

Spring 5-15-2015

Never Getting Back: Creating the Title Role in Rajiv Joseph's Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

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Never Getting Back:
Creating The Title Role In Rajiv Joseph's
Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film and Theatre
Performance

by

John Neisler

B.F.A. Boston University 1989

May, 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am grateful for the guidance of the faculty and instructors at the University of New Orleans Department of Film and Theatre, including but not limited to David W. Hoover, Henry Griffin, Diane Baas, Kevin Griffith, James Yeargain, Mike Harkins, and Anthony French. The insight, wisdom and support of my fellow graduate student Sam Malone was invaluable and will always be remembered. I was privileged to work with, and learn from, my fellow students, both graduate and undergraduate. Special thanks must go to my endlessly patient and supportive wife, Wendy Miklovic Neisler.

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis documents my rehearsal and performance of the role of Tiger in Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, including research, character analysis, role development, rehearsal journal, and an evaluation of my performance. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was produced by the UNO Department of Film and Theatre, under the direction of David W. Hoover. The play was performed at the Robert E. Nims Theatre of the Performing Arts October 2 - 4, 9 - 11 at 7:30pm, and October 12, 2014 at 2:30pm.

The play was performed at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region 6 in San Angelo TX, February 23, 2015 at 8pm, February 24 at 11am and 8pm. It was awarded the Director's Choice Trophy, receiving awards for Distinguished Director (David W. Hoover), Lighting Design (Diane Baas), Scenic Design (Kevin Griffith), and Actor in a Principal Role (John Neisler).

Theatre; Acting; Performance

RESEARCH

Accessing research materials about Rajiv Joseph has proven more challenging than I initially imagined. He is a relatively young playwright whose work has attracted attention only in the last five or six years, so printed materials regarding Joseph and his work are scant compared to more established playwrights. Online sources, including articles, reviews, and video were both necessary and invaluable in this research.

The Playwright

Rajiv Joseph credits three years in Senegal as part of the Peace Corps with his development as a writer, saying the loneliness caused by his poor language skills pushed him to keep a regular journal, a habit he keeps to the present day (D'Souza). Born and raised in Ohio, he graduated from Miami of Ohio in 1996 with a BA in Creative Writing (Monji). The child of a mixed marriage (his mother is an American of French and German heritage, his father was born in India), he credits his mixed race status with his fearlessness when exploring matters of race: "Being mixed-race has always been a part of my identity. You are never fully one thing or the other. You always feel a little apart, a little bit of an outsider, even when you are with your own family. That's an interesting perspective for looking at the world." (D'Souza)

His first full length play, *Huck and Holden*, premiered at Cherry Lane Theatre in Manhattan in 2005. The play is based on his father's experiences as an Indian college student in America (Monji). His next major work, *Animals Out of Paper*, opened at Second Stage Theatre in 2008, and has been produced multiple times around the United States. Its plot, about an origamist facing an existential crisis, is less interesting than its

themes: “the fragility of happiness, the tragedy of impulsiveness and the tenuousness of hope” (Gates). One image stands out: “A piece of paper, once folded, is never the same again, that it has memory. Eventually it “probably feels like too many things have happened to it. “It’s all twisted in something so far from what it used to be...folds leave scars” (Gates). This theme of self-alteration and its consequences is explored further in *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, a play Joseph says asks the question, “Why do we hurt ourselves to gain someone else’s love?” *Gruesome Playground Injuries* premiered in 2009 at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas (Joseph, “Theatre 502: Gruesome Playground Injuries”).

The Play

Set in the early days of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the plot of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, Rajiv Joseph’s Pulitzer-nominated play, concerns the intertwined lives of a caged Tiger, killed by one soldier after biting off another’s hand, and an Iraqi translator tormented by the ghost of Uday Hussein, who murdered his sister and for whom he used to sculpt exquisite topiary. The play begins at the zoo, the Tiger, played by a human walking upright (the playwright has defined the character as “the soul of a Tiger” (Joseph, “Charley Rose”), lamenting his captivity and jealously mocking the lions, whose glorious escape was quickly followed by a hapless death. Two American Marines, Tom, an African-American veteran who was present at the deaths of the Hussein brothers Uday and Qusay, and Kev, an eager and unseasoned grunt, complain about their duty station at the zoo. Kev is enraptured by Tom’s gold handgun, looted

from the Hussein palace. When Tom foolishly sticks his hand into the hungry Tiger's cage, the Tiger promptly bites it off, and Kev responds by shooting the Tiger dead with the golden gun. The ghostly Tiger, cursing his own stupidity, prowls the afterlife, still consigned to burning Baghdad, and contemplates his existence.

In the second scene, Kev meets Musa, an Iraqi working as a translator for the American forces, and shows him the gold gun, startling Musa, who recognizes it as the property of his old employer, the demented and cruel Uday Hussein, son of Saddam. Uday had brutalized and murdered Musa's sister Hadia, the hapless topiary artist powerless to stop him or to avenge her. When Kev and Musa go on a night patrol in Scene 3 and Kev's erratic behavior terrorizes an Iraqi man and woman in their home, Kev becomes unhinged by the vision of the Tiger's ghost, Musa placates the crazed soldier, retrieving the gold gun in the process. The Tiger in Scene 4, tells the audience of his existential angst in the afterlife, and wonders what he's doing stuck in Baghdad and how he can escape. Now under psychiatric observation, Kev is visited by Tom in Scene 5, who shows him his brand new hand ("I'm like Robocop") and demands the return of his gun, threatening to kill Kev if he does not return it. At the end of his rope, Kev is tormented by the Tiger who chatters about his own cosmic culpability, eventually driving Kev to cut off his own hand, dying in the process. Musa, alone with the gold gun, is visited by the ghost of Uday, who even in death torments his former employee.

Act Two begins with the Tiger, who tells the audience of an encounter with a little girl whose wonder at the topiary leads Tiger to posit that the garden was the work of God himself, an idea the Tiger comes to believe true. Desperate to escape the Baghdad

afterlife just as he longed to escape the cage at the zoo, Tiger demands the absent God speak to him. In Scene 8, Tom drags Musa to visit a prostitute, who is bemused by Tom's request for help of a sexual nature, his new hand having compromised his old routine. Tom is haunted by the ghost of Kev, who is in turn haunted by the Tiger, all of them scrambling to cope with their realities. Tom learns Musa has "his" gold gun, and they agree to an exchange, the gold gun for weapons for Musa, who will use them as leverage in post-invasion Iraq. Scene 9 finds ghostly Kev calling out to God, only to be interrupted by Tiger, who has now rejected any hope of placating the deity and embraced his animal nature. In Scene 10, Tom leads Musa to a destroyed leper colony in the desert, hoping to retrieve his gold toilet seat. When an enraged Musa learns his promised reward is not forthcoming he shoots Tom with the gold gun, leaving him with a solitary leper who, with ghost Kev, eases Tom's passage into death. The last scene finds Musa, marveling at his transformation from artist to murderer, cheered on by the ghost of Uday, who promises him endless torment. The Tiger comes upon Musa alone and, mistaking him for God himself, appeals to him for help, if not for himself then for the little girl who wondered at his creations. Rejected by Musa, Tiger rails against God, embracing the only path he knows, the hunting and killing that is not only in his soul, but rages all around him.

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo was first produced at the Kirk Douglas Theater in May, 2009. Critical reaction was positive. Laurence Vittes of *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote online on 18 May, 2009:

The writing is beautiful, the bilingual acting is strong and moving, the pacing is taught and thrilling, and the outcome is as dark as night (Vittes).

When the production moved to the Mark Taper Forum in October 2010, the same critic had objections to some changes to the script:

The first part of "*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*" seems more polished, but the second remains unresolved. It's the same cast and crew playing the same roles, so the difference probably lies in the script. The shift away from claustrophobic, hurtful, funny absurdity, accompanied by vaguely PC concern for the U.S. Marines ... begins with a new monologue for ...Tiger at the top of Act 2 in which the atheistic philosopher turns 180 degrees into a searcher for God. No wonder the play winds up less bitter than before (Vittes, 14 Oct, 2010).

Other critics were enthusiastic, like Charles McNulty of the Los Angeles Times, who wrote online on 26 April 2010:

The sweeping boldness of vision, bringing together cultures, species and even the living and the dead, is thrilling in its own right. ...Like

all good playwrights, Joseph thinks out the meaning of his play in fearless theatrical metaphors. A leper woman whose colony has been bombed has been charged with guarding the gold Hussein toilet seat that Tom considers an annuity for his tour of hell. An Iraqi prostitute tries to understand the request of a soldier whose sexual needs have changed since he got a prosthetic hand. A tiger contemplates vegetarianism as a way out the predatory cycle he's locked into (McNulty).

The play's Broadway premiere March 31, 2011 was well received:

Violence is not after all the only human activity that can have far-reaching, unforeseen effects, shaping lives far into the future. Mr. Joseph's richly conceived play reminds us that art can have a powerful afterlife too (Isherwood).

CREATING THE ROLE

Character Analysis

I was informed in late July 2014 that I would be playing the role of Tiger in the first week of October. I was unfamiliar with the play. My reaction to a first reading was lukewarm at best; Joseph's play seemed rambling, unfocused, a messy screed about war

and an absent God. I'm old enough to know my preferences in theatre stories are traditional; I'm suspicious of more adventurous work because I suspect a rejection of clear characterization and structure is merely the dodge lazy thinkers use to hide their lack of vision behind a mask of rebellion. I am also old enough to know I am frequently wrong in this assessment, but *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* did not initially impress me. The story of two soldiers who kill a tiger, one losing his hand, the other committing suicide, interacting with an Iraqi translator, all with a tortured past none could escape repeating, seemed empty of hope and offered no larger reasons for the chaos of its world; even its mercurial God was a speculative figure who may or may not be to blame. I was unmoved by the play because it offered no answers to the problems of its world, it could not therefore help me to improve myself in mine, and, as Stanislavski said, "Unless the theatre can ennoble you, make you a better person, you should flee from it."

Further, the role I was assigned, the Tiger, seemed poorly written, with speeches to the audience that consisted of vague rantings to God, stories about little girls who never appeared in the play, and meandering philosophical speculation, all of which was only indirectly connected to the action of the play. He seemed superfluous; his interaction with other characters was spotty and he did little to advance the plot.

This initial assessment of the play changed with time.

A consistent idea running through *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* is repetition, and it appropriately recurs many times in the play: "I am tired of making the same mistake over and over again," says Musa (56), and his tormentor Uday mocks the Americans, who foolishly believe "when things die, they go away." (37) In scene 8, Tiger

laments his inability to escape the cruelty that echoes all around him, and wonders if he is “just an echo -- repeating and repeating and repeating.” (52) Musa welcomes Hadia into his garden three times in scenes 8 and 11, though he knows she will be murdered by Uday.

Other ideas explored through repetition include chaos, an unapologetically inconsistent picture of the universe that Joseph creates onstage. There are no rules, he suggests, or if there are, they are unfathomable to us. Inconsistency abounds here: the ghostly Tiger is visible to the man who shot him, which makes a kind of sense, but Tiger is also visible to Musa in Scene 11, though not in Scene 3. In Scene 8, Tom asks the ghost Kev why he can be seen not only by Tom, but by the Leper, to which Kev replies, “Dude, I don’t know all the fucking rules, okay?” (62) Tiger tries to make sense of a universe where none apparently exists. He struggles to understand the conditions the absent God has placed on his redemption, deciding he is being punished by God and must find a way to atone, when the supposed “God” has done nothing to suggest this is so. When he fails to reshape himself into the pleasing shape he thinks God requires, he is embittered, but in fact nothing in Joseph’s play says God wants anything at all.

I’m reluctant to ascribe a theme to the play, but if pressed, I venture it is something like, “If God is real, He’s got some serious explaining to do.”

