which I did) and then did some thinking (which I did not), I would have realized that while my show is worth a lot of money. In less than ten days time it will be playing *for free* in Edinburgh. And then once it has been forged in the inferno that is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, it will do a two night run in Camden, where tickets are 7.50£. I appreciate everyone coming to see the show last night, and the feedback they provided me was invaluable. I just felt bad because they had to pay all that money. Of which I'll only see a part. For a work-in-progress.

All of which would be excusable if there had actually been a FEST, and/or there were a bunch of FESTival goers coming to check out the shows. But there were two people in the audience who I didn't know. Which means nearly all of the people paying over-the-odds for the tickets were my friends. I now realize that I was duped, and so shame on them. But also, shame on me; I let my pride cloud my judgement. I was part of "FEST". Big deal.

## FEEDBACK

*Tim Robbins said: "Start with 'It's a masterpiece,' and then tell me what you think could be*

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<sup>9</sup> They not only provided me with a technician (a friend with whom I used to work in Amsterdam, through whom I also got a steep discount on the space), they also provided me with almost half of my audience.

*changed.” And I've been quoting him after every show, because getting feedback is a difficult thing. It's a challenge to the ego, and to the show, and my instinctual response is to try and defend the decisions I've made. But the show needs to improve, and without a director, I need to rely on the audience to give me feedback. A director (which is nothing if not an outside eye with a vested interest in success) is something that the show lacks. The decision I made to focus on the entire show, rather than focusing on small parts, means that it holds an overall arc, but lacks fine details and the million deliberate moments that make a show truly sensational. So I listen to the feedback, for the ideas, suggestions, and questions about choices, because these people are the directors. But before I really take in what they say, I ask that they begin with 'It's a masterpiece'.*

## **Thursday July 29 2010 – Fitter, Faster and Surgically Enhanced**

*(On the insertion of material into the show. The 'material' in question is jokes)*

On Tuesday I made my way to south west London. To a three-bedroom house a boulevard's walk from Clapham Common. My friend Dave Waller and I used the house where he was catsitting to work some new gags into the show. Dave used to do some stand-up and his ability to see where punchlines can be added, or ideas can be pushed, provided me not only with some jokes, but also some insight into jokecraft.

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My final preview is in the tiny upstairs bar at the Queen's Head pub in Piccadilly. It's packed.<sup>10</sup> The new jokes go down extremely well, as do the old jokes. A new joke, in which I compare St. Peter spreading the gospel in Rome to the advent of the iPhone doesn't get a laugh, until I add an iPhone 'zooming' finger-thumb gesture. Then it gets a big laugh. An older punchline, in which I finish my story about the foundation of Rome, and Romulus' murder of his brother Remus with the line “And that's why it's called Rome and not Reme,” also gets a big

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<sup>10</sup> I'm the first half of a double bill with East London improv group Fat Kitten. They provide most of the audience.

response. I'm not sure what to attribute the new laughy vibe to: the new jokes; a greater comfort with the text; the big audience; something else? It's likely a combination; one that I need to replicate.

But I realize that there is a paradox: only by playing your heart out to small crowds in crappy venues (i.e. really difficult shows) will you be able to regularly play to large crowds in good venues (i.e. easy shows). It's true that seasoned professionals only get that way by paying dues in hard areas and struggling. But then once they've gotten to the top of their game, the shows tend to be easier – audiences laugh quicker, because they expect them to be funny, and are just trying to meet that expectation.<sup>11</sup> This realization helps me understand how hard I'm going to have to work in Edinburgh to get audience, and how hard I'm going to have to work with the audiences I do have. I'm also realizing how important reputation is. So every person that comes to see my show needs to have a great time. Including me.

Another change that played so well tonight is an accidental text edit that first occurred at The Canal Cafe. Somewhere in the middle of that show, I blanked. And like a skipping record I made a couple of slow revolutions, before sliding back into the groove. The thing is, in the process, I missed out two big chunks of text. One was an explanation of the mechanics of starting a promo tour, the other was a chunk about Emperor Constantine. Each provides a piece of set-up for the climax of the show. The thing is, the audience didn't notice. And I think the show was better for missing those clunky bits of exposition. I thought they were necessary to make the ending work, but it turns out that is not the case. And so they got cut. Sometimes the show is the best judge of what it needs.

## **Tuesday 3 August 2010 – Like a Freight Train**

*(I get on the train already overwhelmed, and that feeling continues)*

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<sup>11</sup> Oliver Double puts it succinctly in his book *Stand-up: On Being a Comedian*. "Famous comedians go onto the stage with a huge advantage. The audience has come along knowing their reputation, having already experienced their good humour, and fully believing that they are going to have a good time. (Double, 132) Sounds like a pretty nice arrangement.

I'm on the 8am train from King's Cross. I left the house before 7am. I'm not usually up before 9am, so this was a bit of a shock. The good news is that I spent the best part of yesterday preparing myself for Edinburgh, packing clothes and shaving cream, but also making a schedule of places I need to go and events I need to attend.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is the largest arts festival in the world. The programme for 2010 lists 2,453 different shows doing 40,254 individual performances. The names coming here are big names, people who have been on TV, shows that are professionally organized and promoted, and also many updated classics, improvised musicals, and comedy and excitement and... I'll be part of it. It's an absolutely amazing opportunity, and one I'm hoping will turn out to be a positive career move, because I need it to be.

