

Character Building

Reading for Arts 499: Performance

# THEATER

## Character building

*The Pillowman's* Michael Stuhlbarg constructs a breakthrough role

By Adam Feldman

Watching Michael Stuhlbarg's bravura turn as a mentally damaged prisoner in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, you might recognize this consummate character actor from one of his many other roles on the New York stage. He was the young, effete, titular king of the Public Theater's *Richard II* (1994) and the hapless Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare in the Park's most recent *Twelfth Night* (2002); he played a love-struck yeshiva boy in *A Dybbuk* (1997) and a friendly Nazi in *Cabaret* (1998). But even if you've seen Stuhlbarg before, chances are you won't recognize him at all.

"In some ways, he's quite an old-fashioned protean actor," says John Crowley, *The Pillowman's* London-based director. "He changes from role to role." And rarely has Stuhlbarg's self-transformation been so dramatic as it is here; formerly rail thin, he has maintained 30 pounds of extra weight to play the puffy, shuffling Michal, whose childlike demeanor masks deep fissures of rage and resentment.

Stuhlbarg, 36, began bulking up last year, in preparation for his role as a 19th-century Parisian barkeep in Lincoln Center's *Belle Epoque*. "Throughout my research for that project, I found many pictures of bar owners who were very heavy-set," he says. "And when I got the role of Michal, John and I started talking about how we wanted to manifest the character. He said, 'Shave off the beard, but don't go on a diet.'" ("My notion was to have someone who was quite squishy and soft, almost like a pillowman himself," Crowley recalls.) Some of Stuhlbarg's other physical choices are less obvious: a small shock of gray hair and subtle scar makeup at his temples suggest Michal's history of parental abuse; the character's unbalanced psyche is ac-



**MAKING IT BIG** Stuhlbarg carries extra weight to suit his roly-poly *Pillowman* role.

cented by an uneven pair of shoes. (The one on the left is about an inch and a half taller.)

Such details are an essential starting point of Stuhlbarg's outside-in approach to his work. In his dressing room at the Booth Theatre are notebooks full of ideas: neatly arranged collages of handwritten text, photocopied images

"I wanted to have someone who was quite squishy," director John Crowley says.

and the actor's own sketches. "I've been drawing since I was a kid," he says. "It's been a huge part in the creation of the characters that I play." Equally important is Stuhlbarg's reverence for words—his willingness to let a play's language shape his performance, instead of vice versa. Much of his most prominent work has been in the service of texts by verbally brilliant writers: Shakespeare, Tony Kushner, Tom Stoppard. Once he has mastered the externals, the rest of his performance—what he calls "the passion behind the mind"—is free to flow.

"It really overtakes me," he says. "I'm a very impulsive actor. Even though many of the texts that I find myself involved with are very intellectual, there's got to be a heart and a passion behind it." Crowley has nothing but praise for Stuhlbarg's process. "Michael's all about trying to remain open so that new things can happen in the moment of playing the scene," the director observes. "It's like an embarrassment of riches with him; he's bringing so much new stuff to the floor continually."

In person, Stuhlbarg seems sweet and soft-spoken (he describes himself as "a silly goofball, and sometimes very, very shy in communicating with people"), but onstage he is drawn to bold strokes; he lights up when talking about "big stories," "huge thoughts" and "epic theater." He also gravitates naturally to humor. "I get so much joy out of playing comedy, and finding the comedy in tragedy," he says.

*The Pillowman* makes the most of his talents in that regard. "For Michal, you need an actor who can convince you that he could be quite dark and scary, but at the middle of it is very gentle," Crowley explains. "Michael brings huge personality to it—charm and warmth and cheekiness—but he can also be deeply affecting and upsetting."

While Stuhlbarg's excellent past work has earned him the

reverence of directors and fellow actors, *The Pillowman* has been a breakthrough. Last month, he won a Drama Desk Award for his performance, and on Sunday 5 he will vie with Alan Alda and Liev Schreiber for the Featured Actor Tony. It's the kind of irony a character actor might appreciate: For disappearing so persuasively into his role, Stuhlbarg may finally get the recognition he has earned.

***The Pillowman* is playing at the Booth Theatre. See Broadway.**



## Scouting the City for Her Characters

By JOHN LELAND AUG. 19, 2011

A SUMMER afternoon in Chelsea, and Sarah Jones was on a recon mission, searching for ... she did not know what, exactly. An accent, for starters. An ethnic wild card. “Hybridity,” she said, using a word she uses often to describe her field of urban study.

She noted a young man with a do-rag under his baseball cap and a belt buckle in the shape of a handgun; a Caribbean woman pushing a white baby in a designer stroller; a heavy woman smoking a long, exaggeratedly slim cigarette. “The slim cigarette trumps the fact that she wasn’t talking to anyone,” Ms. Jones said, turning to follow the woman. “Nobody smokes those anymore.”

Ms. Jones asked the woman for a cigarette, but got nothing useful in return. “She didn’t say, ‘Yeah, honey, you can have one,’ ” Ms. Jones said, shifting her voice to sound like a Bensonhurst ashtray, circa 1938. “I’m looking for something else.”

Ms. Jones, 37, might be described as an unlicensed anthropologist, an explorer of the cultural fault lines that unite and divide the city. More plainly, she is a playwright and performer whose one-woman shows carry her through rapid successions of ethnically diverse male and female roles: a Russian immigrant or an elderly Jewish woman; an Italian cop or a Brooklyn rapper seeking treatment for rhyme addiction; an American Indian comedian or a Chinese-American woman whose daughter, to her disappointment, is lesbian.