Though some online critics view *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* as a “war play” (Vittes, 26 April 2010), the war is basically over by the start of the play. Joseph describes his universe as one in which we are trapped in repeating patterns of chaos, but this is

independent of the slightly more organized cruelty of war. The universal condition is simply cruelty and chaos.

A final notion Joseph's *Bengal Tiger* presents is appropriately biblical: the Garden of Eden. Musa's creation, the topiary garden, is presented as "God's garden" by the Tiger (40), a place of wonder for him and the little girl he describes in Scene 7, as well as Musa's sister Hadia, whose fascination with the place puts her within reach of the serpent Uday, who kills her. Now a ruin, the garden still draws Tiger, who hopes for God's help to escape the burning city to which he's consigned. He dreams of an idealized home (33), but by the end of the play he -- and we -- know he is never getting back.

Embracing the play as post-modern gave me some insight into ways to animate the character.

POSTMODERNISM

Post-modern theatre is relatively new, arising from mid-twentieth century philosophical ideas advanced by Martin Heidegger, among others. Heidegger advocated a return to pre-Platonic questioning, essentially a willingness to eliminate structure and live in Das-ein (Being or existence), and an awareness of one's aloneness in the universe balanced by caring for one's immediate surroundings. (Childers and Hentzi 70) In theatre, postmodernism means a play shouldn't so much offer answers as spark questions, creating a reality that is often natural and recognizable but contains obviously theatrical elements. A well-known precursor to post-modernism in theatre is Samuel Beckett's absurdist classic *Waiting for Godot*. *Bengal Tiger* is post-modern because it uses clearly

theatrical constructs (ghosts, walking tigers) to create a world in which there are no easy answers for the characters, or the audience.

From a performance point of view, understanding Joseph's play began for me with a practical question: who is the protagonist? The titular Tiger would seem a logical choice; he's a quasi-narrator who talks to the audience, he is on a journey of sorts to navigate the afterlife, and he has a significant amount of stage time. Also, Robin Williams played him on Broadway!

Ultimately though, a common test of a protagonist is how much he changes from the beginning of the play to the end: does he go from ignorance to knowledge? There, Tiger falters. He learns a great deal of information in the play, it's true, but he ends by appearing to embrace his initial world-view: life is hunting, killing, and that is all. What he learns about the world doesn't change him. Musa the translator, on the other hand, goes on a journey that not only includes a great deal of new information about himself and the world, but by the end has turned him into — as he himself says — “a different man” (68). Musa is the protagonist of *Bengal Tiger*.

What then is Tiger's function in the play? He appears to fill several roles: a narrator who addresses the audience to hash out the larger themes of God's presence or absence; a Dante-esque host who walks us through the afterlife; a symbol of the primordial instinct for violence that lurks within all men; a hapless eternal prisoner; and a rootless Everyman in a cruel world. He can even be seen as an echo of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. I struggled throughout the process to determine which

of these Joseph thinks most important to convey, and which I valued in my performance. In short, I was at a loss to know how to play the role. So I watched Robin Williams do it. Conventional wisdom holds that watching another actor perform your role is risky because one may consciously or unconsciously imitate that actor rather than find one's own interpretation, but I was at loss to understand how one might play the Tiger. Additionally, I remembered T.S. Eliot's quote, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Surely true of actors as well. Williams, the famous comic actor, had played Tiger on Broadway in 2011, replacing Kevin Tighe, who originated the role in Los Angeles the previous year (King). Short clips of Williams's performance were available online (Williams, "Show Clips"). William's Tiger was a mostly static figure, delivering lines in scenes and monologues without great body tension or truly visceral physical movement. It was a relaxed performance, a talking head. Entertaining, to be sure, it contained in muted form the comic delivery for which he was justly famous. Within a week of my initial viewing of his performance, Williams committed suicide. I admit to wrestling for a brief time with the temptation to make my performance an homage of sorts to the actor. This urge, of course, passed, but throughout the process I was cheered, in times of befuddlement at the play's endless layers, by recalling Williams's simple assessment of *Bengal Tiger* as "a heavily armed Our Town" (Williams, "Charley Rose").

Other performers who have played Tiger are present in online video; their performances were also physically static and, surprisingly, emotionally removed. These Tigers were watchers, philosophers, reporters. Their passion appeared more rhetorical than visceral. This approach was not attractive to me. Joseph says in the character

descriptions in *Bengal Tiger* that Tiger should not be played as an actual Tiger with feline qualities (5), but I was attracted to the idea that there was something elemental to him, that his body moved in ways that were human, but more viscerally so. Yes, the lines show us an expanding neocortical consciousness, but there would be a lot of limbic brain in my Tiger.

Over the course of rehearsals, I became most comfortable with the idea of Tiger as Everyman, the living embodiment of man's questioning nature, his confusion, his desire for communion — with God or *someone* — and his awareness of his isolation. Looking at his relationships to the other major characters makes clear his connections both to them and to the major themes of the play.

MUSA

Tiger meets Musa only at the end of the play, almost prostrating himself before the supposed deity. Previously they speak some of the same ideas, nearly echoing each other's lines. In Scene 7, Tiger tells the story of a little girl who he brings to see "God's" garden, saying of the topiary, "She's never seen anything like them." (41). A few pages later, Musa tells his sister the same thing. (50) In Scene 9, Tiger taunts Kev, telling him God's missive to mankind is, "Go fuck yourself." Again, one scene later, Musa taunts Tom with a "Go fuck yourself, Johnny." In the play's final scene, when Tiger confuses Musa with God, is rebuked and left ultimately alone, he reverts to his primal nature, the only thing that still makes any sense.

KEV

In an act of pointless bravado, Kev shoots Tiger in Scene 1, killing him. Both ghostly seekers, Tiger haunts Kev before and after Kev's death, trying out the questions his post-mortem knowledge has sparked. He does not select Kev as a confidant and sounding-board; in this universe without rules it simply happens that Kev is one of very few people who can hear Tiger. In Scene 9, a recidivist Tiger taunts Kev for his adherence to the path of questioning that Tiger himself had earlier embraced. Kev's appeal to God to give him one sign he's being heard echoes Tiger's similar demand two scenes earlier.

TOM

Tiger uses Tom to illustrate his own stupidity: when Tom reaches his hand in to the cage, Tiger remarks, "This is what I'm talking about. Pure stupidity." (12) The characters are similar: by the end of the play, the acquisitive American's life is destroyed by his fundamental drive for money, just as Tiger's is destroyed by his fundamental drive for food.

UDAY

A fellow ghost, Uday could play the Devil to Musa's God. For Tiger, he is a vision of cruelty; seeing him in the "Garden of God," Tiger says, "But cruelty echoes all around me." (52) Tiger's connection to Uday is through Musa.

HADIA

When in Scene 7 Tiger relates the story of the little girl he met and brought to see the topiary garden, he is echoing Hadia's ill-fated walk through the same shrubs.

Ultimately this play is not chiefly about war. War is an important given circumstance of the play, but only as it describes the basic chaos of life itself. If Joseph has a point about war, it's that it is intrinsic to our cruel nature. If, as I believe, the Tiger is the archetypal Everyman, then the play can be seen as a longing to return to a home, a place of peace, that it is impossible to reach, and the desires we substitute for this impossible goal — gold, meat, sex — are ruinous distractions that ultimately lead to more destruction than solace.

In creating the role of Tiger, I was keenly interested to expand my movement range to incorporate a fuller, more physical performance. To that end, I had hoped to enlist the help of James Yeargain, UNO instructor of movement whose class I was taking. Ultimately, scheduling and the abbreviated rehearsal process truncated our work together on the piece, but I gleaned several useful concepts from his class.

Tadashi Suzuki's movement method leans heavily on his background in Japanese theatre but is popular in actor training schools in the U.S. It places emphasis on the lower body and grounded movement in order to provide a foundation for a wide range of movement choices. His emphasis on very grounded feet resonated with my impression of a tiger's gait, and I wished to make sure my own feet were planted firmly on stage throughout the performance. I went so far as to request replacing the sandals of the original costume concept with heavy boots to help achieve this goal.

In movement class with Yeargain I discovered a very human slashing motion that could also be read as a tiger's claws ripping through air, which I employed at one point in the Scene 7 monologue to underscore a moment of victory for Tiger (41). Yeargain stressed the utility of varied movement speeds, which I used several times in the show, deliberately slowing my movements, first by slowly wrapping my hands around the cage bars to underscore the line, "When you're this far from home, you know you're never getting back" in Scene 1, as well as a slow drop to a squat in Scene 8, when Tiger regards the plants he seeks to become.

I also gleaned a great deal of general knowledge on the essence of performance from the book "The Invisible Actor," by Yoshi Oida. Oida, a Japanese actor who has performed for decades with Peter Brook's International Center for Theatre Research, offers a vision of performance that is both deeply personal and rigorously disciplined. I did not come close to this ideal, but found it a worthy goal.

The set itself, designed by Kevin Griffith, provided an important element for the performance. Upstage, a scattered group of "blast walls", ranging from 9 to 16 feet high,

loomed over the world. An overturned wall at down stage center was a central location for much of the action. The actors christened it “Pride Rock”. This was the location of some of Tiger’s important moments during monologues. To me, the effect of this configuration was reminiscent of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Ozymandias:” “Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.” (Shelley 100) Blast walls are used in war zones; our show’s walls echoed a version called Bremer walls or T-walls, which were used in Baghdad during the post-war period to protect citizens and soldiers from the effect of explosions (Giordano and Morin), but their looming, monolithic presence is anything but comforting.

The stage floor was scattered with shredded rubber tires, to mimic debris from explosions. This created an initial concern about the possibility of actors slipping and falling, but we grew accustomed to navigating the debris, and the effect was ultimately beneficial: we couldn’t trust the ground under our feet, which in a sense was true of the characters we played.

The lights offered me a particularly useful item: a follow spot, on Tiger for the entire show after his death. I decided that this implied the eye of a watchful, judgmental God. It was particularly pleasant to scream at it.

The costume for Tiger was simple, as befits an Everyman character: sandy-colored pants, shirt and vest in a shabby state. The boots I requested were provided, and helped to anchor me as the character in the way I had hoped.

REHEARSAL JOURNAL

What follows is an account of my observations while rehearsing and performing the role. It was written not so much as a document for presentation but a resource for this actor while in the middle of the process. It was useful to refer to these entries during subsequent rehearsals for reminders of past discoveries, while attempting to build upon them.

8/28/14: Audition

I chose to audition with the portion of Tiger's monologue that begins Act 2 and concludes with "Fucking kids, you know?" (41) David Hoover, our director, and James Yeargain were the two auditors. James is my teacher for movement this semester, and I've spoken with him about my desire to use my thesis as an opportunity to expand my limited movement skills. My stage career has tended to keep me in roles that are not physically large — I don't do big well. My tendency is to create small performances, focused and, I hope, more clear than big.

By "big" I mean physically expressive and mobile. Large gestures to punctuate moments and provide imagistic complements to the words. I also use "big" to refer to a capacity to use much of the stage area, moving purposefully to mark new beats or punctuate and underscore the images the words create. Finally, I mean "big" in the sense of being constantly "in" my body in a manner that is casual but is specific to the character, and is the result of conscious choices.

The audition experience was successful only in the sense that I used physical gesture to help illustrate the story. I used more of the stage than I normally would have, as well. The whole movement score (such as it was), however, lacked any real focus and I was not physically embodying a character after conscious choice and experiment. That, though, is what rehearsal is for.

9/2/14: First Read

First readings are generally of little use to me in terms of opportunities to discover things about the character, but they are valuable in that one hears one's fellow actors and gets a feel for the arc of the play.

My voice seems at odds with everyone else — a result of my “comedian” delivery, bigger characterization, or lack of listening? More to discover here.

9/3/14: Rehearsal

Relaxation: 10 minute vocal physical. Drop downs and stretches effective at releasing spine tension. Vocal “huh” (Linklater 7).

