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THE DEATH OF BEOWULF: EXPLORING THE CONCEPTION, PROCESS, AND  
LESSONS OF AN ORIGINAL SOLO PERFORMANCE BASED ON A CLASSIC

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the School of Performing Arts  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2021

Major Professor: Christopher Niess

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## ABSTRACT

“The Death of Beowulf: Exploring the Conception, Process, and Lessons of an Original Solo Performance Based on a Classic” is the exploration of a performer’s journey understanding how their own identity and aesthetic has been defined by other works of art and how it affects their creative expression. The author examines the nature of classics as culturally and personally formative texts, and how the artist’s experiences and interpretation can potentially deliver fresh understandings of a familiar text. Then, by applying this to his own process of devising a script based on the epic poem *Beowulf*, he grapples with the challenges of encountering and freeing the authentic self to create art that reflects an honest refraction of the artist’s experiences and interpretations. How does one adapt a classic text based on one’s interpretation? What value does one’s personal voice have in a centuries-old conversation about a classic? What challenges does solo performance present to the performance of a fictional work? How does one implement an identity-driven lens to craft a fictional character based on source material without sacrificing the exposure of self? By utilizing the techniques of Jerzy Grotowski and Michael Chekov’s concept of creative individuality through the process of retelling a classic story, the author frames the necessary value of one’s own personal aesthetic, interiority, and authenticity in creating personal and potent works of art.

*In loving memory of my aunt, Florence Rowland.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Researching, writing, rehearsing, performing, and producing a solo performance is a daunting task under the best of circumstances, but making this thesis performance during COVID-19 was a task fit for Beowulf himself. I could have never done it alone and it is with great humility and love I acknowledge the numerous people that helped this dream, and sometimes nightmare, find a reality.

Christopher Niess, thank you for believing in this project from conception to pandemic all the way to production. Your guidance and support helped me shape, reshape, and believe this was worth doing even when it seemed impossible.

Chloë Edmonson and Vandy Wood, thank you for being stalwart supports when I went silent and offering the encouragement I needed to press onward and upward.

Carson Betts, Christy Clark, Amy Livingston, and Sammy Pontello thank you for being my test zoom audience. Without all of you, I would have never known if any of this was working.

My graduate cohort, Sarah Hubert, Chris Creane, Brian Wiegand, Megan Friend, Jessica Johnson, Josh Kimball, Darren Cajipo, Janice Munk, and the others already mentioned, thank you for the genuine love and support you have shown me for three of the hardest years of my life.

Mark Brotherton, thank you and I miss you. You are my Hrothgar, and I will follow your example.

Brenda Sneed, Carl Sneed, and Michael Sneed thank you for instilling an undying love of fantasy and curiosity in me. I could have never gone on some of the greatest adventures of my life without your support.

Lastly, Julia Weeks, none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for being my fan, my partner, my inspiration, my audience, my camera person, my rock, and my everything. Your compassion, enthusiasm, love, and laughter are just as responsible for this play and this document existing as I am.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER TWO: FINDING SELF IN A CLASSIC: SOLO PERFORMANCES INSPIRED BY CLASSICAL STORIES .....	6
CHAPTER THREE: MEN AND THEIR DRAGONS.....	17
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>THE DEATH OF BEOWULF</i> PERFORMANCE DRAFT .....	30
CHAPTER FIVE: WRESTLING WITH MYSELF: THE PROCESS OF FINDING MY BEOWULF.....	52
CHAPTER SIX: A REFLECTION .....	66
CHAPTER SEVEN: JOURNALS .....	70
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	110

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One of the oldest terrestrial globes in existence dates back to 1510. It is called the Hunt-Lenox globe and it is a small, hollow copper globe that currently sits in the New York Public Library. There are many reasons this globe is fascinating, but one little inclusion makes it particularly notable. Along the equator, around what today we recognize as China, the map bears a most unusual phrase: “Hic Sunt Dracones.” In English, this reads “Here Be Dragons.” The globemaker presumably included the notation as a suggestion this area is uncharted, unexplored, and potentially dangerous.

If a cartographer were to chart the landscape of a person’s mind, I like to believe there is a similar place at the furthest recesses of the brain. It is a forgotten place of mysterious import; a margin in which dragons hoard all the hidden treasures you forgot existed.

For me, one of the jewels at the border of my memory is a story I read in High School: a little poem by the name of *Beowulf*. Back then, I thought it was awesome. A brave warrior confronts three deadly monsters and perishes in a blaze of glory. What I didn’t know is how deep that particular text had sunk its claws into me and how revelatory the experience of revisiting it a decade later would be.