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From the moment the train pulled into Waverley Station today was a nonstop hustle. Much of it was a blur of groundwork: checking into my dormitory room, seeing the venue, picking up flyers, getting registered at Fringe Central, and shlepping flyers and posters around town. The hostel was deserted, the venue was empty except for a couple of painters, and even Fringe Central seemed pretty quiet. Everywhere had tension and anticipation, but little activity. The literal calm before the festival storm.

In addition to getting a sense of the geography of the town, I learned that my promotional plan – to coordinate with an Edinburgh tour guiding outfit – was going to come to naught. The plan itself was pretty good: to cross-promote my show and a tour of Edinburgh. According to my plan the company would send their guides to watch my show thus ensuring some extra audience, with the possibility of them mentioning my show to people on their tours. In return I would plug their tours at the end of my show.

However, when I arrived at the office of Mercat Tours, I was greeted with no small amount of condescension. Joyce, my liaison, whom I had been cultivating a relationship with over email

and phone for some time, greeted me with a phony smile, then made a big show of accepting a poster and some flyers, and comped me a ticket for a tour that afternoon. It was immediately apparent that she had decided indulging me was the fastest way to never having to deal with me again. They would be no help in the audience development part of things; but hey: free tour! Unfortunately, from the moment that tour began it was clear that Barry, my guide, was at least as condescending as his colleague. And his tour was terrible.

I also got my first taste of festival-going. My plan had been to see a couple of shows tonight, but I didn't realize that the world's biggest arts festival also means the world's biggest ticket lineups. So I was unable to use my papering comp<sup>12</sup> for The Scat Pack's *Lights! Camera! Improv!* However, I did get to see London-based sketch comedy darlings Pappy's do their new show *All Business*. The show was a preview (half-price tickets!), and amazingly sloppy. There were missed cues, haphazard scene changes, laughing on stage. I was simultaneously thrilled to see such an established company put on a show this shambolic, and as a paying customer, I was a furious. But then I realized that I was enjoying it, and the ramshackle element was part of its charm. The key here was that the performers were enjoying themselves and each other so much, and so utterly convinced of their own hilarity, that it actually worked. It seems confidence can trump preparation. It gave me more confidence, also because I know I'm well-prepared.

## **CONFIDENCE TRICK**

*The one thing that my reading has suggested that has been borne out most effectively in performance is the 'confidence trick'. In Zen and the Art of Stand Up Comedy, Jay Sankey says that the key to success is poise. "Appearing relaxed and confident, the crowd in turn relaxes, confident that the comic not only is going to be funny, but is funny."*

*And it can be a virtuous circle, by relaxing and growing confident, the audience relaxes and*

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<sup>12</sup> 'To paper a house' means to give out free tickets to ensure bigger audiences. Often done at the start of a run to pad the audience with sympathetic viewers, for the sake of early reviews.

*trusts you more, and you relax more. And so on. Of course the reverse can be true as well. The trick is to stay off the downward cycle, which means putting on a show of bravado if need be. But, as any actor will tell you, the trick to making an audience believe your character is to believe it yourself. And that's the confidence trick.*

## **Thursday 5 August 2010 – Part of the Action**

*(The day of my first show as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe)*

After two days of chaos and uncertainty, it'll be nice to do something that I'm used to doing. And that will only happen once I step onto the stage. Although I am now getting familiar also with my lodgings. My hostel is ideal: central, only moderately overpriced, and, though spartan in appointment, the kitchen includes toaster, microwave and fridge and sink.

I saw my venue yesterday. I can make it work, I think, but it's less than desirable. I'll be performing the show in what is essentially a hallway and a sunken dance floor. The lighting is perhaps the silliest part: when I first showed up the space was dark. I asked Rachel, the venue assistant if perhaps I could see what it looks like lit. She went to find the technician, and I went to the toilets. When I returned the place was bathed in a warm orange glow, and speckled with green and blue moving pinpoint nightclub lights. If I were an ABBA cover band, my tech rehearsal would be done. However, my lighting requirements are much simpler, something that ironically the venue struggles with. The technician demonstrated the different settings on the nightclub lighting grid, before explaining the problem with switching from disco to theatre.

“There was a power surge a few years ago, and since then everything in this room has been a bit funny,” he told me and an increasingly-concerned production of Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*. “Some sockets I don't even use anymore, since they may knock the whole ring out.”

Not the kind of stuff that fills one with confidence. We'll soon see how that goes, and we'll also see the results of the flyering and postering.

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Just finished my first show. My part went well, I remembered everything, I was energetic; it was surprising how effectively I masked my anguish. The audience consisted of five people. Then three people from a university production of the Bald Soprano came, but they left before the end (they had a tech rehearsal to get to), so I'm not sure if that counts. The lighting was simple and serviceable.

*Audience: 5 (then briefly 8)*

*Tips: 10£*

*Notes:* Small crowd makes for more work. Also, I'm bitter about the low turnout. I know flyering is difficult, and people taking them is far from a guarantee they'll come to your show, even if your show is free and thirty steps from where you've been flyering, but five people is unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> I don't mind all the hustle and gladhanding and the shlepping of flyers and posters around town; it's not the work itself that bothers me, it's the ratio of work to reward.