Goals: Explore a physical malady — hip dysplasia.

Talk to audience: they are me, no one else Tiger talks to.

Result: My voice after rehearsal is a little hoarse: I naturally fell into a grumpy growl with the character and will have to reconsider this if vocal strain is an issue, or expand vocal warmup to see if that helps.

Goal result: The hip dysplasia idea fell almost immediately apart. I spent the evening pacing back and forth in a 4 foot “cage” and concentrated on lowering my normally high center of gravity down to the knees, with a little success. Feeling those big tiger feet grounding me is a desire, and I explained to the director that the planned sandals for costume might get in the way of this goal. My request to consider boots instead will be passed along to costume. I think the weight (of boots) adds to my ability to shift my center of gravity downward.

Talking to the audience, in the Director’s view, is talking to the audience, in the classic sense. I took this note.

9/5/14: Rehearsal

Goal: Find the humor in the character. This per the director’s suggestion from last rehearsal.

Result: Stressing the absurdity of the situation, playing the action “to mock this madness” resulted in a Tiger who seemed detached from emotional truth, per director’s note. This role, we agree, will be found by exploration and experimentation, not by simple, direct plotting.

9/8/14: Rehearsal

Goal: Explore physicality, vocal and tonal choices in monologues.

Result: With director's help, discovered the "grumpy old man" in these monologues.

Physically stiffening hips and knees ages me, and encourages a manageable but distinct hardness in the voice.

9/11/14: First Run

Things to remember for run:

Jealousy: The Lions get the love I want.

Anger: Humiliated by captivity.

Loneliness: How can a loner be lonely?

Smell: Take in everything.

Focus: Hard focus, as if hunting prey.

Result: Frankly, this was not a run so much as a work through, especially for scene 1. The size of Tiger's cage makes it almost impossible to take the loping steps I associated with "tigerness", as the script calls it. This was discussed, and will be addressed if possible.

The question of how to deal with my audience chats is coming into slightly better focus—for next rehearsal I will try new goals and obstacle.

9/16/14: Scene 9 plus monologues

Scene 9 with the ghost Kev:

Goal: Clue Kev in to reality.

Physical choice? Tiger is blood drunk, abandoned to instinct.

Per Director: too comic the first time. Adjustments are made and more direct focus on Kev leads to better result.

Monologues: Each one is still an exploration of blocking choices and I'm still free to follow physical impulses. The objective for scene 4 "to get their help"; the obstacle — I want to eat them.

The Director felt Tiger was too mean, not appealing in either sense of the word. Adjustments brought a better, softer result.

Second monologue (40): the objective is "to reveal a troubling event". The obstacle: still wanna eat them.

Two runs at the speech brought a clearer experience of the little girl. She is unique because unlike most prey she has no fear of me. I must protect her, defend her, to God.

9/18/14: Act 2, Scene 8

Goal: Establish who exactly Tiger is talking to in this scene. Action evaluation for 2 lines at bottom of p. 51, and last line of scene.

Result: This was no quick fix to the problem of who Tiger's speaking to. I tried speaking to the topiary, just talking out loud. The result is confusing, outside and inside. I can't treat them as "real" or potentially real, simply because later in the scene I ask where the lions are and there's a topiary lion right in front of me.

I defaulted to speaking yet again to the audience, enlisting help, trying out solutions to Tiger's problem. There is a discovery Tiger makes on "I have to become something else." It is not reportage.

But I did notice a kind of grasping at straws on the "God's garden" line; in effect Tiger is choosing to believe that something which is his own invention is true. Frankly, the script is murky in so many ways. I'm frustrated by the vagueness of Joseph's world and its haphazard application of rules, as the otherwise "enlightened" Kev points out in scene 10, "Dude I don't know all the fucking rules, okay?" (60)

But this scene (Scene 8) is very important in the Tiger's arc. It is his resolution scene, his determination to go over the cliff and reinvent himself. The next time we see him he has rejected the hope of salvation and is drunk on killing.

9/19/14: Line run

The cues are bedeviling all of us, especially (for me) scene 1. Rehearsal time has been scant, and it is difficult to develop the pacing without it.

9/21/14: Run through

The difference between Acts 1 & 2 is palpable. Act 1 falls into a comedy routine and Act 2 is merely an exercise in Sturm und Drang. This run laid bare for me how important it is to simply impose choices on the character, that in the absence of a clear vision of how to play it and confusion about the Tiger's function (human limbic brain, genial Dante-esque host, tortured prisoner) any direction is better than none.

The second Act has more focus for Tiger because it is an arc that begins at the possibility that I've stumbled on God's holy place, moves through resolution to change myself, a rejection of change as impossible, and a last hope of an answer from God and retreat to the "primordial impulse." (33)

Act 1 is murkier. Sulky boredom, jealousy of lions, a moment of lashing out followed by death. Then amazement at the afterlife and an inchoate theory of a way out through redemption.

9/22/14: Scenes

Goal: Get the Scene 1 cues down!

...And the goal wasn't reached. The double mind required for hearing the cues coming from a partly unrelated scene while delivering my own monologue on the opposite side of the stage eludes me. As a result no real flow to the Tiger monologue is possible yet.

There is no technical lesson I can take away from this except to keep working at it.

9/23/14: Run

As a rule my investment is a problem. Exploring the reasons that I can't seem to give a hoot at the top of some of these scenes is something there's no time for. I just have to give a damn and walk on with a clear intention and moment before. Sometimes acting is just girdle-cinching.

Notes:

— a pause after "I bring her here" for light cue.

— pre-set newspaper.

— “give up eating children.”

9/24/14: Run through

Goal: to give scene 5 to Kev, instead of to audience.

Run through had continued problems with lines for all concerned, but generally I and everyone made some improvements. The goal of giving the scene 5 “child hunting” lines to Kev (or mostly to him) certainly resulted in more focus in the delivery and raising of the stakes, whereas talking to the audience left the whole story as more reminiscence and rumination.

Mike Harkins, UNO graduate and local actor/director, was present for the run, at my request and with the Director’s approval. Harkin’s notes generally were about specificity and investment. I shared them with the Director.

Mike Harkins notes on 9/24 run:

Scene 1:

— “kill everyone, eat them.” Relish this.

— “pride of fucking lions” More specific.

— Tiger changes after his death: play “hissy fit”, “seriously?”

— when you see yourself, you’re disappointed.

Scene 4:

— jealousy of monkeys: bigger. They’re dumb, simple people.

— “who does this?” More incredulous, then “A-ha.”

— “why am I still here?” More desperation to escape.

— last flinch in monologue. Finger to God? Instead of point...

Scene 7:

— moment before: as if you just walked through the biggest crowd of noisy kids.

Scene 8:

— “I have to become something else.” Discovery!

Scene 9:

— “knew I was a Tiger when you made me.” GO LOUD.

Scene 11:

— “yes you are!” Right now sounds like an order. Make it a plea.

Director’s notes on 9/24 run:

— moves towards Iraqi couple in Scene 3.

— “didn’t register significance” Play as “poor kid...”

— keep giving Scene 5 to Kev, but open up to be seen.

— “low hanging fruit” Go to Pride Rock. [“Pride Rock” is our tongue-in-cheek name for the scenic element that dominates down center stage, a toppled “blast wall.”]

9/25/14: Run

Goal: Solidify consistent high stakes/need, refine physical choices.

Result: Scene 9: A vagueness (laziness) crept into the playing tonight and the crispness of choices declined. Again, slightly lower stakes have a bad effect on the scene, any scene. Generally, I find my physical movement in Scene 4 (monologue) is flappy, for lack of a better word. This is an indication, per Jon Jory (Jory 144), of poor choices, not dropping in — merely “conducting” the piece. His sage advice? Don’t do it.

In both scenes 5 and 8, my initial choice was to deliver these lines to the audience in a sort of rumination, an appeal for help in the discoveries, etc. This hasn’t been useful. It feels and looks muddy, unspecific. As of now it is clear that the lines must be delivered to Key.

Director’s post-run notes:

— “didn’t register significance.” The guilt was good.

— Scene 4 Good.

— Scene 7 Great.

/27/14: Tech

Lighting is incomplete, elements of the set are not on stage. The show was run in its entirety with stops for problems. We began at 2:15 and were finished by approximately 5pm. As techs go, this was a success.

However, my performance saw a retreat: the stakes dropped and some lines/cues were lost.

Given circumstances of this role are problematic. He is a tiger (but not a tiger) who is almost totally anthropomorphized. He talks to the audience. Less often, he talks to some of the cast, but not all.

Tiger moves from one cage in life to another cage in life-after-death, both of which he longs to escape. He doesn't achieve the latter objective.

9/28/14: Tech Run

The general emphasis on stakes comes at risk of losing some of the humor, and I'm reconciled (grudgingly) to leaving the Borscht belt for the good of the play. His (super-) objective after death is "to escape this tar pit of life-after-death."

Director's notes:

— Don't go close to Kev in Scene 3.

I'm still exploring how Tiger haunts Kev and am circling him near the end of Scene 3.

Director believes it's too much and if kept would require Kev to be more frightened of my presence.

— Instead of stage center proscenium lip, be at top of platform stage left for "I'll become a plant then..." (Scene 8)

This note is to utilize the left ramp more frequently during the production.

9/29/14: Dress Run

Act 1 yet another example of the penalty for not dropping in on the stakes, personalizing. One pays for it with a performance that's vague and "meh." Technically I continue to find Scene 1 cues challenging.

Director's notes:

—between Scenes 3/4 DON'T leave down stage center to go upstage. Stay where you are.

This note resolves a pointless cross upstage between two scenes.

— keep the big laugh at the end of "glorious sight."

9/30/14: Run

Before show: I read pg. 81 of Yoshi Oida's book "The Invisible Actor" this morning and have been wondering since about my own personality type and how it affects my acting. If my difficulty in concentrating is a sign of narcissism, then every new parent is an egotistical jerk. But Oida's invitation (I take it so) to lose oneself in concentrating on the role is welcome, and I suspect all this questioning about my acting motivations and personality has some relation to the problem of lower stakes and lack of specificity. Do I really want to tell this story? — It's about a desire to escape, a feeling of being trapped, and utter confusion about who's in charge here. Who's the jailer? Is he approachable? What's the crime?

9/30/14: Evening Run

Read page. 60-61 “Invisible Actor.”

Oida talks about “universal experience.”

This relates to Tiger as Everyman.

p. 63 Ibid.

Relates to inadequacy of emotional recall for long runs.

Used 15 minutes prior to run for final meditation.

Tonight’s run: my preparation is not including time actually running lines. Scene 1 continues to be a cue nightmare and I have the terrible feeling that the addition opening night of the audience reaction will result in my going up (forgetting lines). To prevent this I am considering a goal for scene 1: do NOT do what every good actor does — embrace the presence of the audience, explore their mood — and instead aim to adhere rigidly to the reality on stage alone.

Act 2 was overall good — the objectives seem to work together to create an arc, and the actions support it.

Director warned me about getting too soft vocally in scene 7. I will watch it.

OBJECTIVES:

Scene 1: justify my captivity.

Verbs: bitch, moan, grouse, defend, demean, minimize, dream, fantasize, envy.

Scene 3: Absorb the new reality.

Scene 4: Solve the puzzle.

Scene 7: Solve the puzzle.

Scene 8: Come to terms with the new order.

Scene 9: Revel in reality.

Scene 11: Win my freedom from God.

10/1/14: Final Dress

Reading Oida on the story of the tea master confronted by a samurai (Oida 121), I think of the need for body mastery, being at home whatever you undertake onstage. When Oida talks about body rhythms he counsels contrasting interior and exterior. An energetic exterior has a still focused interior. In my case, does a grumpy cynical exterior cover a poetic hopeful interior?

Director's Notes:

Occasionally the voice is pressed down and (the growl) is artificial.