Since she won a Tony Award in 2006 for her show “Bridge and Tunnel,” Ms. Jones has been searching for her next subject and next cast of characters, making

one-off appearances at gatherings of business leaders, as a Unicef goodwill ambassador and at the White House, where she performed in 2009. In the interim she got divorced from her husband and behind-the-scenes collaborator, the slam poet Steve Colman, and received a commission from Lincoln Center to develop an unspecified show. She does not know what it will be about.

So the clock is ticking.

MS. JONES agreed to let a reporter follow her on two reconnaissance outings to look for new characters and to do what she does: explore the hidden tensions and weirdnesses that make New York City the global theater that it is.

“This is a new experience for me, to be with someone else,” she said, straining her ears for fruitful sidewalk disruption. She gravitated toward Zen Bikes on 24th Street, where two women were arguing, alternating in English and Spanish. Ms. Jones pretended to talk on her mobile phone so she could get close and listen.

“She’s not happy,” Ms. Jones said of the older woman. “And she’s not happy in two different languages, which is perfect for me.”

She gave the argument a chance to develop. Was it between a mother and daughter? Were they like her own Dominican relatives, who add spice to the vast stew of her ethnic background?

Ms. Jones edged closer, then backed off, continuing on her surveillance rounds. Barbecue smells wafted from Madison Square Park. A Senegalese woman asked for directions, and Ms. Jones answered her in French. Tourists spoke every language known to man. She walked on. If she was feeling pressure to produce, she did not voice it.

“I’m practicing a kind of meandering faith, or faithful meandering,” she said. “I just trust that something is coming. I don’t know what it is. But I’ve been a straphanger all my life; I know what it’s like to not know when the next train is coming, but I trust the subway.”

Ms. Jones, the daughter of a white mother and a black father, both doctors, came by her cultural inquisitiveness early, as a child in Baltimore trying to figure out who she was. When she brought home forms from school asking her to designate her race, her mother would cross out the line and write “human,” she said.

“My grandmothers are Irish-American and German-American; my grandfather is from the Caribbean,” Ms. Jones said. “My father is African-American. My family looked funny. I just started naturally imitating whoever I was talking to. I didn’t want to be a phony, but I felt very authentic in the moment. I don’t think of it as having a fractured self, but as having many interconnecting selves, concentric identities.”

Things got more interesting when the family moved to Jamaica, Queens, and Ms. Jones attended the United Nations International School, where her background suddenly seemed vanilla compared with her classmates’. Then at Bryn Mawr College, the diversity she had come to take for granted suddenly evaporated. Ms. Jones, who dropped out after two years, had her mission.

On Fifth Avenue she ducked into a Sephora cosmetics store, where for some reason she decided she would be least conspicuous as a tall, caramel-complexioned Russian. No one looked at her funny.

“Excuse me,” she said to a salesman, an African-American man with giant glasses and a subtle touch of gray. “We were saying you were like beautiful man, André Leon Talley,” the iconic figure from Vogue magazine and “America’s Next Top Model,” whose name survived even her linguistic roughhousing.

“Everyone says I look like him,” the man said. “I wish I had his money.”

“Never too late,” the babushka replied.

In truth, the man’s lament fit a theme that has been tugging at Ms. Jones as a possibility for her next show: the brutality of the economy and the wedges it has driven through the city. Outside the store, she put on a British accent to talk with a woman selling jewelry on a sidewalk table. Within minutes the woman described how she had been laid off from her job in the fashion industry.

“That’s fascinating,” Ms. Jones said.

She bought a ring for \$20. The woman, Lisa Clarke, 48, wrote her name and number for Ms. Jones.





For the playwright, a story line was taking shape.

“How did we get from that woman having a middle-class experience in America in the '70s to now she sells jewelry in the streets?” she asked afterward. “I promise you she does not have health coverage. Her father was a piano teacher. How did that happen, and what is that story? It’s not going to be a Michael Moore diatribe. But my first thought is just, this is the reality of today, that companies can get away with paying people next to nothing. That’s the through line: the guy in Sephora — ‘Oh, honey, if I had his money.’ And I know if I just pursue that conversation a little I’ll find out how much he makes an hour and if he has health insurance. Every time I overhear something, a financial component is there, and not far behind that is a health story. And those things are very connected up for me. That’s where I’ve been hovering.”

Ms. Jones got her start reading at poetry slams at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the East Village and her first break on HBO’s “Def Poetry Jam,” where she performed a feminist rewrite of Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (“Your revolution will not happen between these thighs,” she recited). Mr. Scott-Heron, who died in May, was a friend of her father’s, and gave her the opening slot on a concert tour.

“He was like spoken-word royalty to us,” she said of Mr. Scott-Heron. But she said she blushed now to see clips of the poem, “Your Revolution.”

“I was getting up there like, ‘Hi, y’all,’ ” she said. “That’s part of me, but that’s not all of me. I remember going home like, I don’t really talk like that. I was telling this all-black story. I was playing a spoken-word artist. I quickly realized it was O.K. for me to bring the other voices onstage, and people would respond to them.”

**AFTER** a few hours on the streets, Ms. Jones had not found what she wanted. She seemed a bit rusty or unfocused, watching the panorama rather than immersing herself in it. Maybe the problem was that it was a Sunday, she said. Weekends were for tourists. Midweek was when people’s wheels squeaked.