For a moment, indulge a silly question: do you remember the first story you were ever told? A potentially impossible question. It could have been about anything. A fanciful rhyme about sentient flatware eloping under the shadow of a cow as it remarkably bounds over the silver moon. A song about being the sun on a cloudy day. It’s just as likely it was an admission of a mother who always wanted a baby with eyes just like yours. It also could have been a memory, a bit of history, or even a

lie. Whatever it was, you probably don't remember the words, right? You might not even remember what you had for lunch yesterday. However, I posit that just as the digestion of that burrito is having a considerable effect on how your body functions, so too have every story you've ever heard.

This is a notion I've always believed, and as it turns out there is a lot of science to back it up. Jonathan Gottschall's book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* discusses Michael Gazzaniga, a pioneer of split-brain neuroscience, and how he identified specialized circuitry in the left hemisphere of the brain responsible for making sense of the information we are receiving from our environment. These neural circuits detect an order and meaning to the received information and organize it into a coherent account of a person's experience. A story, as it were. Gazzaniga named the part of the brain responsible for this job "the interpreter" (93-96). The simplest way of describing the programming of the brain is that it looks for patterns in information. Frank Rose, author of *The Art of Immersion*, writes:

Just as the brain detects patterns in visual forms of nature – a face, a figure, a flower – and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns, we find meaning. We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise.

(Rose)

In all their myriad forms, stories are an expression of how someone experiences and understands the world. They are told to share that perspective. Sometimes, there are facts and dates. Other times, there are dragons. Regardless of whether the story being told is a history or fantasy, the thing all stories have in common is they are distinctly subjective. This is not to call them lies – though some stories are certainly

just that – but they are filtered through the teller’s unique “interpreter” to be encoded into the brain and then filtered once more to be shared with and decoded by you. That process is repeated by your interpreter when you hear the story. It enters the mind and once there helps shape how we see the world around us. Either by rejecting, accepting, pondering, fantasizing, or embellishing they all become a part of the sum total of your unique perspective of how you see the world. Even though you forget almost all of them.

It is probably a good thing you do not remember the first story you were ever told. Also, it is probably a good thing you do not recall all the details of your favorite movie. Consider what happened to Don Quixote: his brain was a “world of disorderly notions, pick’d out of his books, crowded into his imagination” (Doré) and it made him fight windmills. A reductive, but whimsical, analogy for why we do not consciously remember all the stories (or details) we are told. That does not mean the story is gone. It has been processed and the story is now acting on you in ways you do not even notice. This is because of how our brain encodes information into our implicit memory. Unlike our explicit memory – the things we know we know – implicit memory is what our *brains* know but *we* don’t. These are memories we cannot access in our conscious mind. It contains the sort of things like knowing how to drive a car, playing a certain video game, or walking without falling flat on our face. As Gottschall quotes, “realistic rehearsal of any skill...leads to enhanced performance regardless of whether the training episodes are explicitly remembered.” (65). Due to the way we experience our favorite stories (transported to another time and place and empathizing with the characters and plots), they become memories similar to the ones we actually experienced. In other words, parts of the stories we are told

become a part of our explicit memory (the quotes, the images, the parts of the plots we share) while other parts linger in the recess of our minds helping us navigate the world (i.e., subconsciously wanting a dramatic, star-crossed romance). This does not even include the fact that our oldest and most favorite stories inspire us to relive them in real life: swinging sticks like knights or operating on the tumor in our teddy's stomach. Stories stick with us. We share them in the way we move, speak, love, and explore the world around us.

All that being said, there are stories you remember more than others, are there not? Their influence weighs more heavily on your mind. The characters, the places, the lesson have left a deeper impression on not only your consciousness but of those around you. Chances are the story that just popped into your mind is something someone might call a *Classic*, even if the only one calling it that is you.

These "Classics" are powerful and because of their pervasiveness in the cultural consciousness they have done more to develop and define one's identity than most stories and often without you even being aware of it. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* defining lofty expectations of romance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* revealing the workings of structural racism in the American South, or *Lord of the Flies* showing the broad conflict of good vs. evil inherent in the hearts of people. Most students in the United States encountered all three of these texts in the impressionable years of their High School education. It is early enough that you are likely to take in their lessons but also forget where or how you learned them in the first place. Sometimes the only way to determine how formative a text has been in shaping your identity is to revisit it.