This has been problem for me in the past — I lack confidence in my own voice which I fear is too high.

Addition of the “meat-eating moment” is good.

This is thanks to the invaluable Sarah Beth James, our prop master. To the dead animal prop, she affixes a hunk of beef jerky slathered in stage blood, so I can tear off a bite of flesh. Inspired. An example of how in theatre, an actor's performance is created by playwright, actor, director, costumer, designers, and dedicated prop masters!

10/2/14: Opening

It will be useful now to have the input of the audience especially in this production. I'm interested to hear them, by their reactions, tell us what they think the play is. I personally am out of ideas.

Post-show thoughts: To me the actions in scene 5 make sense but they're either wrong or my focus is wrong or my delivery is wrong, but I can feel it isn't working. Later feedback on the night makes me think I was pushing, instead of looking, listening and responding. Overall reaction to the show was positive, but opening night is rarely an opportunity to criticize. The audience as I hoped found humor. They even found things funny I didn't anticipate like my final scene with Musa and monologue. Even in the moment I found this surprising but not upsetting. I'll be interested to hear more audience responses in later shows.

10/3/14: Friday Second show

Post Act 1 thoughts: I dropped the line "three square meals a day" in scene 1. After a half-moment's pause realizing the line was nowhere in my head and the other actors were waiting for some response from me, I said "Fuck it!" in disgust. Worked for me, worked for Tiger. Later an actor spoke my cue too early and after some meandering by the soldiers I jumped in to get us back on track. All in all an invigorating start to night two.

This audience reminds me of Oida's yin/yang theory (Oida 85): a quiet audience requires more energetic performances, an exuberant audience requires more focus from the actor. I need to step up energy for Act 2.

Post act 2 thoughts: Act 2 was improved. The scenes themselves carry me along, so I need to attack act 1 with particular energy tomorrow.

10/4/14: Saturday Third show

I ran the first scene for lines with my wife on book this afternoon. It took me seven times to get it right. I am as prepared as I'm going to be...

Result: I got every line in the first scene. I suppose work pays off, it just irks me to realize that I have to do line work during the run after starting to learn them in August. I blame our new baby and my advancing age...

Small aspects of performance went wrong. I bit off too much jerky (lion) during scene 9. Tough to do the scene with your mouth full.

The audience did not laugh nearly as much as the previous two nights. It reminded me again of Oida's yin/yang of audiences.

Our play was entered in competition to the American College Theatre Festival. Two "respondents" were present tonight and gave us their thoughts after the show. Their response was generally favorable. For me, they offered several small notes but one very large, and I think quite valid one: the Tiger's death needs to be featured more. Now it is almost a given, an afterthought. Later discussions with the director have resulted in a

slightly more extended moment to accommodate the Tiger's rise from the dead.

Basically, the other actors hold for a moment. A light/sound cue may be added if the show is chosen to compete in the Festival in Texas.

10/6/14: Thoughts per Practical Handbook for the Actor (Bruder et al. 19)

Scene 1:

What I'm doing: *bitching about my life.*

Essential action: *demand my rightful place.*

As If: *Grad Dept. denies my MFA due to a clerical error and I'm having it out with a rep.*

Scene 4:

What I'm doing: *relating my experience in this crazy afterlife.*

Essential action: *confess my confusion.*

As If: *I have to tell my wife I have no idea how to fix the house financing mess.*

Scene 5:

What I'm doing: *sorting out my situation.*

Essential action: *cajoling an underling into helping me.*

As If: *I manage a convenience store and insist the night cashier help me go over all the week's receipts to figure out who's been stealing money.*

Scene 7a:

What I'm doing to audience (most of speech): *tell a terrible story of hopelessness.*

Essential action: *clue them in to the real truth.*

As if: *I'm telling my wife about this amazing kid in my acting class who challenged my assumptions but who I really liked.*

Scene 7b:

What I'm doing to God (end of speech): *yelling at God to give me an answer.*

Essential action: *demand the attention of an inferior.*

As if: *my tax preparer hasn't finished compiling and I want my deduction. I'm fed up with waiting — I need the money to pay the baby's doctor bills.*

Scene 8:

What I'm doing: *needling Kev for an answer.*

Essential action: *make amends for bad behavior.*

As if: *I've reluctantly returned to church to confess to God I've seen the error of trying to manage my own life.*

Scene 9:

What I'm doing: *mocking Kev's faith.*

Essential action: *taunting a goody-goody.*

As if: *While drunk I run into a sober friend. I am unrepentant.*

Scene 11:

What I'm doing: *I meet "God" and appeal to him.*

Essential action: *to appeal for salvation.*

As if: *I meet Rajiv Joseph and beg him to tell me what Bengal Tiger... is about.*

10/9/14: Thursday fourth show

Pre-show: Insufficient mental preparation has me worried about my ability to, not just remember the lines, but to be quick with the cues and sharp with choices and investment. I'll do a simple warmup as always to begin the process of re-entering the world of the show.

Post-show: Finding the warmup was only good for, well, warming up, I was empty when I started the show. The actions were there with stakes but a little hollow. Instinctively I defaulted to "affect the audience" and gave a less introspective performance. It appeared to be well received, in that there were laughs, but I think I'd rather sacrifice that to a deeper investment in the choices.

10/10/14 Friday fifth show

A decent vocal warmup and special attention to the neck, which is stiff. The Tiger's death, a fall backwards onto a pile of rubber chips, has something to do with that. First scene went well, establishing audience rapport, possibly because I left most of the "gruff voice" choice off the lines.

As the show went on, I was aware that the audience was quiet when I was onstage — my expected laughs in scene 5 were not there, but the soldiers had had great laughs before my entrance. I assumed the audience was not interested in my story, as can happen in a show, night to night. They remained quiet for the remaining scenes and the feeling grew in me that this audience just didn't care for the tiger. I was playing less for laughs (last night's show) but the absence of any real response made me sure that NOTHING was happening between us.

Before the final scene I thought, "Well, they're not interested in this. What can I play that'll get 'em?" I decided not to try, and gave myself permission to do something different. "Do it to please yourself".

It felt great. The pace I noticed was faster, the transitions quicker and sharper, and the investment more deep. I just knew it was working and I didn't concern myself with the audience's reaction — I just assumed they were with me. And they were. It was a very instructive experience.

10/11/14: Saturday sixth show

Tonight I'm tired and generally apathetic, for which the pre-show prescription will be a review of objectives and As Ifs to remind myself what is going on with the character. Post-show: An overall good show but I continue to be challenged by the sense that this character isn't entirely cohesive. Jory mentions in *Tips...* the tell of "sawing the air thus" as a sign the actor doesn't fully believe in or inhabit his choices (Jory 144). I use my

hands for emphasis as Tiger excessively, evidenced by the fact I notice my hands moving *during the scene*. More focus is required.

Also, I am just late enough at my entrance for scene 9 that my first line isn't selling well, punching well. I'll check the script and come in a line or two earlier to give myself a fuller moment before.

10/12/14: Sunday matinee close

Frankly, my goal today is to keep concentration and focus, as always.

Post-show: I discovered in scene 5 that adding an extra reaction beat after Kev's death and before my line "Shit," got a laugh. I don't think it was a gratuitous comedy gag (mostly these are beyond me anyway) but a reaction to their access to a fuller thought process by Tiger. Instead of going from the interior realization "He's dead" to the line "Shit," I basically added an "uh-oh" moment, a short beat to convey my realization that I had discovered the trouble I was in.

Further, I entered one line earlier for Scene 9, which gave me a fuller moment before for my first line. It worked better that way, giving the line more punch as Tiger had time to process what he heard. The run is over.

PROJECT EVALUATION

Self-Assessment

Assessing one's own performance is difficult for the actor; my interpretation of a role is largely a reflection of myself, and my ego trembles at the thought of a damning self-evaluation. Self-criticism is sometimes a form of suicide, or at least masochism. However, I believe my performance as the Tiger was largely successful, both in its reception by the audience and as an opportunity to explore physicality in my work. While it is difficult to take audience reaction at face value (people are often kind) the fact so many people found the play itself challenging and exciting, dwelling afterwards not just on the specific delights of the performances they saw but also on the larger questions of the play, leads to the conclusion they considered their evening in the theater worthwhile. For me, the performance was successful because I was able to explore expanded physicality. I made direct physical choices to run or lope onto and off stage that were not directly in the script but were supported by it, I utilized a wide area of the stage in the monologues, and I attacked the large themes in the lines — desire for God, anger at Him, confusion at the unknowable nature of existence, longing for an unreachable “home” — unapologetically. In short, I created a performance that was “big,” which was a primary goal for the experience.

The short rehearsal period underscored for me the importance of arriving to each rehearsal with a goal for the evening, even as one remained open to the surprises often found in rehearsal. The very act of keeping a journal of the experience made it possible to

revisit things found weeks earlier, and made the problem that exists when one arrives at the theater devoid of focus far easier to remedy.

I was aided in navigating a role that seemed at first confusing by a director who relied first and foremost on simple action choices to tell the story of the play. Working with David W. Hoover has reinforced for me the idea any acting problem can ultimately be solved if you make a clear, active choice. The many questions posed by playing a tiger -- dead no less -- in the midst of an existential quandary seemed paralyzing at times, but Hoover's insistence on a playable action cut through this confusion; once an initial choice was made, creating the role became a simpler matter: I evaluated whether the action made sense for the scene and the character, and if it didn't tried another.

Improvement could have been made in the area of pacing. Trust in the language and trust in the audience's ability to follow this unusual play was not initially present in my first performances, and my pacing was more measured as a result. Audiences can often think faster than an actor will speak, and I should have trusted that more. I could simply have acted with more confidence in the early shows. I will carry this lesson forward to future performances.

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo winning the Director's Choice Trophy at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region 6 in San Angelo, Texas in February, 2015 was a welcome validation from the regional university theatre community, and reinforced the impression we had created a compelling piece of theatre. The production also received awards from the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival at the national level for Distinguished Director (David W. Hoover,

Sound Design (Diane Baas), and Scenic Design (Kevin Griffith). Additionally, my performance as the Tiger received recognition as Distinguished Performance by an Actor in a Principal Role.

The local New Orleans theatre community also honored this production, awarding it Best University Production at the 2015 Big Easy Awards.

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BENGAL TIGER AT THE BAGHDAD ZOO

By RAJIV JOSEPH

ACT ONE

Scene 1

The Baghdad Zoo, night.

Two American soldiers standing guard next to a cage with a Bengal Tiger.

The Tiger stands like a person and faces and speaks to the audience.

TIGER. The lions escaped two days ago. Predictably, they got killed in about two hours. Everybody always gives lions so much credit. But I am bigger than them. I am bigger than those motherfuckers.

TOM. This guy is hungry.

KEV. Sergeant said they fed him.

TIGER. They liked to show off the lions here because they had eight.

TOM. No, he's hungry.

TIGER. Eight fucking lions.

KEV. This place creeps me out. I wanna see some action, not hang around no ghetto-ass zoo with my thumb up my ass.

TIGER. Which is why they had them in that big outdoor lion's den. Which is why they all got away.

TOM. Zoo duty's seen action three nights last week.

KEV. Who's gonna attack a zoo?

TOM. *We're* here. They'll attack *us*. And they've been stealing shit. Like peacocks.

TIGER. All eight of them took off as soon as the wall got blown up.

KEV. I don't know why they wanna kill *us*. We're trying to protect their zoo, you know?

TIGER. Typical lion-like behavior.

TOM. *We* blew the zoo up. Use your head. And these animals are valuable.

TIGER. Three square meals a day, and the idiots take off.

KEV. This guy ain't valuable. So let me see it.

What I'm doing: *bitching about my life.*

Essential action: *demand my rightful place.*

As If: *Grad Dept. denies my MFA due to a clerical error and I'm having it out with a rep.*

TOM. Again?

KEV. C'mon, Tommy. Let me see it.