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This evening I went to see *Cactus: A Seduction* by Jonno Katz. Jonno is a friend of a friend and gave me a couple of papering comps for the show. He is also an established performer on the Canadian Fringe Circuit, having won Best in Fest, Pick of the Fringe, Best Solo Show, and Best Actor in various fringe festivals across Canada. It was easy to see why. His show was a mix of clowning, stand-up, and storytelling that largely took place in the deserted landscape of the narrator's mind. He was vulnerable and endearing, witty and clever, and

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<sup>13</sup> Allegedly the average fringe audience is five people – but I'm pretty sure that's just a thing people say to console themselves and others with lacklustre audience numbers.

physically adept, effortlessly inhabiting the various characters in the show. It was sharp and funny and polished to a brilliant sheen. I was humbled by the ideas and the execution. The show clearly had a director.<sup>14</sup> A look at Jonno's website shows me that the first time he performed *Cactus* was in 2004. Which means that *Roman Around* and I have a lot of work to do, and a lot of time to do it in. And I'm now freshly inspired to tackle that work.

## **Friday 6 August 2010 – The Art of the Flyer**

*(The sweet relief of a 400 percent audience increase)*

*Audience: 19*

*Tips: 29£*

*Notes:* People came! Hurray! Crowd was heavily slanted towards a retired demographic. Unsure whether that's my target audience, but perhaps it is. So be it.

My flyering has for the most part already been reduced to a couple of stock phrases. Both take place as I'm holding a flyer in an outstretched hand. The first is "Free? Funny? Mildly educational?" The intonation is key. Not quite a question, but just a slight lilt to come across as non-aggressive. The usual response is either "Oh, that sounds interesting." Or, if it's a man between the ages of 16 and 55, "Educational? No thanks!" And then a little laugh. But at least they're paying attention.

The other line is more direct salesmanship: "Scotland's finest walking tour of Rome!" I declaim loudly. This usually causes some intrigue at which point people want the flyer. And then I hit them with the follow up: "Of course, there's no walking involved. And Rome is in Italy... So, it's just an hour of me talking. Having said that, it is pretty good. And free." After yesterday's poor turnout I was devastated, but I stuck with the plan, made no changes to my flyering routine. After the 400% increase, I'm unlikely to change now.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Chavez, one half of the brilliant and surreal sketch/improv comedy duo The Pajama Men.

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The encyclopedic comedy website Chortle came to review my final London preview. Ever since then I've been awaiting the verdict. This evening as I was getting ready for bed, I checked the Chortle website for a review and there it was. Three stars. Three disappointing stars.

I've never felt that the show was a five star production, but I did harbour a hope that it could be worth four stars. And most surprisingly is the fact that the reviewer seemed to really enjoy the show. It's described as an "entertaining history lesson" and "thoroughly enjoyable," though my favourite quote is this one: "By crikey he must have made a cracking tour guide as he brings the yarns he does include to vivid life with engaging gusto. I defy anyone not to get the urge to see that inspiring Sistene roof [sic] once Millar has told his Michelangelo story." However, the reviewer (being a comedy reviewer) was less impressed with the lack of jokes. The final line is the most critical: "It's all fun, but there's no drama and little of Millar's personality beyond his well-practised storytelling skills in the show. Which means it'll kill an idle hour, but it's probably not a must-(Holy) see." Ouch.

And now I go to sleep, hoping my flyering technique continues to work, because that review seems unlikely to drive in the crowds.

## **Saturday 7 August 2010 – Impressing the Press?**

*(I try to convince more reviewers to come see my show)*

This morning in Fringe Central I saw something that I've never seen before. A moment seemingly scripted

*Audience: 23*

*Tips: 42£*

*Notes:* Friends who had travelled up from London on the overnight coach saw me on the Royal Mile, came up and grabbed my flyers out of my hand and went off to work. They managed to draw in quite a few folks. Just the fact they'd come bolstered my spirits, their selfless enthusiasm after a night of no sleep cheered me even more. The show itself was chatty and fun.

We enjoyed a post-show pint, celebrating both the show and their engagement (confirmed that morning on Arthur's Seat). I then excused myself to make my way to the Meet the Media event.

It was mostly a long line up, followed by a series of shorter line ups. I adopted the fatalist attitude of getting into the shortest lineups and delivering a very short pitch (not much different from my flyering pitch) and after trying the three shortest line ups in succession (Three Weeks, Hairline, and Fringe Guru), I left.

## **Sunday 8 August 2010 – The Summerland Connection**

*(I meet up with a friend from my hometown who imparts some timely wisdom)*

*Audience: 29*

*Tips: 11£*

*Notes:* I must have really screwed up my sales pitch at the end, because people hardly tipped at all. My biggest audience, and yet my lowest take. In a phone call with Chiara after the show, she tells me not to worry about it. But I know that people should be showing their appreciation with a few pounds. It's hard to evaluate the show (which I thought was strong) without including the abysmal tip collection.

This evening I had a couple of beers in the Pleasance Courtyard with a friend from long-ago,

a full-time fringe and street performer named Jeff. Jeff goes by the name of Mr Bunk, a language-free clown figure who speaks in grunts and noises. His show this year is a live-action shadow puppet show with puppets he's made out of junk, like scissors and erasers and pots and whatnot. He's my age, but balding with a wild tuft of graying hair on the front of his head, and burly sideburns, making him look something like a sideshow barker of yesteryear. A look he confirms he is going for, as part of his show.

He's spent lots of time street performing, and our last conversation, over the final swallows of beer, was how to teach an audience how much to give you.