A few days later, at a construction site on West 14th Street, Ms. Jones's faith appeared to be rewarded. A Latina Con Edison worker let her long hair fall from under her hard hat. A man in a beret and blazer collected cans. Nearby were a vocational center for people with disabilities, a Salvation Army outpost and the Norwood, a members-only social club to which Ms. Jones belongs. The street was a place for wealth and poverty to mingle and collide, as they do in her shows.

"Today I'm just looking for somebody inspiring," she said, zeroing in on the Con Ed woman. "So far she's my favorite. I'm just looking for some strange juxtapositions, like a petite, long-haired, shirt-too-big, female construction worker. I'm interested in it from a feminist perspective; I'm interested in it from an economic perspective, this moment in New York. Did she used to do something else? She doesn't look that young. Is this a second career? This provided better benefits? How risky is this job? I don't see her every day."

"And Con Ed workers have the best accents," she added. "These are Lawn Guyland guys, or Jersey."

But from this group, too, Ms. Jones seemed to be held at a distance. As she expanded her patrol of the area, an explanation began to present itself. The New York she documented so intimately in "Bridge and Tunnel" back in 2006 had changed, as it does between any two blinks of an eye. Ms. Jones's explorations were shaping up as a study in loss.

At the playground where she expected to find brown nannies and white children, mothers were the rule. "This is weird," she said. Just feet from her apartment in Greenwich Village she saw a Starbucks she had never noticed before. Even the accents did not crackle and pop where expected.

"There was a time when if you listened to anyone from Russell Simmons to — I mean, Russell Simmons has a little bit of Ed Koch in his accent," she said. "There's that lovely Eastern European influence on his New Yawkese. It's that hybridity I love. But you can say goodbye to that."

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During her research for "Bridge and Tunnel," she found this hybridity in a Chinese-American woman from Flushing, Queens, who said "dawta" for daughter. That dropped "r" was a part of New York history, Ms. Jones said, a story of [immigration](#) and struggle and unlikely cultural intermingling — exactly the story she felt born to tell. But it was a story in eclipse, she said.

“That sound is being smoothed out by the influx of Minnesotans and Michiganders and all these people who grew up watching ‘Sex and the City’ and want to come here and live like Carrie,” she said. “And they can and they do.”

FINALLY, she spotted a character who interested her, a transsexual in a bright green minidress, collecting cans on her bicycle. The cans were an economic story at least. Ms. Jones approached her in hopes that more would follow. She was not disappointed.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” the woman said. She wore bright red lipstick and heavy eye makeup and called herself Crystal Scott, using her former first name as her surname. A flag over her bicycle identified her as a “she-male.” She was 66 years old and in very good shape. “My life is totally unbelievable,” she said.

With encouragement but little prompting from Ms. Jones, the story came out: childhood polio and tuberculosis, military school in the 1960s, addiction to crack cocaine.

“Whatever came my way I adjusted to it and survived, by any means necessary,” Ms. Scott said. “And anything I did in life, the means was necessary.”

Ms. Jones owned up that she was a playwright looking for characters. To Ms. Scott this made perfect sense. She had more to tell, so much more.

“Miss Crystal, you’re blowing my mind,” Ms. Jones said. “I think we are going to meet again.”

She took Ms. Scott’s telephone number and promised to call. Maybe something would come of it, maybe not.

It was getting late, and Ms. Scott had more cans to collect.

**She got on her brightly decorated bicycle and rode to the next garbage can, in search of New York’s unredeemed but ever-so-valuable treasure. Sarah Jones continued on the same search.**



George cited Chaplin's Tramp as a Mask, since the character had come from the clothes and the make-up. Here's Chaplin's own account (from his autobiography).

'On the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, and a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything to be a contradiction; the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. I was undecided whether to look young or old, but remembering Sennett had expected me to be a much older man, I added a small moustache which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression . . . .

' . . . I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and make-up made me feel the kind of person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked on the stage he was fully born. When I confronted Sennett I assumed the character and strutted about, swinging my cane and parading before him. Gags and comedy ideas went racing through my mind . . . .

' . . . My character was different and unfamiliar to the Americans. But with the clothes on I felt he was a reality, a living person. In fact he ignited all sorts of crazy ideas that I would never have dreamt of until I was dressed and made-up as the Tramp.'

Elsewhere Chaplin has said, 'I realised I would have to spend the rest of my life finding out about the creature. For me he was fixed, complete, the moment I looked in the mirror and saw him for the first time, yet even now I don't know all the things that are to be known about him.'<sup>1</sup> (Isabel Quigly, *Charlie Chaplin—Early Comedies*, Studio Vista, 1968.)

famous plays. Suffice it to say that in every case the author created characters, or intended to. How he succeeded, and why, will be analyzed in another chapter.)

Euripides' *Medea* is a classical example of how a play should grow out of character. The author did not need an Aphrodite to cause Medea to fall in love with Jason. It was the custom of those times to show the interference of the gods, but the behavior of the characters is logical without it. Medea, or any woman, will love the man who appeals to her, and will sometimes make sacrifices hard to believe.

Medea had her brother slain for her love. Not long ago, in New York, a woman lured her two children into a forest, cut their throats, poured gasoline over them and burned them—for love. There is no indication of the supernatural in this. It is merely the good old-fashioned mating instinct run riot. If we knew the background and the physical composition of this modern Medea, her terrible deed would become comprehensible to us.