TOM. I showed you it already.

KEV. I wanna fire it!

TOM. You're not gonna fire anything.

TIGER. And what happens?

KEV. Come on, man.

TOM. It's not even loaded.

KEV. You told me you always keep it loaded.

TIGER. Ka-boom.

TOM. Well, you're not gonna fire it anyway.

TIGER. I mean, it's the middle of a war.

Use your head.

TOM. How many times you gonna want to see it?

KEV. It's bad ass.

TIGER. Leo, the head lion – I mean, they were all named fucking Leo – Leo calls out to me just before he takes off, "Hey, Tiger, you gotta come with!"

KEV. I wrote my brother about it. He said there ain't no such thing as no gold gun. He said guns can't be made outta gold.

(The boys hear a sound.)

KEV. What the fuck was that?

TIGER. I said, Leo, you dumb stupid bastard, they're killing anything that moves.

And Leo – this is right over his head – he yells back, "Suit yourself!" Then he runs off.

TOM. *(Picks up his machine gun.)* Halt! Who goes there!

KEV. *(Yelling, picking up his gun.)* Who's there? We're U.S. Marines!

TOM. Shut up, Kev. *(Shouts.)* Advance and be recognized! *(To Kev.)* Cover me. *(Tom exits.)*

TIGER. Suit yourself. I'm still freaking locked up in here, Leo! What're you gonna do, steal the keys and let me out? These lions were dumb as rocks. They think because they can suddenly escape, everyone else can, too. (Tom enters.)

TOM. It was that fucking ostrich.

KEV. You shoulda shot it.
TOM. I'm not gonna kill an ostrich.
KEV. Fuck that, man. I don't give a fuck.
I'll be like... *(He pretends to shoot his machine gun.)* What's up ostrich, motherfucker? I'll *kill* you, bitch!
TOM. At ease with that shit. This is why everyone thinks you're a fucking idiot, you know that?
KEV. That's what *I'd* do, anyway.
TOM. Sergeant said no more killing animals unless they're a danger.
KEV. Sergeant is a pussy. Can I see it?
TOM. It's in my bag, Kev! Just get it! *(Kev darts to Tom's canvas satchel and pulls out a gold-plated semi-automatic pistol.)*
KEV. Holy shit, man.
TIGER. I won't lie. When I get hungry, I get stupid. I screwed up twelve years back. I just followed the scent, took a bite and then, fhwhipp!
KEV. A gold fuckin' gun.
TIGER. This tranquilizer dart comes out of nowhere, and I wake up in Baghdad.
KEV. Sweet ass.
TIGER. So that was depressing.
TOM. You happy now?
KEV. Hell yeah!
TIGER. Imagine, it's your everyday routine...maybe you want to grab a bite, and then whack!
KEV. Yeah, this is the shit right here.
TIGER. Curtains.
KEV. You swear to God this was really Saddam's kid's gun?
TIGER. And you open your eyes and you're in this concrete block.
TOM. Uday.
KEV. Who?
TOM. Uday Hussein.
KEV. Who's that?
TIGER. Tiger of the Tigris.
TOM. Saddam's kid.
KEV. Damn.
TIGER. When you're this far from home, you know you're never getting back.

KEV. This really his gun?

TOM. Yes it was his gun. Who else has a gold-plated gun?

KEV. Damn.

TOM. (*Looking at the Tiger.*) Look at this poor bastard. He's hungry. (*To Tiger.*) You hungry, buddy? (*Tom hits the cage.*)

TOM. Hey, buddy!

TIGER. Yeah, fuck you too.

TOM. Goddamn! You hear that growl, baby? He's starving.

KEV. How you know for sure? How you know that it was Saddam's kid's gun?

TOM. We raided the mansion. I was there, man. Two-day stand-off.

KEV. Fuuuck...

TIGER. What if my cage *had* gotten hit?
What if, ka-boom, there's a big gaping hole
in my cage? What do I do then? I'm not
gonna go traipsing around the city, like the
lions did. No, fuck that.

KEV. What mansion?

TOM. The Hussein brothers' mansion, jackass. Uday and Qusay. They were stacked with gold and shit. Everything in the house was made of gold, practically.

TIGER. But I think I'd step out for a bit.
Hang around the zoo. Hunt something. Kill
all the people, kill everyone. Eat them.

KEV. What else was gold?

TOM. All their guns. Sergeant got the gold Uzi.

TIGER. Then I'd sleep a little. And then get
up, kill some of the animals. Eat them. Sleep
some more. But I guess at that point, I'd
probably step out. Into the world. Not like
the lions did, but still, have to admit, I'm
curious.

TOM. The toilet was made of gold.

KEV. No shit. The shitter?

TIGER. The world is probably a fascinating
place.

TOM. The *toilet* was gold. Sergeant dismantled the whole thing. I won the seat off him in poker.

KEV. You won a toilet seat?

TOM. *Gold* toilet seat. I won the *gold* toilet seat.

KEV. Where is it.

TOM. Somewhere safe. I buried it.

KEV. Where?

TOM. Yeah, I'm gonna tell you, Kev. I'm gonna tell *you*. Somewhere safe. Between this gun and that toilet seat, I am set. Back home, I'll be sitting pretty.

KEV. Sitting pretty on a gold toilet seat!

TOM. No, dude. I'm not going to *use* it. I'm gonna hit eBay with that shit, you know?

KEV. Man. I haven't seen nothing since I been here.

TIGER. Zoo is hell. Ask any animal. Rather be shot up and eaten than be stuck in a fucking zoo ten thousand miles from where you were supposed to be. Like that polar bear they brought in six years ago. He committed suicide. Some world.

KEV. You got to kill Saddam's kids, man. That's awesome.

TOM. Yeah, it was cool.

TIGER. And the fucking lions! They get it all, right? Every captive animal's dream: that a bolt of lightning comes down and ZAP! Frees you in an instant. There it was: freedom! And they blew it. They walked right into the mouth of the beast. Dumb sons of bitches. It's too iffy strutting out into the world like that. I can see them: the eight Leos running through the streets of Baghdad, laughing their heads off. And then – ka-boom – mowed down by artillery. Casualties. A pride of fucking lions.

KEV. I ain't seen shit. Nothing. Not one Iraqi did I get to kill! And I ain't got my dick wet neither! You know back in Vietnam, there was so many Vietnamese bitches all over the place, and everyone got a piece.

TOM. You weren't even born yet.

KEV. I'm just saying. There ain't much pussy in a Muslim country.

TOM. Sergeant got some. Sergeant gets that shit all the time.

KEV. You ever get any Iraqi pussy?

TOM. No, man. Fuck that. I got values.

Hand me that Slim Jim. *(Kev hands Tom a Slim Jim, Tom unwraps it and sticks it through the cage, trying to poke Tiger.)*

Dumb bastard is so hungry, he don't even know he's hungry.

KEV. Leave him alone. He's barely got any fur left anyhow.

TOM. Eat! Eat it up, man!

TIGER. Don't wanna eat.

TOM. Come on, tough guy. Give me another growl.

TIGER. Leave me alone.

TOM. Atta boy. Get angry. Eat something.

TIGER. (To audience.) This is what I'm talking about. Pure stupidity. I'm a fucking Tiger. *(Tom hits Tiger with the Slim Jim.)*

TOM. EAT! *(The Tiger bites Tom's hand off.)* My hand!

TIGER. Yeah your hand! *(Kev shoots the Tiger repeatedly with the gold gun.)*

TOM. Oh God, my hand!

KEV. Tommy! Tommy, you okay? *(Beat.)* I shot him, Tommy! I shot him! *(Tom collapses and passes out. The Tiger, now a ghost, stands outside the cage and can watch as Kev walks over to the cage, pointing the gun at the Tiger's dead body.)*

KEV. I fucking shot him! I shot him! Oh my god, I shot him!

TIGER. Great. This is just wonderful. I get so stupid when I get hungry! Starts out with a tranquilizer dart. Ends with a bullet.

KEV. He's dead, Tommy! I killed him! *(Beat.)*

TIGER. To die in captivity at the Baghdad Zoo. What a freaking life.

KEV. Who's King of the Jungle now, bitch?

TIGER. The lions, you jackass.

KEV. *(Gets on radio.)* Man down! Man attacked by fucking Tiger animal! *(To Tom.)* Tommy, I'm gonna go get help! Stay here! *(Kev exits. The Tiger stares at his own dead body. Beat.)*

TIGER. But I guess I was always going to die here. I guess that was my fate, from the start. But I would have thought maybe I'd have one good day. A day like the Leos had. A brief foray out into the great wide open. And I'm bigger than them. I am bigger than those motherfuckers. (Beat; he looks at his body.) So that's what I look like. You go your whole life never knowing how you look. And then there you are. You get hungry, you get stupid, you get shot and die. And you get this quick glimpse at how you look, to those around you, to the world. It's never what you thought. And then it's over. Curtains. Ka-boom.

Scene 3

In the dark, chaotic sounds of soldiers pounding on the doors of a home. Yelling, screaming, furniture being overturned.

As the sounds continue, lights up on an Iraqi man standing with a sack tied around his head and his hands tied behind his back.

Kev enters with Musa. A woman runs on and goes to the man. Her sudden entrance goes entirely against procedure and freaks Kev and Musa out.

WOMAN. La-takhthoo! Etle'oo min baitne! Joozoo min edne! [*Don't take him! Get out of our house! Leave us alone!*]

KEV. Whoa! Get her back!

MUSA. (*To woman.*) Irja-ee. Irja-ee. [*Go back! Go back!*]

KEV. (*To man.*) I need you down on the ground! Hands behind your – Sir? SIR? I need you DOWN on the GROUND! DOWN on the GROUND!

MUSA. (*In Arabic, to man.*) In the tentaj tinzil lil ... [*You need go down to -*]

KEV. Wait, what are you telling him?

MUSA. What?

WOMAN. Makoo shee elkoom ehna!
 Roohoo! *[There's nothing here for you! Go away!]*
 KEV. What are you telling him?
 WOMAN. Me sawaine shee ghalatt.
 Roohoo! *[We have done nothing wrong. Go away!]*
 MUSA. I'm telling him what you said!
 KEV. What the fuck?
 MUSA. I'm *TRANSLATING!*
 KEV. *(To man.)* You speak English? Hey, sir, you speak fucking *ENGLISH!*?
 MAN. Hathe shee-yreed? *[What does he want?]*
 WOMAN. Ma a'roof, daykhereboon ilbait.
 Yreedoon yakthook wiyahoom! *[I don't know, they're wrecking the house. They want to take you away!]*
(Kev pushes the man.)
 KEV. You speak fucking English, I said!
 MUSA. He doesn't speak English!
 KEV. Fuck that, man. Tell him to kneel down. I'm gonna count from five!
 5...4...3...2...
 MUSA. *(Over Kev.)* Yireed-kum thnain-nat-koom terka'oon. *[He wants you both to kneel down.]*
(The man and the woman kneel down. Kev bumps into a large wooden chest and nearly falls over.)
 KEV. Hey! What's in this chest here? Hey you speaka Englisha?
 MUSA. They don't speak English! Stop yelling! You don't need to yell.
 KEV. That's what you gotta do, man, or these towelheads will fuck you, man. No offense, but that's like the rules.
 MUSA. Just tell me what you want me to tell them and I will translate. Okay?
 KEV. Don't fucking tell me my business, Habib.
 WOMAN. Allahoo akbar, ehne me sawaine shee, bess gooloo shitreedoon? Treedoon takhthoone kkulne? Etlá'oo! Etlá'oo min baitee! *[Oh my God, we've done nothing,*

but say what do you want? You want to take us all away? Get out! Get out of my home!]

MAN. Kafee tse-ween masha-kil! Lazim nse-wee lee-reedoo! *[Stop making trouble! We must do what they say!]*

KEV. *(Yelling.)* Shut up! What's in this box?