"Don't be shy. You're not begging," he said looking me dead in the eye, "This is live theatre. They appreciated the show, otherwise they would have left." He paused. "There are lots of little jokes you can put in too, like 'if you didn't like the show, write it your comments on a twenty pound note, fold it up and put it in the hat. The more laughs you can get during your pitch, the better."

He had other points as well:

- It is inexcusable to be finishing a show with less than five pounds a person.
- Reference it early on in the show. Five pounds. Say it early, and say it often. Make it funny.
- Make comparisons: say how much a beer is, how much a movie is, how much you're looking for.
- Also: bring a hat. Don't use a bucket, use a hat.
- Don't look down when they're tipping: look them in the eye and say 'thank you'.

At this point of the evening we had already been shuffled out of the venue. I walked home with new donation-themed jokes running through my mind.

## **Monday 9 August 2010 – Deferred Payment Fringe**

*(The show comes together in every way possible)*

I was disheartened by the tip failure yesterday. It's too late to make the Fringe this year financially viable, but I should be making more than 30p per person watching and enjoying the show.

It especially bugs me that such a big part of the show isn't working. Because the pitch for money is part of the show, and if it's not successful, then the overall show suffers as a result. I preferred to just mention it, and have people feel compelled by the richness of the experience to come and tip me. And in the first three shows, it worked. But then when it didn't I realized that relying on luck and spontaneous goodwill is a mug's game. I need to make some money. So I practiced the new lines in the shower this morning. One casual mention early on, insinuating how much people should be tipping. And at the end, a few sincere jokes to set up an appropriate 'tipping culture'.

*Audience: 29*

*Tips: 65.07£*

*Notes:* Woohoo! I feel much better about the end of the show, and of course, having a few extra pounds with which to buy lunch and dinner doesn't hurt. I didn't mind the asking for money part, it was actually kind of fun. I told people: look this is the Free Fringe: the most honest of Fringe shows, because you can pay what you want afterwards. Actually, we call it the Free Fringe, because it sounds better than 'the Deferred Payment Fringe'.

It didn't work out to five pounds a head, but it was a big improvement. I also managed to wrangle some more big laughs out of the pitch at the end, which meant more laughs overall. Those last few laughs – and the extra cash – contributed to my overall sense of satisfaction. After days of focusing on the administration side, it was a real relief to get to the point where I'm really enjoying the performance. I was still out flying until five minutes before showtime,

but I felt better performing it. I could feel the audience really listening. I think adding in the new bits kept the show feeling fresh.

I had a friend in the audience – Jonno from *Cactus*. He had some words of encouragement. After the show, he told me, in his nasally Australian twang, “Great stuff. This would do really well on the Canadian circuit.” Wow, I thought. That's great news.

“With some editing and directing,” he concluded.

It stung a little, but he's absolutely correct. The show needs work. But the thought that it could be a success got me excited. And he would know: he is an established performer on the Canadian circuit. I appreciated his feedback, as well as the fact that he came.

## **PERFORMING SELF**

*“There's no difference between myself onstage and off. None. I speak louder. Theatre is just a way to which you can inflict yourself on the maximum number of people.”* Quentin Crisp is quoted as saying in a January 1999 interview in *Backstage*, during the run of his one person show *An Evening With Quentin Crisp*. *I understand perfectly what Quentin is speaking of. And I'm a little ashamed about how well. I have played characters – done that actor's trick of pretending to be someone else, of inhabiting another person and thinking, acting and speaking as you imagine they might. But I prefer performing (or, if you like, inflicting) myself. And Roman Around is the perfect vehicle for me to be my idealized self in front of as many people as possible. I'm a witty and erudite raconteur people pay to listen to. And hopefully at the end of it all, they won't mind me inflicting myself upon them.*

## **Tuesday 10 August 2010 – Big Money, Big Dreams**

*(I have my biggest audience and most profitable show)*

*Audience: 50-ish*

*Tips 132.50£*

*Notes:* The crowd was much bigger than yesterday – and very attentive. I've learned to trust myself more and not depend on the laughter. At first I was fine with the audience laughing only occasionally, then I wanted more laughs, and was concerned when the audience was quiet. But now, I'm comfortable giving the jokes a bit more space and letting them sink in. Some of the jokes take a little bit longer for the audience to respond, and some of the laughs come in the middle of sentences. Though every audience is different, I've learned to be quicker to respond to what they need, and give the gags some time to air out.

I also made one small adjustment to the end of the show. Rather than making my tip pitch right at the end, I let the audience applaud first, took a bow, and then held up my hand for silence. Only then did I appeal for word of mouth and tips. I'm not sure if this directly influenced my 'box-office takings', but they doubled. It seems like every little aspect of the show can be examined and adapted and have an influence on the overall reception of the show. Man, I need a director.

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This afternoon I received a text message from a woman named Gyda that read “Nice review in 3 weeks!! Congrats, can't wait to see it.” I immediately made my way to Fringe Central to track down the review, and I'm glad I did. Four stars, and perhaps the nicest sentence that has ever been written about me: “Millar would make a most excellent drinking buddy, with chat educational enough to make you feel like downing a pint with him was a virtuous undertaking, and he can segue seamlessly into a good Michelangelo joke - quite the rare find.” I spent the rest of the afternoon feeling like I was a brilliant raconteur, which made for a great day. However, I now realize that neither my mediocre review, nor my stellar one, is anything more than someone else's opinion. They are not fact, and they shouldn't affect me to any great extent. But it's hard to pay attention to these rational thoughts when I'm so excited. Four stars, wow!