For me, this was the discovery I had in reexamining *Beowulf* in my maturity. *Beowulf* is another one of those inescapable classics of the American education system. I read it when I was young, but I don't believe I understood the importance of the story to me personally until it reappeared in my first year of graduate studies. My cohort was required to perform a poem, and the goal of this particular exploration was to gain access to our vulnerability. One of the options we could select was the description of Beowulf's funeral pyre from the epic poem. Inexplicably, I gravitated to it. It was the first time I had revisited the poem since high school and the experience was eye-opening. I felt a connection to the piece and started entertaining ideas to take on an ambitious project for my thesis: to write an original solo script about the story of *Beowulf*.

At the outset, I could not have imagined how revelatory the process would be. In attempting to retell a fictional story from youth in my own words I discovered the implicit importance of the story to my artistic self. More importantly, I learned just how vulnerable and valuable it is to tell a story that exposes a part of your genuine self.

What follows is my analysis and reflections on this journey. I examine how a classic retold through the subjective eyes of an artist can challenge, reaffirm, or retexture formative texts for an audience. I consider the process that led me to my original telling of *Beowulf* and the best way to perform it solo. Furthermore, I reflect on the personal dragons I had to wrestle to create the piece in a time of public and personal turmoil and how that taught me to value myself as an artist. Put simply, I hope this document serves as a reminder of how important it is for an artist, or anyone really, to share how they see the world.

## CHAPTER TWO: FINDING SELF IN A CLASSIC: SOLO PERFORMANCES INSPIRED BY CLASSICAL STORIES

Performing by nature is an expressive art form, but within the theatrical medium one of the most personal vehicles of expression is the solo performance. Sometimes categorized under the catchall term “performance art”, solo performance achieved contemporary acclaim in the realm of visual art. These performers – particularly feminist performance artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Yoko Ono, and many others – defined their mode of performance as a space for artists to interrogate the self and challenge audiences’ conceptions of identity.<sup>1</sup> Their work gave rise to what Jo Bonney terms solo performance. This term is preferable to performance art because it is the “basic description” (xiii) that unifies the eclectic work of the soloists in this exceptionally broad medium.

What sets this mode apart from dialogue-based plays is not just the obvious vulnerability of performing alone. Unlike plays in which two or more characters interact, the solo artist is not crafting relationships with other characters onstage. Instead, what is formed is a direct, intimate, and personal relationship with the audience. In attempting this, they find themselves in a vulnerable position. Without other performers, the artist has positioned their self as the sole object of scrutiny. It is their body, words, and thoughts the audience is investigating. As a result, the audience will commonly assume the performance is an expression of something personal to the real-life artist rather than any character on stage. This is not entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Feminist performance artists of the 60s and 70s were instrumental in the definition of solo performance as an expressive medium. See Jayne Wark’s *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* and Elise Archias’s *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* for more information.

off the mark, for the soloist is not necessarily embodying a character. In the creation of solo performance, the artist is fully imposing their own interior subjectivity as the object of exploration. They are deliberately questioning the distinction between real-life self and performance persona. As David Krasner puts it in his chapter on the subject of solo performance in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, “this is not simply an actor playing a part, but an artist presenting him-or herself as the art” (521).

This idea is most apparent in solo performances that take the form of autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical, monologues inspired by life experience and anecdotes presented to the audience. These are unquestionably of a personal nature as they assume a sort of confessional storytelling. The artist is minimizing any idea that they are playing a role and is instead presenting as thin a version of the dramatized self as possible. However, the question of how the artist presents themselves as the art becomes more complicated when a soloist selects or creates material with no obvious connection to the self.

This is the category I found myself in by choosing to perform the story of *Beowulf* as a solo performance. The choice seemed impersonal as the story lacked an explicit connection to my life as an artist and, therefore, might exclude the performance of a literal dramatized self. It is easy to assume, then, that the subject of inquiry has shifted from artist to material. However, even in this situation, the singularity of voice within a solo project results in the same exposure of interiority as any other form of solo performance. The artist remains the solo subject of scrutiny and their voice, body, and interpretations come along with it. The primary difference is in choosing to write/perform a classic as a solo piece the artist has positioned their

voice within the context of a larger conversation. Potentially, this gives the audience not only the chance to peer into the artist's soul but simultaneously reassess a story that has cultural importance through a perspective that is not their own.

To explain, one must understand the nature of a classic, but the term itself is a bit difficult to define. The word means so many different things to different people that Italo Calvino, in his essay titled "Why Read the Classics", produces thirteen potential definitions for the term. Ultimately, he settles on a fourteenth that encompasses all of the previous definitions: "A classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway" (13). This is an excellent summation, but the subjectivity of Calvino's smaller definitions is equally important in getting at the heart of how an artist's identity is exposed, or even defined, by their relationship with a classic.