Here is a guide, then, a step-by-step outline of how a tridimensional-character bone structure should look.

#### PHYSIOLOGY

1. *Sex*
2. *Age*
3. *Height and weight*
4. *Color of hair, eyes, skin*
5. *Posture*
6. *Appearance*: good-looking, over- or underweight, clean, neat, pleasant, untidy. Shape of head, face, limbs.
7. *Defects*: deformities, abnormalities, birthmarks. Diseases.
8. *Heredity*

#### SOCIOLOGY

1. *Class*: lower, middle, upper.
2. *Occupation*: type of work, hours of work, income, con-

- dition of work, union or nonunion, attitude toward organization, suitability for work.
3. *Education*: amount, kind of schools, marks, favorite subjects, poorest subjects, aptitudes.
  4. *Home life*: parents living, earning power, orphan, parents separated or divorced, parents' habits, parents' mental development, parents' vices, neglect. Character's marital status.
  5. *Religion*
  6. *Race, nationality*
  7. *Place in community*: leader among friends, clubs, sports.
  8. *Political affiliations*
  9. *Amusements, hobbies*: books, newspapers, magazines he reads.

## PSYCHOLOGY

1. *Sex life, moral standards*
2. *Personal premise, ambition*
3. *Frustrations, chief disappointments*
4. *Temperament*: choleric, easygoing, pessimistic, optimistic.
5. *Attitude toward life*: resigned, militant, defeatist.
6. *Complexes*: obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, phobias.
7. *Extrovert, introvert, ambivert*
8. *Abilities*: languages, talents.
9. *Qualities*: imagination, judgment, taste, poise.
10. *I.Q.*

This is the bone structure of a character, which the author must know thoroughly, and upon which he must build.

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Whoopi Goldberg is a Bay Area performer who enters into her characters initially through an act of empathy. A black, a woman, a Buddhist, Catholic, Jew, she defies stereotypes while capturing the essence of characters. Her humor is sincere and outrageous, her characters as improbable as the people who sit next to you on the subway. Among her characters are Ugmo the Wino (who celebrates Uncle Ben Day), a junkie on a tour of Europe who meets up with the spirit of Anne Frank, a thirteen-year-old Valley Girl who aborts herself with a wire hanger, an appealing black ghetto child who fantasizes that she'll grow up white and rich. These characters are the disinherited, the members of our society who maintain dignity though they may lack hope. Goldberg has listened when people talked to her, she has paid close attention to individual mannerisms. She has an acute visual sense that allows her to construct a character in her imagination as she observes:

*You have to look at people and take the way that your mother walks, the way she moves her feet from her knees to her toes, and connect it to the way a policeman on the block moves his hips and thighs. So that's a whole new character you know. And taking the torso and putting someone else onto that, and building it, layering it. That's how I build my characters. Not in the studio, but in my head.*

Goldberg says she generally feels a clear separation between her self and her characters. She does not like Whoopi Goldberg to appear on stage at all; it has to be pure character.

As well as using empathy as a *modus operandi* to construct her characters, Goldberg's personae really don't come into being until she is in front of an audience. Her characters gain life through their interaction with the spectators. Like the ancient Greek *phallophoroi*, the clowns who traveled from town to town insulting their audiences, Whoopi Goldberg's outrages are in the joyous spirit of Dionysos. In ancient Greece the raillery and abuse towards the spectator were thought to ward off evil.



Figure 21. Whoopi Goldberg as Mable.

Goldberg is not abusive, but she makes her audience at times extremely uncomfortable or at least quite alert. The audience comes to see Whoopi Goldberg because they trust her skill, her expertise, her intentions:

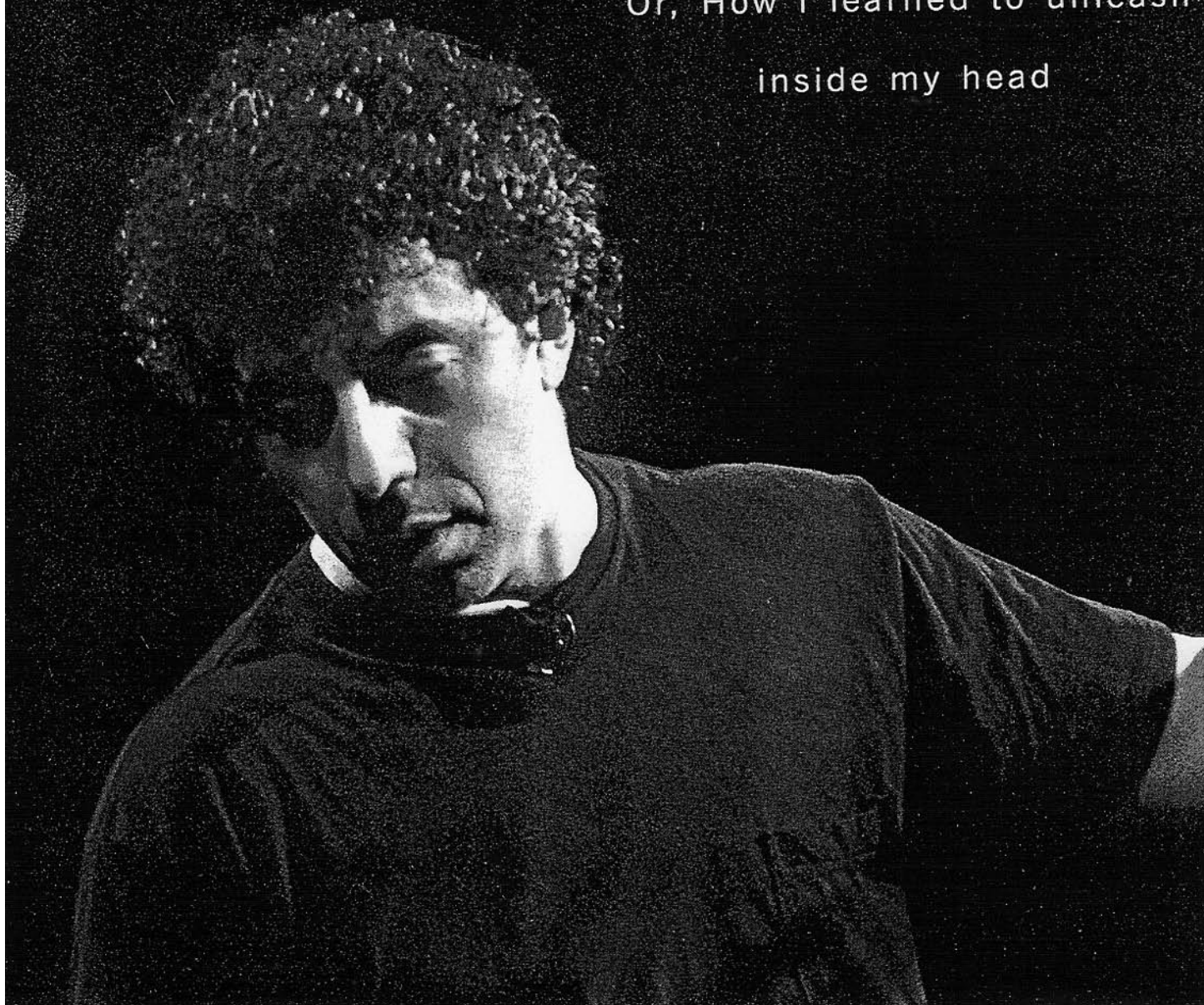
*I'm responsible to them [the audience] and they're responsible to me in that they have to participate the way I want them to participate. That's why I scream, "Wake the fuck up: you know, participate, challenge me. You wanna see how bad I am? Give me some shit. Throw something at me and we'll have a great time." I like that. I feel like I'm training audiences in the Bay Area to actively participate; to speak back. You can yell at me, I don't care. It's my characters. They can handle it. I want people to wake up. I want them to come and be a part of the experience of theatre. That's what the Greeks did. They came and said, eh, we're living in a piece of shit here, don't you think so? And the audience would say, "Yeah!" And they'd travel to another town. They had no Athens Chronicle, you know, so it was up to the actors to get information across, educate and entertain, which is what I want to do. I want people to take responsibility for themselves and not take anyone's word for what's going on.*




BY ERIC BOGOSIAN

# CUTTING LOOSE

Or, How I learned to unleash  
inside my head





multitude of characters

"Standing,  
moving, engaged":  
a scene from Eric  
Bogosian's 1994 solo piece  
*Pounding Nails in the Floor*  
with *My Forehead*.

PANJIA COURTE

In an epilogue to the sixth of Eric Bogosian's full-length solos, *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee* (published this month by TCG), the author describes how he first came to create the panoply of characters for which he has become widely known. Here is an excerpt from his account.

IN 1980 I WROTE AND PERFORMED A PIECE CALLED *Men Inside*. It wasn't "stand-up comedy" or a "showcase" or "performance art." It was a play for one person. I had no intention of ever making another like it. I couldn't have imagined that this initial exercise would morph into a series of solos that I (and others) would perform in venues across the United States and the world.

What happened was this: Around 1978—having arrived in New York three years earlier with a theatre degree, intending to work Off Broadway—I met the actor David Warrilow, a charter member of the Mabou Mines theatre company. He had the most perfect speaking voice, so I asked him for some actorly advice on how to improve mine. He told me to get a tape recorder, tape my voice and listen to the results.

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

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

I made more tapes. As these improvs mounted up, I decided to catalog the "people who live inside me." I sorted them out and came up with 12 distinct male archetypes, ranging from a threatening street punk to a redneck deer hunter to a little boy playing. All of these characters were the product of free-form vocal improv. I wasn't looking "out there" for characters, I was looking "inside."

This gallery of characters, this set of monologues, became *Men Inside*. I performed it first in 1980 at Franklin Furnace, a small loft space. Lots of people showed up and dug it. I performed it in a more polished version at the New York Shakespeare Festival. By then, I had become an exile from the traditional theatre, making performance pieces and performing them in lofts and back rooms. Other pieces featured a few actors spouting chunks of text, some taped voices and slides. I also wrote "plays" like *Sheer Heaven*, which was performed entirely in Spanish for English-speaking audiences. I had a nightclub act (*The Ricky Paul Show*) in which I played an obnoxious comedian who sang off-key and hurled insults at the audience.

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

I hung out at places like CBGB's, Max's, the Mudd Club and Hurrah's. I embraced a "punk" aesthetic. I liked the energy. Aggressive and loud. Antagonistic to the status quo, it didn't take itself too seriously; it liked to laugh. There was a new attitude in the music that said awkward was good; grotesque was fascinating. Punk was rough. It didn't smooth everything into lovely shapes; the chords were basic. I wanted to do the same thing with performance—make stuff that was straightforward, not precious, not effete.