## **Wednesday 11 August 2010 – Homecoming**

*(The last show of the Edinburgh Fringe)*

I woke up in an ancient country manor, next to me was my wife. Today is off to a great start! Chiara arrived last night so she could watch the last show, and tomorrow we'll head back to London. The cooked breakfast was all gone by the time we hit the dining room, and the kitchen had apparently flooded, so the day's flying start was tempered somewhat. However, we managed to navigate our way from the train to the venue; along the way Chiara got her first taste of flyering the Royal Mile.

She's pretty good at it, being pretty and seemingly guileless is her strength – nobody suspects her cunning. But the biggest advantage of having an extra person around was that I was able to slip backstage 15 minutes before the show started, and leave her outside the venue, like a lighthouse, guiding people safely into the space

*Audience: 45*

*Tips: 112.50£*

*Notes:* The crowd today was slightly quieter than the day before, but I didn't mind, because every time I looked at a face it was looking back at me, enjoying the show. I also realized that my week-long battle to finish on time was not bearing fruit. So I just relaxed and did the show. And it was great fun. At this point it is working amazingly well. All the parts have clicked, the audiences have been growing, with many patrons telling me they had been sent by friends, and yesterday's great review will probably help the numbers – in short, this is the perfect way to begin a run at the fringe. Of course, for me it is the end of my run. However, there is still the Camden Fringe to look forward to.

## **Saturday 14 August 2010 – Not the Same Feeling**

*(I go to Camden to feel the Fringe, and feel disappointment)*

A few days back from Edinburgh, and I knew that I needed to go to Camden and promote the show. The vibe there was disappointing. In that there wasn't really a vibe. I went to watch a sketch show whose blurb was festooned with stars and critical praise. I was one of seven in the audience, and even though I'm a performer (and therefore entitled to free entrance at shows that aren't sold out) one of the duo managed to corral five pounds off of me.

I should have walked out. The show was alright, but not great – some running around, a bunch of accents, but really not worth the critical praise that has apparently been heaped upon the show. Makes me wonder (again) about the value of critical praise, and secondly, giving up that five pounds feels like the second time I've been foolish enough to part with money and receive less than it was worth in return (the first being Theatre 503). But I remember clearly thinking, as the guy was whinging about the lack of success of his show, and his need for money to break even, how it wasn't a whole lot different from my pitch at the end of *Roman Around* in Edinburgh. So I gave him the money and have tried not to feel sour about it, instead, I've tried to feel like I've squared up with karma.

Although it's not right to compare the two, coming home to the Camden Fringe is depressing me. There are less international acts and mind-bending theatrical whozzits, and nothing like the buzz of Edinburgh, but there is a strong selection of comedy and experimental theatre being presented. However, I've now grown accustomed to a relatively full audience – it really makes the performance much easier and a whole lot more fun. I haven't exactly heard that tickets to this weekend are flying off the shelves, so to speak. And it's a shame, because even though I knew Edinburgh would be the highlight, I am still hoping that the denouement of the Camden Fringe will contain more climax than anti-climax.

Besides, I'm a little nervous now about playing to empty houses on the weekend. Not that I worry I'll pull a stroppy fit, or not deliver a good show, but more that afterwards I'll be even more depressed than I am now. But, as director David Cromer said after they closed his production of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* after the first week, "If they don't want to come, you

can't stop them." I can only hope they don't *not* want to come.

## **17 August 2010 – The Press Calls Works too Well**

*(I discover I'll have plenty of reviewers at my show on Saturday. Less certain about regular audience)*

Yesterday and today have been spent haranguing the entertainment world about my last two shows. The reception in Edinburgh has made me more confident. I know that with the success the show has already had, and the lessons I've already learnt, the next project will be that much easier to get off the ground. Audience and reviewers will be easier to find and, in fact, any of the things I need to do to get any sort of performance time (at open mics, teaching workshops, etc.) will be easier. And of course, Jonno's words about *Roman Around's* potential to be a hit on the Canadian fringe circuit keep popping into my head.

But for now I have just two more opportunities to perform the show. I need to maximize them. Hence I spent yesterday and today sending out invitations to journalists and producers, casting directors, and agents. And there will be three reviewers at the show on Saturday night. Which is great news, except I'm not sure who else is coming.

## **GETTING REVIEWED**

*"Don't read your own reviews" is a theatrical adage. I had always assumed this was because if they were bad, you start to lose that trust in your own performance, and begin second-guessing yourself, and the show suffers as a result. It had never occurred to me that not reading reviews that were positive could have the same effect, but after my first four-star review (not given by a friend), I realized that I went from surprised, to joyful, to insufferable in a fairly short span of time.*

*There's also a third option: getting mildly complimentary yet relatively indifferent reviews. That*

*can be even more frustrating. What if your tree falls in the woods and makes a sound that people hear, only they're pretty blasé about the whole thing?*

*Roman Around has gotten some reviews: none of the first sort, but a few of the latter two. In total the reviews I've gotten are:*

*★★★★David Harrison<sup>15</sup> reviewed my second preview on RemoteGoat.*

*★★★★Three Weeks were the only media outlet to review my show while it was in Edinburgh.*

*★★★★Another RemoteGoat reviewer came to the Camden Fringe and gave the best explanation of what exactly the show is.*

