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Final Thesis – Scars Build Character

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I began with these memories:

My sister called me a cow at dinner one night. I reached across the table to punch her in the face. She got a bloody nose.

My brother Troy wanted to be like the ‘big’ kids. He jumped off the dock into the lake. He drowned. I saved him.

I was rollerblading along the strand as my father ran. I wiped out--two bloody knees, banged up elbows, and a bump on my head. He kept running and told me to keep going because “scars build character.”

Instinctively I knew how much these experiences shaped me as an individual, and how what appears as a small childhood incident can alter the course of one’s life. Paolo Freire articulates, “No one leaves his or her world without having been transfixed by its roots, or with a vacuum for a soul. We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, a self-soaked in our history...our culture; a memory, sometimes scattered, sometimes sharp and clear, of the streets of our childhood, of our adolescence.”¹ These kind of root experiences ultimately inspired and drove my senior integrative project, a one-act play entitled *Scars Build Character*. The play unfolds at a three-course family dinner staged as a football game that is hosted by the eldest daughter, a character based on my experiences. As this character prepares and serves each course, we see her struggle to live up to her parents’ expectations and eventually learn to let go of their expectations as she serves the “perfect” dessert.

¹ *The Pedagogy of Hope*, New York, Continuum, 1994, p. 31.

Before I embarked on this yearlong experience, I asked myself whether I was prepared to expose my vulnerability as a human being by sharing my story. It was a difficult question with which to grapple, but I came to understand that in order for me to truly grow up and begin my life as an adult, I had to confront my past and reach a resolution. Thus I decided that this project would serve as a necessary rite of passage into adulthood. A rite of passage is defined as “a ritual associated with a crisis or a change of status (as marriage, illness, or death) for an individual.”² I had always believed that the major crisis in my life was my parent’s divorce and believed that enduring that crisis would change me from a child to an adult. However, ten years passed after the divorce and I often still felt like a child—struggling to be perfect, to understand who I was, to become someone I thought everyone expected me to be, to forgive my parents, and to be happy. I realized the crisis was not simply the divorce, but rather how I responded to the animosity, rupture, and pain that surrounded the event. I still had that desire to have a sense of family, however fractured it would become. Thus the performance was inspired from my responses to, and perspectives of, the event in which I had to revisit both painful and happy memories to obtain the necessary material to write a play.

Thus the writing began. I wrote and wrote about my experiences with my family. I purged emotions, experiences, and questions onto endless pages of paper. I turned to the teachings of Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, in which she wrote that in order to get good material I had to put everything on paper and later return to my writing to determine what to include and what to exclude in the final script. I let go of the fear that my story would be boring because it was not a universal experience, but rather my own individual

² *Merriam Webster Dictionary*

experience. I let the words take me where they would, and soon some surprising revelations came out. I reflected on my writing and noted recurring images, words, and themes: abandonment, teatime, responsibility, kitchen, win, football, disappointment, failure, success, struggle, father, boil. I found myself returning to experiences that revolved around cooking, eating, mealtime, and sports. In my family, the dining room table was a space where no matter what happened, at the end of the day, blood was thicker than water, and we had to come together to share our stories as we shared our food. In thinking about how to apply these experiences to my performance, I utilized both the rituals involved in meal and food preparation along with the concept of athletic prowess, as vehicles to explore the themes that were hidden within my family: what is said and what remains unsaid, what is expressed in patterns of trust and mistrust, and ultimately the way our lives are woven together to make a family function and dysfunction.

I am an athlete, an artist, a cook, a writer, a performer, a leader, a daughter, and a sister. In each of these roles I play, there are particular behaviors I must perform. As an athlete, I must compete. As a daughter, I must obey. As an artist, I must create. As a chef, I must cook. In thinking about these behaviors, I explored where they intersected and then synthesized the varying actions to bring a narrative to life. In the play, I fused athletics and cooking as a way to portray the rather complicated relationship between my father and me. Athletics have been a source of both connection and conflict with my father, and thus cooking became the analogy through which I addressed our relationship.

While researching my own life, I also turned to other artists whose work was autobiographical. Specifically, I was drawn to both Ruth Reichl's *Tender at the Bone* and

M. F. K. Fisher's *The Art of Eating* because they both use food and cooking to explore the intricate relationships with their mothers, fathers, and other extended family members. I loved how the trials of the kitchen were used as metaphors for the trials in each of their lives. In my writing, I looked more closely at how I could use food and the rituals that have evolved around cooking and eating to explain the relationships within my family. I experimented with this notion by writing a series of vignettes that objectified each family member as a particular kitchen utensil. For example, I became my father's cast iron skillet -- the first kitchen item he purchased after my mother left him. He has never washed it, and he cooks everything he eats in this skillet. My mother became a teakettle because sometimes the water is cold and sometimes it is boiling. When the water boils, it screeches, suggesting that it has figuratively lost its temper. Thus the characteristics of inanimate kitchen objects represented the behaviors and personalities of the characters within the play.