Vintage Bogosian: The performer hones his "punk aesthetic" as an obnoxious comedian in the 1979 *The Ricky Paul Show*.



"My stuff was thought to be in poor taste or too violent or 'negative,'" says Bogosian. "I didn't c

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

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

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

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

**I WANT TO GET THEORETICAL HERE, AND DISCUSS ACTING and character and, ultimately, writing for the stage.**

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

What makes a character tick is fascinating because we are all characters in the way we see ourselves and in the way we see others. "Character" is our way of conceptualizing who we are. Character is what we create every time we interact with one another. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman says we learn how to *act* to be the people we are. "Acting" in day-to-day life is more than behaving—it is imitating; it

is constructing. When I am interacting with other people, I am consciously or unconsciously imitating the behavior of other people I've known. And to take it one step further, because I live in a world of mass media, I experience all sorts of people who are not only in my life but whom I "know" from movies or TV.

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

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

We all have little theatres in our respective heads. We make representations of people mentally and play out imaginary scenes with these imaginary people. From these mental exercises, we feel we can predict how someone (say, our mother or father) will behave, and we act accordingly. The interesting thing is that the mother in my head has just as much to do with the real person as she does with the way I think about her. People are conceptual.

The goal of the theatre artist is to take the imaginary "mother" and put her on stage in such a way that when other people

come to see the play, they see a mother they recognize. If an audience doesn't recognize what they see, then the play doesn't work. The audience sees things laid out in front of them and they compare the mechanisms of behavior (the acting, the behaving, the plot) to the way they think about them, as opposed to the way they "really" are, which is unknowable.

Theatre is powerful because it works in exact concordance with the way our heads work (not the way reality works). To quote Samuel Johnson (via Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*): "Imitations produce pain or pleasure not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind." The truthfulness of the theatre is determined by the audience. Theatre is consensus. And that consensus is a function of the characters who speak and act the way the characters in our collective head speak and act. In other words: archetypes. Success can only be measured by the ratio of what I (the artist) see, versus what the audience thinks they see. Marcel Duchamp, a great lover of science, suggested this ratio. He said the closer to one-to-one this ratio becomes, the greater the artist. But of course, no one can measure such a ratio.

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

**SO ENOUGH THEORY. HERE'S HOW I MAKE A SOLO. I START** with a tape recorder and an empty room. I work in a space where I'm completely isolated and no one can overhear me. And I make sure there's enough room to bounce around. When I'm alone, I can let go and fantasize without self-consciousness. I can improvise freely, become the character and let him loose. Self-consciousness ruins creativity. I turn on the tape recorder. I note the date and the piece I'm working on. Then I start.

Once I get a chunk of improv down, I review the tape and try to find the good parts, parts I like the sound of. I transcribe these. I keep collections of these transcriptions and revisit them later.

Then I select pieces from the transcription that I like, sample them and commit them to memory. I then use these segments as a launch pad for another improv. Then I start the process all over again. The final edited piece of monologue is maybe three minutes long, after hours of improvs.

Good things happen when I do it this way. First of all, when I'm speaking, I'm looser with language than when I write. There isn't as much editorializing going on. Second, the arc of the story of the finished monologue (and every monologue has a beginning, middle and an end) is not as predictable. This is the way people talk. They wander, they get interrupted, they think of ancillary ideas as they speak, they listen to the other person and react.

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

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

"Fuck you." "Fuck you!" "No, man, fuck you!" "You saying, 'Fuck you!' to me? Well fuck you!" "Come here and say that."  
"No, you come here." "I'll come there if you come here."  
"What, you're telling me what to do now? You think you're better than me?" "As a matter of fact I do, shithead." "Who you calling a 'shithead'? Fuck you!" Etc.

The trick with these improvs is not to aim for anything in particular. Not to try to make it funny or poignant. I just want to become the person and get into the situation and see what happens from there. The most important goal is to play and cut loose, to let the character speak for himself.

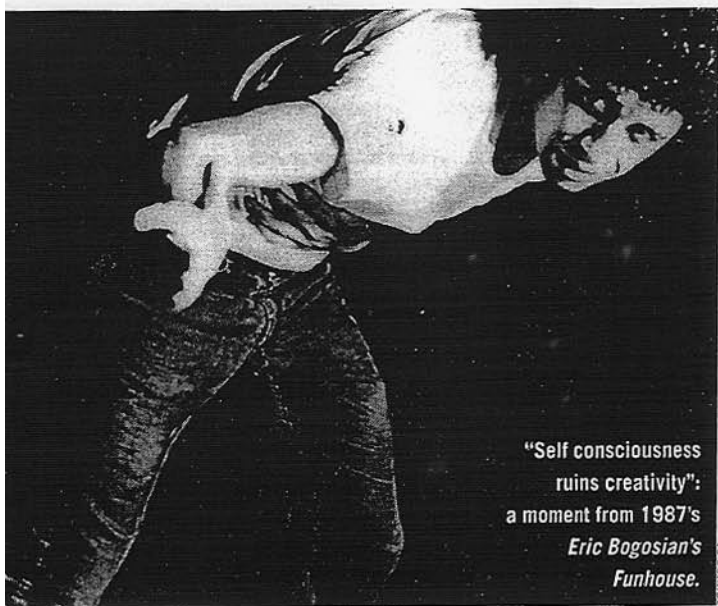
I move from the original to the final version through transcription, memorization, repeated rehearsals, discussions with my director Jo Bonney, live "workshop" performances and performances as part of the run, as well as touring. Every time I perform the piece, I look to see if its logic, tone, humor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

Another way into the character during the improv phase is to find a physical aspect of the character and work with that. The way a junkie lights a cigarette, for instance, nodding into the flame as he tries to puff—that can get me started. The way someone holds a beer bottle or a coffee cup. The way an old man might shuffle across a room.