*★★★London events website Spoonfed came late to my Saturday night show in Camden, but still gave a decent (if occasionally wildly inaccurate) write-up.*

*★★★Steve Bennett of British comedy encyclopedia Chortle reviewed my final preview before Edinburgh.*

*I prefer not to think of the critical assessment as three four-star and two three-star reviews. Instead, I like to look at the big picture: 18 stars!*

## **Saturday 21 August 2010 – What Romes Around, Eventually Ends**

*(I prepare for my penultimate performance of Roman Around)*

On my way to Camden to deliver my second last show. I thought I'd be happier about finishing, but in fact I'm kind of desperate to figure out a way to prolong the experience. I love the show, I love performing, and I'm hoping that all the hard work will get me discovered. Not necessarily in a 'make me a star' way, just in a 'give me a job doing stuff I love to do' kind of way. That is an unlikely scenario, yet from this point on I will have this show as proof of my ability to write and stage a show, and perhaps I will be able to find other venues for this show

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<sup>15</sup> David came to see the show as a friend, and wrote a review only because I asked him to. His review was so well-written that I convinced him to send it to RemoteGoat, a review site. On the strength of that he was made an official reviewer. His relationship to me means that his review is not entirely impartial, however it's worth keeping in mind that he is the only critic who paid for his own ticket.

after my final two performances.

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Wow, that was bad. I was unfocused and rambling, like you might be upon waking up drunk in the backseat after missing your bus stop. And I could see and feel it all happening, but couldn't change anything. It's the kind of experience you want to happen in private, but there were three reviewers, my dissertation supervisor, my wife and a bunch of friends – as well as a dozen strangers – in the audience. Afterwards all had positive comments, and were eager with questions, but inside I felt awful.

I'm not sure what it was that made the show feel so bad – the tiny squeaky stage, the peculiar L-shape of the audience,<sup>16</sup> the heat growing progressively more stifling, the lack of audible response, the fact I hadn't performed it for ten days... Of course, it's probably a combination of all those things. But a professional doesn't let those things interfere with the success of the show. Therefore I wasn't acting like a professional. Of course, I'm hyper-aware of the moments (and it was probably only a handful of them) where the tempo faltered, or my focus wavered. But on more than one occasion, that heightened awareness almost seemed like an out-of-body experience. Except I wasn't sleeping, I was sleepwalking through the show.

## **Sunday 22 August 2010 – Curtain Call**

*(The final show of the first series of shows)*

Today is my last performance of *Roman Around*; at least for the foreseeable future. I'm trying to get excited about it being finished. But mostly I'm going to miss it. However, the knowledge that I can pull off this show will stay with me.

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<sup>16</sup> Staring straight out from centre stage meant looking at the corner of a wall, the audience was split into two halves on either side of the wall. Each time I faced one half of the audience, the other was looking at my back. How to solve this issue occupied a lot of my mind on stage.

I'm nervous about tonight. Because the show last night was a shockingly mediocre representation of the work. It should have been much better. After spending a week in Edinburgh performing the show day after day and feeling the momentum and audiences build, my comfort with the show grew. But after taking it out of its usual habitat, it behaved differently. Tonight I plan to work harder on making the show better, and also, work less, and have more fun.

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Success! The show tonight was great. I don't think it was the best the show has been, but it was a big improvement on last night.<sup>17</sup> The audience was again approximately twenty people, comprising half friends and half strangers. A friend filmed the entire performance, so I've got video evidence. This will be useful for analyzing the performance, transcribing the script, and posting video clips on the website. But the important thing at this point is the fact that I felt good about it.<sup>18</sup> Leave on a high.

I still have mixed feelings about the end of the run, but I was easily coaxed into celebrating with an excellent homemade meal of potato casserole and salad. Followed by spice cake and a scotch. A fitting feast to end the journey that was *Roman Around*.

## **Thursday 26 August 2010 – Objectives in Mirror**

*(Looking back on almost a year, and looking ahead on another year)*

My not-entirely premeditated plan<sup>19</sup> was to take *Roman Around* from a secret idea locked away in my computer through all elements of production and perform it at not one but two Fringe festivals. So it's done, and successfully. But it doesn't feel finished.

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<sup>17</sup> Rather than worry about the squeaky stage and the odd shape of the theatre, I just concentrated on the show, and it was fun again.

<sup>18</sup> I suspect that if someone had seen both shows, the difference would have been barely discernible. But even knowing that Saturday night's audience really enjoyed the show did little to cheer me up regarding that performance. So I guess it's most important that I feel I had a good show.

<sup>19</sup> Some of the best laid plans are only visible in hindsight.

All of the work of the past year has yielded a successful show. But the story is not yet over. At one point I thought that once this summer is over (if the festivals went well) the fall would mean starting a whole new show. I now realize that the fringe festivals were to gauge the viability of this show. Indications are that it still needs tweaking, but it has many good performances ahead of it. So the hunt for a director begins, and the scheming for how to manifest more performances and more professional opportunities starts as well.

In a phone conversation I just had with an old friend (who also happens to be a life coach and corporate career adviser) I was reminded that “Ryan, you tend to manifest whatever you set your mind to. Make some goals about how much you want to be earning and how, and then work on making that happen.”