MUSA. Yireed yu'roof shinoo bil sundog. *[He wants to know what is in this box.]*

WOMAN. Il sendoog, yreed il sendoog? Yigder yakhooth il sendoog, ukhthe! Bess roohoo, telle'hum koolhum berre! Ehne me sawaine shee ghalatt! *[The box!? He wants the box? He can take it, take it! Just leave, get them all out! We haven't done anything wrong!]*

MUSA. She says there are ... *(To woman; Arabic.)* Shgil-tee? *[What did you say?]*

KEV. Wait what?

WOMAN. Makoo shee hnak! Bess buttaniat, makoo ghair shee! *[There's nothing in there! Blankets and nothing else!]*

MUSA. Nothing! There's nothing –

KEV. That's bullshit. She said a lot more than *nothing*. I don't speak Iraqi, but she said a lot more than *nothing*.

WOMAN. Yireed il sendoog? Gul-le khelee yakhooth il sendoog! Yakhthe we-yrooh! *[He wants a box? Tell him to take the box! Take it and leave!]*

MAN. Sook-tee! Let saw-weehengess! *[Be quiet! Don't make it worse!]*

MUSA. *(To man and woman.)* Raja'en sook-too! Reja'en! *[Please be quiet! Please!]*

KEV. *(Re: the man and woman talking.)* See that's what I'm talking about. *(Kev goes to the man and woman and stands above them in a threatening manner.)* WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU!

MUSA. You don't need to do this!

KEV. What's in the BOX?!

MUSA. *(To woman.)* Shinoo bil sendoog? *[What is in the box?]*

WOMAN. BUTTANIAT! BUTTANIAT!

MUSA. *(To Kev; accidentally in Arabic.)*
Buttaniat!
KEV. What? What the fuck did you say!?
MUSA. *(To Kev; in Arabic; frustrated.)*
BUTTANIAT! BUTTANIAT!
KEV. In ENGLISH! Speak English, will you?!

MUSA. What?
WOMAN. Let suy-eh! Gul-le kheli y-buttel
y-suy-eh! Joozoo min edne! *[Don't yell! Tell him to stop yelling! Leave us alone!]*
KEV. What the fuck!
MAN. Kafée tsuy-heen! *[Stop yelling!]*
MUSA. Blankets! Sorry! Blankets!
MAN. Makoo ba'ad shee moomkin yakh-thoo! Bess sook-tee! *[There's nothing more for them to take! Just be quiet!]*
KEV. What blankets?!
MUSA. In the box!
KEV. What?
WOMAN. Ukhthoo, boogoo, boogu
kulshee edne. Mujremeen, kulkum, kul
wahid min edkum. *[Take it, steal it, steal everything we have. Criminals, all of you, every one of you.]*
MUSA. BLANKETS! In the BOX!
KEV. We'll see about that! We'll fucking see about that! *(Kev walks to the chest and opens it and begins taking out folded blankets. He flaps them open and tosses them randomly.)*
WOMAN. Hathe shee-yreed? Makoo shee hnak! Hethole buttaniat. *[What does he want? There's nothing there! They're blankets.]*
KEV. You see this!? You see?
MUSA. What!? What's wrong?! What's happened?
WOMAN. Hetholeh bess buttaniat! *[They're just blankets!]* *(As Kev goes through the blankets, he seems to be more and more desperate, looking for something in the box.)*
MUSA. You're supposed to stand guard!
KEV. I'm SUPPOSED TO DO MY JOB!
Shut up!

WOMAN. Hathe shday-sa-wee? Makoo shee il-eh hnak! Hathe mejnoon! Hel-rijal foo-ked akle! *[What is he doing? There's nothing there for him! He's crazy! The man has lost his mind!]* (*The Tiger enters. Kev sees him, but nobody else.*)

KEV. Oh God, no way. (*Kev drops his gun. The woman screams.*)

MUSA. What's happened?! What's wrong?

MAN. Il khater alle hi shdayseer? Te'alee hna, te'alee yemme! *[For God's sake what is going on? Come here! Come to me!]*

MUSA. (*To man and woman.*) Suntteh! Moomkin tsooktoon! *[Quiet! Will you shut up!]*

WOMAN. Hathe rah yuktulne! Hathe mejnoon! *[He's going to kill us! He's crazy!]*

MAN. Hi shday-seer? Hi shday-saw-woon? *[What's happening? What's going on?]*

KEV. SHUT UP!

WOMAN. Telle'a minna! Akh ya alla ... *[Get him out of here! Oh, God ...]*

KEV. NOBODY MOVE! NOBODY SAY A FUCKING WORD!

MUSA. (*To man and woman.*) Suntteh! *[Quiet!]*

(*Kev takes out the gold gun.*)

KEV. Motherfucker ... motherfucker ...

MUSA. (*Yelling.*) WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?

KEV. SHUT UP! (*Kev picks up a blanket and throws it.*) You see? What the fuck is that!?

MUSA. That's a blanket.

KEV. What else, huh? What fucking else?!

MUSA. There's nothing there! (*Kev points the gun at Musa. The woman screams.*)

KEV. It's not a freaking blanket! It's him! It's HIM! (*Kev points the gun back at the Tiger.*)

MAN. Te'alee hna, te'alee hna, hethole shday-saw-woon? *[Come over here, come over here, what are they doing?]*

WOMAN. Ma a'roof, hathe iljundee t-kheb-bell, oo ende mused-dess ... *[I don't*

What I'm doing: *wandering the afterlife.*

Essential action: *sniff out the truth.*

As If: At a garage sale, I encounter an old teddy bear that I could swear was mine.

know! The soldier is sick in the head, he has his gun ...]

KEV. Everyone needs to shut up.

MUSA. Suntteh! *[Be quiet.]*

KEV. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. *(Kev starts sporadically removing his gear. Helmet, shirt, eventually his pants come off.)*

WOMAN. Hathe shday-saw-wee? Hathe leysh hee-chee day-saw-wee? *[What is he doing? Why is he doing that?]*

KEV. *(To Tiger.)* Bring it, Tiger. I'm right here, ready, bitch. Don't need no Kevlar, no flak, fuckin-A, just me and you. Me and you Tiger, I'm ready. I'M READY! *(He starts to cry.)* I did it once, I can do it again ... I can kill him again ...

MUSA. No. No killing. The gun. Give it to me. It's me.

KEV. I didn't want to do it.

MUSA. I know. Here. Give it to me ... Yes. Yes. Yes. *(Musa slowly takes the gun from Kev. Kev starts sobbing and collapses. The woman gets up and starts screaming at him, throwing the discarded blankets at him.)*

WOMAN. Ente la shai', ente ma i'ndek shee, inte mejnoon, farigh, kulkum, Demetrio haeyatne b gheba'kum oo lu'abkum il ashwa'i-yeh! *[Nothing, you've got nothing, you're crazy, empty, soulless fool, all of you, ruining our lives with your stupid, mindless game!]*

KEV. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

WOMAN. Ente! Wean rayih? *[You! Where are you going?]*

MUSA. Ani rah-arooh. *[I'm leaving.]*

(Musa looks at the gold gun and then puts in his pants and starts to leave.)

WOMAN. Ente det-boog, mithilhum, haramee, haramee a'adee! *[You're stealing, just like them! Stealing, a common thief!]*

MUSA. Joozee minnee. *[Leave me alone.]*

WOMAN. Rooh, rooh ilbaitek ya kha'in, ya haramee! *[Go! Go home, you traitor, you thief!]*

MUSA. Hathe moo melteh! ... *[This gun, this gun does not belong to him.]*

MAN. Met gooleelee hi shdayseer!
Tigdereen tbettileen syah, il khat-tir alle?
[Would you tell me what's happening! Will you stop shouting, for God's sake?]
(The woman looks at Kev, now half-buried under blankets.)

WOMAN. *(Quietly to her husband.)* Hoo-eh al ga'. Te'al. Te'al ... *[He's on the ground. He's crazy. He's sick. Come ... come, we'll leave ...]*

(Woman and man begin to exit; to Kev.)
Rooh el-je-hen-nem! *[Go to hell! Leave us alone and go to hell!]*

KEV. I'm sorry ... I'm sorry ... I'm just gonna stand here ... I'm just gonna stand here standing guard. Sir, yes sir ... Sir, yes ... sir ... I'M SORRY! Man down! Man down! Man attacked by ... Man attacked by ... Man attacked. I shot him, Tommy. I shot him. I fucking shot him. He's dead, Tommy, I killed him. I'm okay ... I'm okay ... I'M okay! *(The woman and man exit. Kev huddles in the corner. Lights illuminate a garden in Baghdad. The garden is filled with large topiary animals carved out of hedges, but they are ruined, burned and skeletal. Bombs go off in the distance. The Tiger examines the topiary.)*

Scene 4

Tiger, wanders the garden of topiary. The bombs in the distance cease. He looks around at the garden.

TIGER. It would have been better to have died young. I'm an old ghost! There's a gang of teenage rhesus monkeys down at the zoo who got blown up by an IED, and they're carrying on like a bunch of morons, milking the afterlife for all its worth. You want my advice? Die young, die with your friends. It's the way to go. (Referring to topiary.) I mean, what the fuck is this supposed to be? Animals made out of

What I'm doing: *relating my experience in this crazy afterlife.*

Essential action: *confess my confusion.*

As If: *I have to tell my wife I have no idea how to fix the house financing mess.*

plants? Vegetative beasts? I've been walking around this city for days now, taking it all in, and nothing was very much of a surprise until I wandered into this garden here. I mean ... Who does this? People. First they throw all the animals in a zoo, and then they carve up bushes to make it look like we never left. Insult to injury. Insult to injury. (*Bombs go off in the distance. The Tiger cringes behind a hedge. The bombs cease.*) I don't know why I'm so scared. You figure getting killed might be the last bad thing that can happen. The worst thing. I'll tell you right now: It's not the worst thing. See, all my life, I've been plagued, as most Tigers are, by this existential quandary: *Why am I here?* But now ... I'm dead, I'm a ghost ... and it's: *Why aren't I gone?* I figured everything just ended. I figured the Leos ... just ended. The suicidal polar bear ... bones and dust. It's alarming, this *life* after death. The fact is, Tigers are atheists. All of us. Unabashed. Heaven and hell? Those are just metaphorical constructs that represent "hungry" and "not hungry." Which is to say, *why am I still kicking around? Why me? Why here?* It doesn't seem fair. A dead cat consigned to this burning city doesn't seem just. But here I am. Dante in Hades. A Bengal Tiger in Baghdad. (*Beat.*) You didn't think I knew Dante, did you? Now that I'm dead, I'm having all sorts of revelations about the world and existence. Things just appear to me. Knowledge, the stuff of the universe, it just sort of floats into me ... Or maybe I'm floating into it. But it doesn't help. No matter how much I learn, I'm still trapped. I just thought I'd be gone by now. *Why aren't I gone? Will someone please tell me why I'm not gone from here!?* (*Far off in the distance, the Muslim call to prayer is heard. The Tiger listens to it.*) You hear that? That call to prayer? A constellation of minarets surrounds this garden, each one singing in a different key. They come in like

a fog, five times a day. Different mosques, all over the city, calling out to God, voices intermingling in the air. (Beat.) When an atheist suddenly finds himself walking around after death, he has got some serious re-evaluating to do. (The call to prayer continues.) Listen! Calling out to God in this mess. God. Can you believe it? (A loud bomb goes off and the Tiger instinctively covers himself with his arms, and then looks skyward.)

Scene 5

KEV. *(Starts to cry.)* Tommy. Don't leave. You're my best friend.

TOM. I am not your friend.

KEV. Yes, you are. You are, man. And I need you, okay? I'm so scared. He's everywhere, you know? Everywhere I look is that stupid fucking Tiger.

TOM. Well, that's your psycho problem, Kev. Not mine. Now, I have some gold left that I have to get before I leave here and if I don't get the gun back from you, I'm gonna kill you. Understand? *(Tom exits.)*

KEV. Aw shit, man.