The most powerful way into a character is by assuming a vocal stance. Not outward mimicry, because mimicry is hollow, but letting the vocal posture shape the improv from within. Try reciting "The Gettysburg Address" in a Minnie Mouse voice and you'll get the idea. The medium is the message.

Taking a piece of the character, a way of speaking or a posture, or a vocal intonation sets me on the path. From this beginning, the world of the character can be discovered and a story line can develop.

*continued on page 57*



"Self consciousness ruins creativity":  
a moment from 1987's  
Eric Bogosian's  
Funhouse.



**BEHAVIOR IN FRONT OF AN** audience is always performance, no matter who the audience is: a teacher addressing a class, a preacher preaching, a trainer running a gym class or a lunatic on the street. So I collect these natural situations for performance and use them to launch an improv. Public figures make great performances; public speeches are an easy way to work with themes. In my first show, I played a preacher giving a sermon on "Looking Out for Number One." He was enormously fun to play.

The New Age Guru in *Wake Up's* "Harmonious" does the same thing. This Guru, like many characters I play, says the opposite of what you'd expect. This is a writing device, akin to playing devil's advocate, that I use in a lot of what I do. I can't think of anything more boring than telling the audience what "I really think" because, in fact, I'm not sure myself. Likewise, I want my characters to be fresh. Playing against the grain of expectation is one way of doing this.

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

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

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

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

mime because I find mime (and costumes) distracting for an audience. I want the essence of the character, not the hat. I don't want the audience judging me on how well I mime driving a car.

Characters in my shows vary in how broad I play them. A broadly played character, played for laughs, very declaratory, is a "sketch" character, like what you might see on *Saturday Night Live*. But characters can also be so intense that they frighten the audience (because they are so believable). Or they can be so grounded, the audience forgets that they are watching an actor. I use all these approaches to acting, because they are all part of the world of pretending to be someone else. The only question I can't answer is: "What is good acting?"

Another monologue I do is called a rant. It's a direct, emphatic, not quite logical address to the audience with some

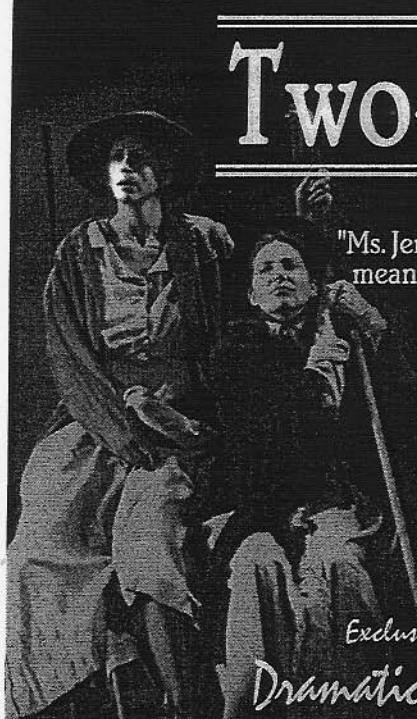
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Photo by Maria Miller. Common Ground Festival production. (l-r) Christine Dunford as Lavinia and Colette Kilroy as Hettie



sort of theme. Here, the character I'm playing is me. But, of course, once on stage, there's no such thing as "me": there's only character. I started doing stuff like this back when I did the *Ricky Paul Show*. I would go ballistic and rant about women, life in the city, injustice, etc. Later, I played with the rant as Barry in the play *Talk Radio*. In the "rant" mode, I discover voices of characters who live within me, not so much as archetypes, but as purified attitude. Usually this attitude is anger.

To improvise a character like this is almost like doing therapy because a hidden part of my personality is being

put before the audience. I'm exposing myself. Often I get there just by pacing back and forth in my studio, saying the first thing that comes to mind (and taping it). If I'm really honest, some interesting stuff can emerge.

ONCE I GET A PILE OF MONOLOGUES together, I begin to think about the order of the show. Like a play, the show must have a beginning, a middle and an end. Each show must have a certain urgency that makes the audience interested in what comes next. To this end, each monologue within a show is serving various purposes:

It's got to be worth watching in and of itself. In other words, if I were to do this piece without the rest of the show, is it an interesting piece of theatre? Does it have themes, humor, characterization and physicality that work, whether or not it fits into the larger context?

Does the piece connect to the overall theme? I don't care if the theme is obvious or not, or if it's meaningful only to me, but there has to be a connection.

How does the piece relate to the rhythm of the whole show? It's important to vary the pace of the show. I'm not going to do a really loud, maddened bit and follow it with another one just like it. And varying intensity and tempo is not just a matter of ups and downs. The intensity and tempo of a piece tell the audience where we are in the show.

Since the monologue's position in the show is relative to the structure of the show, does it build on what's come before it? It may act as an overture, a pause in the middle, comic relief, a summation or something else.

I might put irritating, offensive stuff pretty early in the show as a way of saying, "You're either with me or not," and "You wanna come along?" "Faith" in *Wake Up* works this way by presenting the audience with a garish account of Jesus' crucifixion:

...So, what happens? The old man in the sky, *Daddy*, took little Jesus, his son, nailed his skinny butt to a piece of wood in the middle of the desert so a bunch of jerk-offs could check him out like some kind of rotisserie chicken at the Safeway.