After we got off the phone I thought about it. And it was true, ten months ago I had just started a writing programme, and my dreams of performing, ignited by my experiences playing Tiny Tim almost thirty years ago, had drifted out of focus. And now, here I am having written and performed a successful solo comedy show at the Edinburgh Fringe. I had not expected the writing and performing aspects of myself to complement each other so well. But they have. At the end of *Roman Around* I describe how my time in Rome “gave me a love of history. And really only a taste, but a hunger for more, and that’s what I’ve tried to share with you this afternoon/evening.” This summer and this project was not a standalone one-off event, but rather an important stage on the journey towards becoming a successful writer/performer. And now that I’ve gotten a sample of what the union of writing and performing can produce, I feel that hunger more acutely.

## COMMENTARY

*Roman Around*<sup>20</sup> draws on the conventions of theatre, stand-up comedy, and history lecture to deliver a hybrid performance that defies easy categorization. This fluidity of identity allowed the use of a wide variety of source material for *When I Was Roman Around (WIWRA)*. Contextual material included stand-up how-to books, texts on analysis of performance, memoirs of lives in theatre, improv handbooks, Tom Wolfe's anthology *The New Journalism*, and even Chuck Klosterman's account of life as a heavy metal fan. One important thing that has come out of the breadth of this research has been the certainty that *WIWRA* is more easily categorizable than *Roman Around* itself: it is a memoir. This commentary will explore the idea of writing memoir, and be informed by non-fiction writing about performance, rehearsal, and other first-person narratives.

The original idea for the Final Project for the Professional Writing MA was a film or sitcom script. However, by the middle of spring it was clear that this idea was no longer tenable. The work involved in preparing *Roman Around* for performance was overwhelming everything else in my life, and looked to continue that way until late August. The script idea was dismissed in favour of a project that would complement the preparation of the show. The idea was to write about the process of bringing the show from the page to the stage. Once that idea had been approved, an organizing principle was required. Grouping the material chronologically seemed the obvious choice, especially since the development of the show created a natural narrative, climaxing with performance as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. During a feedback session the course convenor suggested a diary, which became evolved to become the form for *WIWRA* – something like a diary, but slightly different.

Rather than making it a series of daily<sup>21</sup> entries, the book *Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural North Dakota*, by Chuck Klosterman served as inspiration for the form. Klosterman's memoir/history of 80s glam metal is organized by significant dates. Some of the

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20 A commentary on a work that is itself a commentary risks becoming a repetition To avoid that, this commentary will examine *When I Was Roman Around (WIWRA)* from a more academic and historically-situated perspective. It will only include minor references to the script and series of performances on which *WIWRA* is based.

21 Or weekly, or monthly or irregular but evenly-spaced recaps of my activities.

dates correspond to the history of the genre – for example one chapter begins: “October 18, 1988 – Heavy Metal's finest hour: The three best-selling albums on the planet are Bon Jovi's New Jersey, Guns n' Roses Appetite for Destruction, and Def Leppard's Hysteria. (Klosterman, 146)” Other chapter headings take as their focus Klosterman's own life. Such as: “November 15, 1992 – I get drunk and go to a hockey game.” (Klosterman, 226) Of course, Klosterman getting drunk and attending a hockey event is not terribly significant, and in fact, in most instances, Klosterman's chapter headings only tangentially relate to the content. However, the idea served as inspiration for the format of *WIWRA*: significant dates in the genesis, rehearsal process, and performance of the show would be the ‘pegs’ on which would hang insights and ideas about the show.<sup>22</sup>

Chronology seemed so natural an organizing principle, and with Klosterman's book as inspiration, alternatives weren't considered until I came across Stephen Berkoff's *Free Association*. The book presents an ingenious and intuitive way of constructing an autobiographical narrative. As he says in the preface “I free-associated, as one does in conversation, letting one thought spark off another, so that my life unravelled in this way rather than in a sequential order.” (Berkoff, xi) This anti-chronology has the potential to be confusing, but Berkoff ensures that the narrative thread is never lost. Also, his writing is engaging and lyrical enough to bring alive mundane details, such as when he describes some wartime memories of his early childhood: “Legs, the long legs of adults, trousered legs, table legs, Dad's legs. Then the small comforts of childhood: a red tricycle and the fire in the grate leaping like an inferno.” (72, Berkoff) At points it's more poetry than memoir. The anecdotes are not always so lyrical, but the scene-setting and storytelling are evocative and personal. It also flagged up the importance of details in storytelling.

Susan Letzler Cole's book *Playwrights in Rehearsal* provided further examples of more prosaic, but still compelling details. The section on playwright Sam Shepard begins “It's 10am, March 22, 1997. As I enter the fourth-floor rehearsal studio at 422 West Forty-Second Street,

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<sup>22</sup> The decision to add in the non-dated elements came later. From a stylistic point of view it was to provide breaks from the journal entry chronological format. From a content perspective it was useful to allow the insertion of some insights and ideas that didn't naturally wed themselves to the journal form.

in New York City, I see two long tables surrounded by ten folding chairs and a few, odd upholstered chairs on wheels. A former chunky peanut butter jar filled with fresh daffodils sits in the centre of one table. To either side of the daffodils are paper cups, a few coffee mugs, a box of Kleenex, several other glass jars with sharpened pencils, and a bottle of water with the name 'Jim' written on it.” (Letzler Cole, 1) The book goes on to detail the different working processes of writers in rehearsals of their work. Letzler Cole strikes a balance between reporting, insight, and interviews.