I was further influenced by Ellen Duckenfield's solo performance, *The Ideal Recipe*. In this performance, she portrays a woman who is obsessed with feeding people telling her personal story through her own living recipe book, in which the performance ends in a feast of food. Duckenfield's story meanders through her family's political roots, her middle-class upbringing, and the contrasts of growing up in the U. K. of Margaret Thatcher's era.³ Yet what makes the performance so engaging is how the actions of her cooking (chopping onions, kneading bread, whisking eggs) correspond to the story she tells. In a similar manner, I used physical actions in the kitchen as metaphors to root the language of the script in the physical world. This concept led me to look closely at the

³ <http://ellenduckenfield.com/>

master of live cooking, Julia Child. In her series *The French Chef*, each action she performs--whether it is de boning a giant monkfish or carving a roasted turkey -- suggests more than simple, didactic instruction. Greater underlying emotion can be revealed when paired with a particular narrative. As I prepare the traditional Pavlova New Zealand dessert during the final scene of the play, I use the actions of separating the egg whites, chopping the strawberries, pouring in the cornstarch, vinegar, and vanilla to convey the confrontation, acceptance, and forgiveness that unfolded in the scene between the daughter and the father. The actions convey the emotions that words could not. I deliberately chose particular actions to be sloppy, e.g. throwing eggshells on the table, ignoring specific measuring utensils, licking my fingers, leaving the hairy skin on kiwi fruit, and taking bites out of the strawberries to further portray that I do not have to be perfect to be accepted by my family.

In reaction to the traditional Julia Child style of live cooking, I also looked at Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* for inspiration. In her performance, Rosler presents a variety of cooking utensils, each of which she names and demonstrates, but in a way that departs from the normal uses of the tool. Her body language is quite jarring as she demonstrates unproductive and violent ways to use the instruments. I also considered closely how to manipulate particular kitchen actions to convey the complicated and contradictory relationships that exist within my family, specifically the relationship between me and my father. The first gesture of the final scene is one in which I pick up a huge butcher knife and begin to play with it as if it were a doll, thus revealing to the audience the contradiction that lies between the daughter and father's double-edged relationship.

Finally, I turned to several contemporary plays to understand how to adapt a written story to a live performance. Most significantly, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* provided inspiration for how to incorporate common themes and issues that occur in a

family. In the play, Wilder emphasizes the archetypes and stereotypes of family roles (father, mother, daughter, and son) by initially focusing on the routine and mundane necessities of daily life, using these intimate daily habits to examine the life of a real American family. Similarly, I used the habitual behaviors that occur around a dinner table to suggest to the audience that although the father, mother, daughter, and son on stage are not their own, the characters display similar behaviors and relations to the audience's mother, father, daughter, and son.

I used the narrator in my play in a manner similar to the narrator in Wilder's work. Wilder's narrator provides a third-person perspective in which he analyzes the story directly for the audience. In my play, the narrator as sportscaster uses the same kind of analytical dissection of my family story that Wilder's narrator does to the town, but using the analogy of a football game to make his commentary. Both narrators can feel disturbing to the audience as they began to analyze both my family and the town people as specimens being closely observed, as if in a laboratory. Throughout my play, the narrator makes commentary on both the dialogue and the physical actions of the family members to really extenuate the absurdity of their behaviors. Finally, *Our Town* is divided into three acts that are organized around rites of passage: Act 1: daily life, Act 2: love and marriage, and Act 3: life and death. Similarly, my play is divided into three scenes that portray a particular phase in the eldest daughter's life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The play concludes as the main character, the eldest daughter, transitions into adulthood.