TIGER. Nice guy.

KEV. Shut up.

TIGER. I just remembered something: Sixteen years ago I killed two children. A little girl and a little boy. Sister and brother.

KEV. Fucking dead-ass ghost motherfucker. Just hanging around, trying to make everyone think I'm some crazy-ass piece-of-shit grunt.

TIGER. This was back in the Sunderbans, in West Bengal. Home! The only place these crazy stripes actually camouflage me.

KEV. I'm sorry! Okay? I'm sorry I shot you!

TIGER. I'm telling you, for the most part, I'm very shy! I like to sit back and wait for something to walk by so I can kill it and eat it. I'm a simple guy with simple tastes.

What I'm doing: *sorting out my situation.*

Essential action: *cajoling an underling into helping me.*

As If: *I manage a convenience store and insist the night cashier help me go over all the week's receipts to figure out who's been stealing money.*

KEV. I wrote my brother about you. He said you're just a figment of my imagination and shit. He said you were just one of those fucked up things about being in war. So what's up now? You don't even exist, bitch! Except for me! Except for me.

TIGER. Anyhow, the two children had strayed away from their village. The girl was collecting wood or something. I watched them curve around a corner. I was absolutely still. The little boy, at one point, turned and looked directly at me, into my eyes. But he didn't register the significance. He never did.

KEV. You know what though? Fuck Tommy. My brother is a hundred times better than Tommy. If I was on suicide watch, then they wouldn't've left shit behind that I could ... you know, shit like this? (*Kev lifts his mattress up and takes out a large, sharp piece of metal, like an old knife or scrap metal.*) Shit like this!

TIGER. I was hungry. They were food.

KEV. If you don't get the fuck out of my head, bitch, I will kill us both. Don't think I won't do it. I killed you once, I'll kill you again!

TIGER. And I caused untold misery to the parents of those children. But what could I do? I'm a Tiger.

KEV. Get Out Of My Head!

TIGER. It wasn't cruel. It was lunch! A basic primordial impulse isn't cruel! But what if it is? What if my every meal has been an act of cruelty? What if my very nature is in direct conflict with the moral code of the universe? That would make me a fairly damned individual. After all, lunch usually consists of the weak, the small, the stupid, the crippled. Because they're easier to kill.

KEV. You want my hand? You want to eat my hand, just like you did Tommy? Maybe then you'll leave me alone, just like you left Tommy alone! (*Kev starts cutting his wrist.*

Trying not so much to slit his wrists, as to actually cut his hand off.)

TIGER. I'm guilty! That's why I'm stuck here. I'm being punished. But you'd think the twelve years in a zoo, caged, never hunting, never killing, never breaking God's ridiculous, LAW ... you'd think I would have atoned for my Tigerness. But maybe that's my way out of here. Assuming God exists, and assuming this punishment has a reason, I have to atone. I need you to tell me: How do I do it?

KEV. Eat it, take it. Eat my fucking hand, I don't want it!

TIGER. I don't want your hand. I want your help.

KEV. I'll get a new one like Tommy. Fucking RoboCop and everything. See? I can still do what I want. I can do whatever ... whatever I want, and no faggot ass Tiger is gonna ... is gonna ... Yeah. *(Kev dies, and crumples in a heap on the bed. Tiger goes to Kev, looks him over.)*

TIGER. (Realizing.) Shit. I bite off the one kid's hand. And then I drive this one to suicide. (Tiger shakes his head. To audience.) I am digging myself into one hell of a fucking hole. (Tiger exits.)

ACT TWO

Scene 7

The Tiger appears.

TIGER. This place is lousy with ghosts. And the new ones are irritating. They're walking around, wide-eyed ... What happened to me? Where am I? You're dead and you're in Baghdad. Shut up. Anyhow, the other day, I'm walking down the street.

What I'm doing to audience (most of speech): *tell a terrible story of hopelessness.*

Essential action: *clue them in to the real truth.*

As if: *I'm telling my wife about this amazing kid in my acting class who challenged my assumptions but who I really liked.*

The street is literally ON FIRE. And I see this little girl. Her life is like a soap bubble, and then pop! She's here, in the middle of the street, looking up at me. And she says to me: What are you? And I tell her, I'm a Tiger. She asks me am I going to eat her. And I say, no, I gave up eating children. She says why? And I say, I don't know, it's this philosophy I'm working out about sin and redemption since God is apparently nuts. And the girl just kind of looks at me. And I'm like: Think about it, if God's watching, why'd he snuff you out? Why are you standing here, alone, in a burning street, with a dead Tiger? Why is half your face gone? And she says, yeah, but why'd you give up eating children? And I tell her the bit about the two kids in the forest, and how I keep thinking about them and how I have all this guilt. She doesn't understand that. The guilt thing. She doesn't have any guilt. And I'm like, of course you don't. What did you ever do? Nothing. She tells me she's afraid. I tell her I am too. Which you'd think would be comforting, given the circumstances, but somehow, being blown to bits and then coming face to face with the likes of me ... Well, the girl started to cry, you know? Her one eye, cries. And I say, don't cry. But she cries harder. And so I say to her: Hey, do you want to see something? And she stops crying for a second. And she's like, what? And I say it's a ... I tell her it's a garden. And she looks at me as if to say, big fucking deal, like I haven't seen a garden before? And I say, no, it's a special garden. And I don't know why I say this, but I say, it's God's garden. I tell her it's God's garden. He likes gardens, see. He tests us in them, he tempts us in them, he builds them up and tears them apart. It's like his fucking hobby. And she's skeptical, I can see that, but I bring her here and she sees these plants, these animals, and she's never seen anything like them. And I nailed it, because she's not crying anymore. She's walking

around the garden, pointing. A camel! An elephant! A lion! Fucking kids, you know? And I mean, this whole time, I'm talking out of my ass, this business about God's garden, etcetera. Maybe she knows I'm bullshitting, too. The girl is no dummy, even if she does only have half a brain. But for a second we both look up at these ruined shrubs and think, okay, Man: You work in Mysterious Ways. We get it. And I feel this swell of hope. And then she turns to me and she's like: When will He get here? What? She says, When will God get here? If this is his garden, then he has to come to it, he has to tend to it. Look! The green is all burned. This animal has lost his head. Well?! What am I supposed to tell her? I'm asking You to tell me. Because if You don't, I'm going to have to watch her cry again. I'm gonna have to sit here and watch that little single eye of hers well up with tears ... And her brain will fill up, as mine did, and she'll understand the Universe. And then her spirit or body or whatever you've left us with, it will go on to other things. And this moment, this fucking moment when she appraises a ruined piece of beauty with her one good eye, this moment will become extinct. Just like fucking You. Is that what you WANT? Say Something! THIS ANIMAL HAS LOST HER HEAD! Speak through me, or through her, or through someone, but speak, God, speak!

Scene 8

(The lights suddenly shift back to the original scene. Tom faces upstage and the girl stands behind him, whacking him off. She has a bored look on her face. Musa snaps out of it, sees what's going on and quickly turns away. The girl continues. Tom yells out and hits the wall very hard three times. The girl stops and walks away from

What I'm doing to God (end of speech):
yelling at God to give me an answer.

Essential action: *demand the attention of an inferior.*

As if: *my tax preparer hasn't finished compiling and I want my deduction. I'm fed up with waiting — I need the money to pay the baby's doctor bills*

*him with the money in her hand. She exits.
Tom leans against the wall. Kev enters.)*

KEV. Dear Tommy, How are you. I am fine. I am glad that you finally got some pussy. Pussy rocks. It's too bad that to get off you have to have the chick stand beside you and yank it, but that is psychological. Don't worry. One of these days you'll figure out how to rub one off southpaw.

TOM. *(Yells.)* Go away!

KEV. Dear Tommy, How are you. I am fine.

TOM. I didn't kill you, okay? I didn't kill you. You offed yourself, and I didn't have any fucking thing to do with it. *(The garden of topiary emerges. The Tiger wanders through it.)*

KEV. It's not about whacking off, Tommy. You're not confronting the issue here.

TOM. Shut up.

KEV. You feel incomplete without your hand. You feel like you're never going to be *you* again. And so you think, "Oh, okay, I'll come back to Iraq and find my gold, and then I'll be able to whack off again." But things don't work out like that. Look at me: I thought I'd be in heaven by now, but I'm not. I don't know *where* I am. I'm just a reverberation of what I used to be.

TIGER. It's like God's revenge, you know? He's got us chasing our own tails here.

KEV. *(To Tiger.)* I don't got a tail. *(To Tom.)* Look, Tommy, I'm sorry I'm bothering you, but you're the only person who can hear me, besides the Tiger, and he just keeps bugging me about epistemology and original sin, which is annoying as fuck.

TIGER. At first, it's pretty cool: the limitless fruit of knowledge hanging low in your path. Then you realize it's the only thing to eat around here.

KEV. *(To Tom.)* I know I annoyed you when I was alive, too. But you were cool, not like those other guys. You were my patron saint around here, Tommy. Until you were a total prick and walked out on me at

What I'm doing: *needling Kev for an answer.*

Essential action: *make amends for bad behavior.*

As if: *I've reluctantly returned to church to confess to God I've seen the error of trying to manage my own life.*

the hospital. I needed you, you know? But you were all like, “That’s your psycho problem, Kev / not mine ...”

TOM. / I didn’t know you were gonna kill yourself! I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry!

TIGER. What kind of twisted bastard creates a predator and then punishes him for preying?

TOM. I wish I hadn’t done that! But it’s over now. I’m fucked up with guilt, what do you want me to do about it?

TIGER. (Examining a topiary shrub.) I have to become something else. I renounce Tigerhood. I renounce myself.

KEV. We all have a psycho problem now, Tommy. Me and the Tiger and you. And I’m gonna figure it out.

TIGER. If this is God’s garden. Maybe I need to become like these plants ... twisting and distorting my natural shape into something more pleasing to him.

KEV. He’s haunting me, and I’m haunting you ... There’s got to be some sort of relational algebraic equation that the three of us can factor into and solve our problem. I mean algebra was even *invented* here, you know? In Baghdad, by this dude, Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi.

TOM. HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS!?

KEV. I know, right? I’m like a straight-up braniac in the afterlife.

TIGER. You know what really bugs me? Where are the FUCKING LEOS?

KEV. And algebra was derived from the Arabic *al jebr*, which means “a reunion of broken parts.”

TIGER. Why aren’t they wandering around here, scared out of their stupid minds, contemplating their animal nature? How come it’s me? How come I’m always alone every step of the way?

TOM. I’m not a bad person.

KEV. Neither was I.

TIGER. I’m a fucking saint. It feels like existence has become ...

KEV. We’re all just ...

TIGER and KEV. ... Refracted. *(Tiger and Kev look at each other.)*

KEV. *(To Tiger.)* Jinx. Sucka!

TIGER. Fuck off.

TOM. Kev, please, leave me alone.

KEV. We're broken, man. You, me, the Tiger. It's like we fell through a prism that night at the zoo and each part of ourselves just separated. Does your hand still tickle? Does it still itch? It's a phantom limb, Tommy. Just because it's gone doesn't mean it's not there.

TIGER. I'll become a plant, then. I'll cut away all the pieces of me that offend the cosmos. I'll escape my cruel nature. *(Uday enters, looking at the topiary. Hadia enters opposite Uday looking around.)* But cruelty echoes all around me. Even in this ruined garden. And so, I wonder if there is any escape. *(Uday approaches Hadia, smiling. Taking her, lovingly, showing her around, showing her the topiary. He stops, sees something in the hedge ... he takes out Musa's hand shears, large clipping blades for the topiary. He shows them to Hadia, who touches them, smiling.)* And I wonder if I am just an echo, repeating and repeating and repeating ...