Later, I lighten up the mood with simpler material like "Harmonious," the send-up of the self-help Guru. In both cases, I am opening up themes that are important to the show (the arbitrary nature of God, the belief that money is everything), but it's *how* I open them up that lays out the parameters of the show. I keep the audience guessing: "Is this guy serious?" Behind all the characters, there is the character the audience

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is most curious about, Eric Bogosian.

Toward the end of the show, I will present the more complex pieces, when the accretion of what I'm saying has built into a large theme (and so eventually the whole show). Once I've got the audience following me down the "devil's advocate" path, I start throwing the bigger themes into the air and juggling them—ideas about ambition, hypocrisy and, ultimately, how alone and impotent I feel in the face of these conflicting urges. All of this doesn't have to add up to something as coherent as a thesis. I don't have to be making a particular point. I can, and do, simply meditate on a theme, or ask a question. In "Highway" at the end of *Wake Up*, I say that since there's nothing that anyone can do to make sense of the world, we might as well walk into the woods and die. (Do I believe any of this? A part of me does.)

I can't use all the material that I create in the improvs. I may like something that might not work in the context of the larger show. For me, characters are not static, set creations; they are more like quantum particle clouds of behavior, attitudes, statements. One character merges into the next. Characters are contrivances, synthesized from my mind and my imagination. There is no outside objective reality with which to compare them. Ultimately, a "good" character is the one who possesses the most force. So I will borrow and steal and experiment until I cobble together a character who has the most "truth." It's like each character is a small universe and must work according to his own laws of physics. I experiment, like Frankenstein, until I get the character who sits up and lives.

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

bination takes time and rehearsal. Live performance, trial and error, get the humor and pace right.

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

Verbal imagery is a matter of moving away from the predictable. I'm making pictures in the audience's mind with words. The right word or phrase conjures a mental image by being fresh and on the money. Often I find the right image in performance when I'm not thinking too hard about it.

I keep polishing with Jo in rehearsal. This is a matter of continuing to look at

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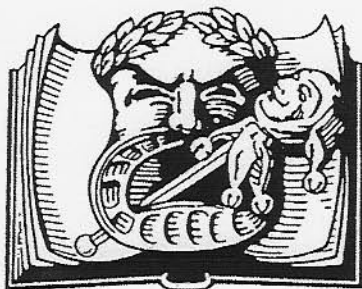
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Cutting Loose *continued from page 59*

the basic character I'm playing and asking fundamental questions that the initial improv may have missed. For instance: "What was this character doing 10 minutes ago?" "What is the character wearing, carrying?" "How old is this character, how does that affect his voice, posture?" "Are we outdoors? Is it warm? Cold?" And so on. These are almost standard acting class questions, but they work to jog my imagination, helping me find a new way to approach the material. Finally, there is just a question of rightness: what feels right and what feels wrong. This happens in rehearsal with the traditional use of blocking and gesture.

SO THAT'S IT. I DON'T THINK ANYONE can learn how to make another person's "art," but, hopefully, if you're someone who writes or performs or makes theatre in any way, maybe all this is helpful by simply revealing how one person gets from A to B to C.

At the end of the day, my work is about my taste or style as an artist. It is a function of the way I see things, and

so it's about the way I choose to act. Ultimately, it is an argument. The stronger the work, the more convincing my argument. What I make is unique to who I am. It is easy to believe that we are isolated within our skins, within the confines of the time span of our lives; that no one can extend beyond those boundaries. And yet, if an artist can make contact with another sensibility by conjuring his or her perspective on life, that is surely a form of transcendence.

Ultimately, there's no way to tell you how I actually find any particular arrangement of words, postures, themes, voices. It feels right or it doesn't. But I do look for the "right" arrangement, the configuration that best says what I have to say. And I do discard pieces if they don't feel right. Another way of looking at it is this: I put on stage what I would most like to see if I walked into the theatre. **AT**

*Eric Bogosian performs his new work, Humpty-Dumpty, at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, N.J., through April 14.*

In Medea Res *continued from page 25*

Having encountered both Jones's play and Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* at Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum, where he is currently an associate artist and the director of the Asian Theatre Workshop, Yew determined to stage them once he assumed the artistic leadership of Northwest in 2000. He notes that stressing the "outsider" aspect of the Medea figure does not mean rejecting gender politics. "No one can ever take away the feminist tones of this play," he says.

Certainly antipatriarchal strains ring out from Moraga's futuristic *The Hungry Woman*, whose lesbian heroine—a traditional healer—struggles to protect her teenage son amid the nightmarish chaos of a balkanized U.S. Pondering the myth, Moraga concluded that "there was a strong relationship between women's enslavement and infanticide." In other

words, Medea murders not because her no-goodnik husband spurns her, but, more broadly, because "in a society that doesn't allow wholeness for women, perverted acts take place." But the playwright's ideas about ethnic identity loom as large as feminism does in *Hungry Woman*, named for the supernatural being whose unappeasable appetite, according to Aztec mythology, brings the world into being. "We were told that, as gay people, we couldn't be a part of the Chicano community," Moraga says, recalling her own experience as a lesbian coming of age in the early '70s, "when the idea of Chicanos as a nation was very strong." Her play meditates on that specific experience of double alienation—sexual and ethnic—while broadening the scope toward more universal questions, such as "What we consider to be abnormal." ▶