I reached a point during this auto-ethnography research when I had accumulated enough ideas and text. I needed to refine what I wanted to say with this material and to

determine what medium was best suited to convey these stories. I began experimenting. Staying in the realm of cooking and dining themes, I embroidered stories about my family on fabric, a medium suggesting domesticity. I made a series of ten napkins. However, these napkins did not achieve the intimate connection and emotional response I was aiming for. Next, I built a dining room installation to host my embroidery. The installation *Remnants: Four Children* represented my family in a ruptured single-parent state. The text on the napkins selected for the piece dealt specifically with my relationship with my mother during this period, as she raised four children after leaving my father. The piece did not try to show the dynamics of my entire family, and it therefore failed to give the viewer an intimate or comprehensive understanding of my family experience. Thus I returned to performance as the preferred medium to convey my story. In a trial live performance at Off-the-Wall Cabaret in October 2007, I presented a family slide show in which the pictures were actually blank and my stories served as the photographs. The success of the cabaret performance confirmed that I would continue to work in the live performance medium to most accurately communicate the interweaving of family for which I was aiming.

So here I arrived. I wrote, directed, produced, and acted in *Scars Build Character*. The play takes place over one family dinner in which the three courses of the meal correspond to the three stages of my life— a kind of parallel to the triptych altarpieces of Matthias Grünewald, Hieronymus Bosch, and Jan van Eyck that display the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. The appetizer of the meal represents my birth and childhood. The main course represents my adolescence and the end of my childish behaviors. Finally, my adulthood and resurrection are the dessert, the transformation

where I decide to accept who I am, separate from my parents' expectations. The play opens as the narrator as sportscaster introduces the characters of the play (my family members) as the starting line-up of the evening's dinner, comparing the spectacle of a family dinner to a football game. The first scene shows the family in what initially appears to be a peaceful and idealized state, enjoying a typical family dinner. As the first course progresses, subtle tensions develop between the mother and father, between the two sisters, and between the father and son, foreshadowing the eventual rupture of the first family state. The family is visually broken down on stage as each character departs, one by one, leaving the eldest daughter alone to reflect upon and respond to the crisis at hand.

In the second scene, the eldest daughter is confronted with the reality that her family is not ideal and is in fact dysfunctional. She refuses to give up and finishes the dinner. In a state of confusion and frustration, the eldest daughter performs a monologue as she plays with a water polo ball. The ball acts as an additional vehicle to express the emotions while the words are spoken. The monologue is inspired by Anna Deveare Smith's piece *Twilight*, in which she describes the LA Riots by combining multiple perspectives into one monologue. In my play, the daughter's monologue is a synthesis of her own thoughts, her mother's thoughts, her father's thoughts, and her sibling's thoughts, in which she physically becomes each character as she speaks their thoughts.

The play concludes with the dessert course as the daughter's rite of passage to adulthood becomes complete. The third scene opens as the family members return on stage, carrying the necessary ingredients for the eldest daughter to make the dessert. The entrances symbolize that there still exists a sense of family, even though it is fractured.

As soon as the family members have delivered the ingredients, the eldest daughter starts to prepare her father's favorite dessert, Pavlova, and once again the family leaves her alone, but this time in order that she may find resolution with herself. She begins to make the Pavlova, while her father's disembodied voice begins an inspirational, achieve your best in life, "go for the gold" kind of speech. The daughter responds to the speech using a language parallel to her father's, but delivering her own version of the speech. The scene ends as she finishes a beautiful Pavlova dessert. By completing a perfect Pavlova, the play infers a resolution to the struggle with both her father and her Self.

I iterated several versions of the performance before reaching the final version. I first noticed that these different stages in my life (birth, adolescence, adult) coincided with major shifts in my family structure. This was why I first envisioned the dinner as a three-course meal in which each course corresponded to the changing states of my family: the idealized two-parent family, the ruptured single-parent family, and the blended, remarried families. In each course (family state), the table setting would change its size in response to the changing number of characters that left and joined. I also considered holding a series of small viewings in which I would only invite six guests. These six guests would receive six different scripts in which they would be cast as the six members of my family. I would be cooking, serving, and participating in the dinner as the narrator of the piece. I even considered constructing an installation space in which the narrative would take place as an audio recording that would be triggered by the viewer's physical interaction with objects in the dining room space. I worked with Michael Rodemer to develop programming that played the audio portion when a person sat in each dining room chair. While these ideas were all compelling, in the end I realized that

all of the aspects of *Scars Build Character* – the writing, the directing, the producing, and the acting – were a necessary challenge that I wanted to undertake.

As I end my final year at Michigan, I see that the long hours in the studio and rehearsal rooms, sitting at my computer writing, meetings with professors, discussion with peers, experimental trial and errors, the frustration with deciding what to do, not knowing how my family would respond to the final piece, the fear of actually confronting myself really changed me, were all necessary parts of a painful and joyful creative process. This process will forever leave an indent on my character, and as my father has always told me, scars build character.

Wesley Ellison
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