Both Berkoff and Letzler-Cole played significant supporting roles in the editing phase of *WIWRA*; passages were fleshed out to be more evocative and representative of mood and memory – either in a more lyrical subjective way like Berkoff, or in an objective observational way, as Letzler Cole. However, care was taken to avoid mimicry. Progress that has been made this year in developing my distinctive authorial voice was furthered in the process of writing this memoir. Of course, the writing of this Final Project was in some ways a very natural extension of my own writing practice (non-fiction personal observation) yet it was also an exercise in pushing myself into greater care, economy of words, rich dialogue and detailing, and playing with memory – becoming a true memoir. However, attending to the performances and rehearsals was intended to add a dimension of theatre and drama theory to the work.

In *Drama in Performance* Raymond Williams laments that, while the examination of script and performance is a common enough occurrence, “strangely, we have very few examples of the necessary next stage: a consideration of play and performance, literary text and theatrical representation, not as separate entities, but as the unity which they are intended to become.” (Williams, 4) Being memoir first and drama critique second *WIWRA* is, in a way, a contemporary take on Williams' complaint. *WIWRA* is not a piece of drama criticism, but by being aware of the ways that criticism and theory can relate to lived and performed experience, a work of this type is richer. This is not only an academic notion – it relates at a very raw level to the relationship between writing and performing. In *Theory/Theatre* Mark Fortier seeks to broaden the understanding of the word 'theatre': “theatre is not words on a page. Theatre is performance and entails not only words, but space, actors, props, audience,

and the complex relations among these elements.” (Fortier, 4) *WIWRA* includes rehearsals, and promotions, a pitch for tips, and other aspects to round out the personal, lived experience of creating theatre.

The 'complex relations' Fortier refers to demand analysis. Writings about the performer's process, for example Johnstone, Sankey, and Letzler Cole contributed to an understanding of the relations between components of theatre and how they can be effectively represented in writing. Each has a different idea of the balance between generalizations, detail, dialogue, reported speech, instruction, and insight – as well as what is omitted. Works of theatrical analysis, such as Mudford and Fortier have also helped keep *WIWRA* connected to the process of creating theatre. In a way, they've also helped sharpen the similarities between theatre and writing. Mudford says “the actor needs to be in control of emphasis, rhythm and breath.” (Mudford, 46) The writer also needs to be in control of these things for the reader.<sup>23</sup> Mudford draws another parallel when he writes that “the action of a play takes place in the imagination of the audience.” (Mudford, 47) These similarities show that writing about creating theatre is not that dissimilar from the process of creating theatre. This again reinforces the shared idea that a work (be it theatre or literature) needs to be evocative to be successful. And in order to be successful, both must be seen (read) by members of a public.

One can definitely feed the other; if *Roman Around* were to carry on building audiences and critical success to become a well-known work, finding a publisher for *WIWRA* would be relatively easy. There is a proven market for works of memoir by comedians, actors, and theatre-makers. Of course, it generally presupposes some level of success and name-recognition.<sup>24</sup> But some examples defy the standard autobiography format, and show a way that *Roman Around* and *When I was Roman Around* could be combined into a literary work that may have appeal on its own merit. Dave Gorman's 2004 account of his quest to meet

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23 It is arguable that the breath of the audience is not under the control of an author, and yet good writing can elicit gasps, laughter, and sighs. While stretching the relationship between acting and writing, this point does not break.

24 Dave Gorman, Steven Berkoff and Stewart Lee are all used as examples in this commentary, but Jerry Seinfeld, Tracy Morgan, Steve Martin and Max Stafford-Clark are just a few examples of other performers who leveraged their onstage success into success on the page.

people via the game of googlehacking,<sup>25</sup> entitled *Dave Gorman's Googlehack Adventure*, was a number one bestseller. But before it was a book it was a touring solo comedy show. Stewart Lee's recent *How I Escaped my Certain Fate* provides another model for which a performance can be made into a memoir-ish literary form. In the book, Lee analyzes transcripts of three of his hour-long comedy shows, providing comment and annotation as well as context. It's an excellent idea, and well executed. Steven Berkoff's *I am Hamlet*, goes scene-by-scene through the play making observations regarding his experience directing and playing the Danish prince. These works show that there is a possibility of combining the performance itself and the story of the rehearsal and performance period to create a future work that capitalizes on the strengths of both.<sup>26</sup>

The end of August seemed an appropriate time to close the chronology of *WIWRA*, as the due date for the Final Project of the Professional Writing MA roughly coincided with the completion of a summer's worth of scheduled performances of the show. With this initial life cycle complete, an evaluation of the process was only logical. However, the show will continue to evolve as a piece of theatre. It will then be performed in new venues in different cities. At all points along the way there will be a wealth of new experiences to report on, and new insights to be drawn. At some point in the future, perhaps the performance and the writing about the performance will follow in the tradition established by Berkoff, Gorman, Lee et al, and be combined in book form. Therefore this version of *WIWRA* is, in a way, not a *final* project, but the conclusion of the first stage of evolution of inter-related projects. This chapter is done, but I'm still *Roman Around*.

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25 Googlehacking is a word game in which the player enters two words into Google looking for combinations that produce one solitary site. Examples from the book include Bushranger Doublespeak, Coelacanth Sharpener, and Optically Scriveners.

26 Of course, one cannot escape making the simple observation that, while these works break the convention of 'straight autobiography' and show a market for biographical stories of performance and observation, each of the authors is a highly successful performer (and perhaps not coincidentally also the author of a number of other books).

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