Scene 9

A bombed-out building, half-standing, in the middle of the desert, south of Baghdad. The middle of the night. The place is ghostly, ethereal, haunted. Kev appears, as if he's been wandering in the desert.

Kev speaks in Arabic.

KEV. *(Arabic.)* Anee tayeh bil sahra'. *[I am lost in the desert.]*

Ulleh, anee tayeh bil sahra' oo da ed'eelek, anee b'oomree me di'ait gebul, bess hisse da ed'eelek bgair lugeh. A'roof hathe shee ghereeb bess emelee inoo tigder tiftehimmee.

[God, I am lost in the desert, and I am calling out to you in prayer. Because I have never before prayed, I am praying to you in a different language because the very strangeness of it makes me feel like perhaps you would understand.]

Ukhuth eedee, ishfee gissmee ilmitgetta', ikhithnee min il-sahraa'. Khelee bal-ee yirtahh. *[Take my hand, heal my severed body, take me from the desert. Let my mind find peace.]*

(Beat.) Or not. Maybe, I should say a Hail Mary? I know how it works, Man: You're not gonna come down and explain everything to me. But I figure You're out there, somewhere. I never expected to know so much. I never knew there was so much to know. And the very fact that I'm *around*? The very fact that I'm learning all these things? I gotta figure there's something out there a little more important than just haunting Tommy. So what happens now, God? What happens now that I'm intelligent and aware and sensitive to the universe? *(Tiger appears.)*

TIGER. I'll tell you what happens: God leans down just close enough and whispers into your ear: Go fuck yourself. And then he's gone. *(The Tiger holds some small, indistinguishable bloody carcass, his face is covered in blood.)*

KEV. I thought you gave up killing animals.

TIGER. What? I was hungry. What's He gonna do? Punish me more? I dare him. I dare him to come down and tell me what a bad Tiger I am? Please do it. Look, I tried. For a good two to three hours I was a vegetarian. But guess what? Vegetables taste like shit. We're just stuck here, son. Mastodons in the tar pit of life-after-death. And I'm tired, and I'm not a saint, I'm just the biggest predatory cat in the entire fucking world. So I'm gonna kill something, and I'm gonna eat it and I'm gonna wave this bloody carcass in God's face and tell

What I'm doing: *mocking Kev's faith.*

Essential action: *taunting a goody-goody.*

As if: *While drunk I run into a sober friend. I am unrepentant.*

him, You knew I was a Tiger when You made Me, motherfucker.

KEV. I wasn't talking to you.

TIGER. Ha. You were praying, huh? Well, you raise your voice and I'm the only one who hears it. What if I'm God. Did you ever think about that?

KEV. God ain't a Tiger.

TIGER. Maybe he is. Maybe I'm Him. Maybe Him's Me.

KEV. Prove it. *(The Tiger leans over as if to dispense a secret.)*

TIGER. Go fuck yourself. *(The Tiger exits. Kev waits for a beat for an answer.)*

KEV. Give me one sign to let me know that my voice is being heard by you? Then I can haunt You through prayer! I could haunt YOU, God! *(Beat.)* Your friend, Kev.

Scene 11

The garden of topiary.

Musa enters.

MUSA. *(Hushed, whispered, to himself.)*
My horse. My poor horse. *(Goes to another topiary.)* Look at you ... Such a pretty ... so lovely ... *(Uday enters.)*

UDAY. Oh, Mansour! Uday is so PROUD! Stupid kid American. Ha! He suffered, Mansour. He died slowly in the desert all alone. And do you know what the best thing? He called out for you! Begging you to come back and save him! He *begged* you! Ha! Fuck me, man, you're good! That's advanced: getting a man to beg you to come back to him *after* you've shot him!? And shot him why? Because he was *annoying* you! Because he wouldn't shut up. I agree.

What I'm doing: *I meet "God" and appeal to him.*

Essential action: *to appeal for salvation.*

As if: *I meet Rajiv Joseph and beg him to tell me what this play is about.*

Annoying people should all be shot and left to die. Because fuck them! Mansour. Oh, Mansour. Uday is so proud.

MUSA. You don't know anything. It wasn't supposed to happen. I didn't want to kill him.

UDAY. I know what you mean. Accidents like that are happening to Uday all the time.

MUSA. I'm not like you are ... I am not the kind of person who does this. It is not who I am.

UDAY. Sometimes we *change*. As people. This is the type of shit they teach you in boarding school. Like you: how one day you are translating, and another day you are shooting people because they annoy you.

MUSA. *That's not why I killed him!*

UDAY. (*Excited.*) Then why?

MUSA. Not because of that.

UDAY. You tell me. Tell me why. Uday wants to know. *Why?*

MUSA. Because ... we were in the desert ... and the sun was going down ... And ... (*Beat.*) The sun was going down.

UDAY. ... What?

MUSA. (*Quiet.*) The sun was going down.

UDAY. THE SUN WAS GOING DOWN! Holy shit, my man, that's your excuse!? The sun?! You know that happens *every day*, right? The sun *goes down*. Fuck me, even my FATHER needed better reasons than that! I thought you were good, Mansour, but this? (*Musa holds the gun out.*)

MUSA. Take it back.

UDAY. It's yours now. You've earned it.

MUSA. I'll never use it again.

UDAY. Come on! Not even once?

MUSA. Never.

UDAY. Don't tell me you didn't like it! It felt a little bit good, no? Killing the boy, leaving him to die. When you realized the bullet hit, that it caused pain, you felt *relief*. I know it, man. The pain *went away*.

MUSA. Yes, the pain went away.

UDAY. Good. You're beginning to learn about survival.

MUSA. It brought him to his knees.

UDAY. Yeah, yeah, and then?

MUSA. He screamed. He prayed to God.

UDAY. And you told him...?

MUSA. I told him not to pray to God. I told him no God would ever hear him.

UDAY. Nice. Good line.

MUSA. I stood above him and pressed the gun to his head.

UDAY. But you let him live. Better he can suffer.

MUSA. No. No more, no more ... (*Musa gives the gun back to Uday.*)

UDAY. Mansour ... you can't let go now! You have a taste for blood. You like it. You want it again and again and again. (*Uday holds out the gun. Musa spits on it.*) This is very rude, Mansour. Very rude. You know what your problem is Mansour?

MUSA. I don't have a problem.

UDAY. Your problem is this: The best thing you've ever done, in your entire life, was only possible because of me. Without Uday, you're just a petty gardener. With Uday, on another hand, you're the artist, building topiary, doing these great things. Because I wanted them. Because I employed you. Because I provided you with thousands of gallons of water in the middle of the fucking desert.

MUSA. This is my garden.

UDAY. No, Mister Fuck-Shit! This is Uday's garden! You think this place is *yours*? These animals are *yours*? Even your *memory*? It all belongs to Uday.

MUSA. No, no, I can remember a life without you ... I can remember my sister without you ...

UDAY. (*Beat; Uday leans in to Musa.*)

When the blades of your shears touched her skin, she burst like a grape. Ruined my suit. (*Uday holds the gun out.*) Oh, Hadia. Hadia Hadia Hadia. Such a small creature, making such a great noise. (*Musa stares at him and then takes the gun.*) Good boy. You take it, and go out tomorrow, and find someone

else. It will be easy. The sun will set and you'll have no choice but to kill somebody. (*Musa points the gun to his own head. Exasperated.*) No, Mansour ... Someone else.

MUSA. I won't be like you. I am myself. I am myself. (*Hadia enters, covering her eyes with her hands.*)

HADIA. Can I look yet? Can I look now, Musa?

MUSA. Not yet.

UDAY. Don't you bring her into this, Mansour! You do not want to see this again.

HADIA. I want to see it! Let me see the garden, Musa! Can I look?

UDAY. I will take her again, Mansour. I will do it all again. I will tear her to pieces again and again and again ... (*Musa leaves Uday and goes to her.*)

MUSA. You can look but then you have to go. But for now, Hadia ... Open your eyes.

HADIA. It's beautiful, Musa, it's lovely. Look, A lion! A camel ... an elephant ... a ... what is that?

MUSA. That is my giraffe.

HADIA. How do you do it?

MUSA. I don't know. It's difficult to explain.

HADIA. It's beautiful here.

MUSA. It is.

HADIA. Who could have ever thought, eh, Musa? That such a place could be here? That trees could grow like this? Who could have ever thought?

UDAY. Fine, okay ... (*Starts to move towards Hadia.*) This is not going to end well, boss.

MUSA. Hadia ... leave now. Go home. Go home quickly. Never come back. Leave.

HADIA. I'll leave in a moment. I want to see the rest. (*Uday takes Hadia by the arm, holding her firmly.*)

UDAY. You could stay in this garden forever, man. Watching me and her, me and her, me and her ... Is this what you want to see? Okay, man. Watch. I'm going to take

her back there and make her into a topiary.
This time, I'm going to wear a bib. Oh, one more thing ... That boy you killed ... He was the boy who killed me. Thank you, Mansour. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. (*Uday exits with Hadia.*)

MUSA. (*To Uday, but to himself.*) I will live with your voice, okay? I will live with it. It doesn't matter, because my hands belong to me. And my hands have their own memory. And when I put them on a plant, they create something. They will create something. (*The Tiger has entered and heard these last few lines.*)

TIGER. Look, I don't mean to interrupt, but I couldn't help overhearing ... Did you make this place? (*Musa looks at the Tiger. Takes in the reality of a ghost of a Tiger before him, seems to be okay with it.*)

MUSA. I made this place.

TIGER. Are You who I think You are?

MUSA. I don't know who I am ...

TIGER. Look, I've been looking for You, I've been calling out Your name.

MUSA. (*Covers his eyes in exhaustion.*)

Too many ghosts. Ghosts everywhere.

TIGER. It's not just me. I brought this girl here. She'd been killed, you know? She was just a little girl. She wanted to know when You'd be back. She wanted to know how You made these things. All these animals. Horse, elephant, giraffe ...

MUSA. This garden, this garden is a wound. I want to burn this place to the ground.

TIGER. Wait! I mean ... The girl ... She's not going to like that very much.

MUSA. (*Turns to Tiger.*) Tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I'm not who she thought I was. Tell her I've done horrible things, and I ... I don't know what I'm going to do next. Tell her to forget about me. I've become a different man. (*Musa puts the gun in his pants.*)

TIGER. You're not a man. You're God.

MUSA. No, I am not. (*Musa starts to*

leave.)

TIGER. Yes, You are! I've been waiting for You. I've been waiting for You to speak.

MUSA. God has spoken. This world. This is what He's said. *(Tiger watches Musa exit. He looks heavenward.)*

TIGER. *This?* This isn't enough! You have to say more than this. Explain yourself, for fuck's sake! You know what? You belong in a cage. We should hunt You down and lock You up just like every other wild thing in the world. I can see it: God in a cage, right here. Finally get a look at You. And all the great mysteries of creation could be revealed at the zoo. Come see the God exhibit! Come watch the beast play! And we, the lousy dead, would finally have our Hold Land ... God in a cage in a garden in a burning city. Ohhh ... What a glorious sight! *(His eyes shut in a dream, a fantasy, for a moment. Then he opens them and realizes he is alone.)* I'm fuckin' hungry. *(He gets something to sit, and then sits down, staring ahead.)* So I'm just gonna sit back and wait for something to walk by so I can kill it and eat it. *(He waits, watches.)* Rules of the hunt: Don't fuckin' move. Don't make a sound. Be conscious of the wind: Where's it coming from. Be still. Watch. Listen.

End of Play

VITA:

The author was born at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in 1964. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Boston University in 1989. He began his work towards a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of New Orleans in 2012, appearing at UNO in *Race* (David W. Hoover, director), *The Good Doctor* (David W. Hoover, director), *Orestes 2.0* (Timothy O'Neil, director), *Parsifal Worthy* (Jessica Madoff, director), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (David W. Hoover, director), and *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (David W. Hoover, director).