Calvino's second definition suggests classics are stories that are formative in our youth. They give shape to our future selves, providing models, values, and comparisons. These influences continue to work on us long after we remember what inspired them in the first place. As he says, "There is a particular potency in the work which can be forgotten in itself, but which leaves its seed behind in us" (11). Classics leave an indelible impression on an individual's identity and, in a way, become a part of who they are. This is not entirely surprising, as people are the sum total of our experiences. Relationships, memories, media, everything we consume, and the way we process it defines our identity. However, classic stories have a certain quality connected to them that memories do not possess. They bring with them a history, previous interpretations, and decades (potentially centuries) of critical discourse. In

other words, by engaging with a classic, we are not just defining one's self in relation or opposition to the classic, but history and culture itself.

Furthermore, classics are not something we encounter in the vacuum of our early formative years. They are a part of our educational, cultural, and social fabric. We have the opportunity to interact with them at any time. As such, the reaction and interpretation to reading, or rereading a classic, is filtered through a bevy of collected personal experiences. Moreover, they are compared and contrasted to other contemporary materials that we have consumed. Meaning, it is all but impossible to confront these classics with any objectivity.

Fortunately, this is not desirable. For it is this subjectivity that reveals how an artist's identity intertwines with the telling of a classic story. Perhaps even more importantly, it reveals how this subjectivity can result in a fresh significance for these culturally relevant tales. Mary Beard and John Henderson write about this concept in their book *Classics: A Very Short Introduction*:

Here, as so many times before and since, creative artists have found their visions in the writing of the classical; and in the process, they have stressed different aspects of the 'original', offered new emphases and stamped the result with their own identity [...] each new reading and 'imitation' invests [it] with a fresh significance- significance that was there all along, no doubt, but remained unrecognizable until another artist's eye made it visible to us [...] to see possibilities and hear echoes in [the] writing that would be lost without them.

(106)

They believe that classics find a richer texture, their meaning changed and renewed, through the multiplication of interpretations across a history of readers, and that the creative artist can create something personal from fresh interpretations of classic texts. This is certainly the case when an artist devises a solo performance from this intermingling of personal experience and classic inspiration.

With this in mind, I realized devising a solo performance based on a classic with my personal interpretation as the foundation of the material requires clear creative intent. As will be discussed in the following chapter, to me *Beowulf* is a masculine text that warns other men of the dangers in pursuing fantastical concepts of hegemonic masculinity. To transforming this concept into a script, I sought examples of men who created solo work about interrogating their own conceptions of masculinity in relation to existing tropes of masculinity in classical literature. The two pieces I landed on were Alan Cumming's *Macbeth* and Neil LaBute's *Iphigenia in Orem*.

In 2013, John Tiffany, Andrew Goldberg, and Alan Cumming conceived a one-person *Macbeth* for the National Theatre of Scotland. In this reimagining of Shakespeare's text, Alan Cumming portrays a mental patient to whom the plot of *Macbeth* is a kind of psychotic nightmare. Cumming portrays the roles of almost every one of the Scottish play's characters, including Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Cumming is forthright about his inspiration for this production. He had been attracted to the play ever since he made his professional debut as Malcolm in a Glasgow production at the age of 22 (Lunden). Echoing the sentiments of Beard and Henderson, his desire to revisit the classic arose from there being something about the story he wanted to personally tell. The catalyst for the solo show came from Cumming's desire to craft a production of *Macbeth* where the actors performing Lady Macbeth and Macbeth switch roles every night. Most interesting, however, is Cumming's original fascination of perform Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, husband and wife, himself. Through performance, his own personal identity and experiences reveal another perspective of the subject of gender in this classic play.

In a truly shocking addition to the plot, Cumming has sex with himself onstage alternating between Macbeth laying on his back and Lady Macbeth straddling her husband. It is a moment of defamiliarization of what the viewer understands to be the story of Macbeth. Instead of the traditional portrayals, we see the singularity of Alan Cumming performing both in an erotic moment that becomes a rather self-demonstrative exposure of his own experiences, interpretations, and sexual politics. In an interview with *Interview Magazine*, Cumming responds to what it is like playing both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth:

What Macbeth fears happens to Lady Macbeth, and what Lady Macbeth paves for their future is what he gets, and he's not very happy with it. When they're together, they're electric and can do anything. She spurs him on; he's more solid. But when they're split apart, they don't function properly. For me, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are kind of similar. They're not vastly different. They are like two sides of me, and I think that's really interesting. When they split about, you see how much they need each other.

(Visco)

Cumming's personal identification with husband and wife in the story turns this moment into something more exposing of personal interiority than just telling the story of Macbeth. As Krasner puts it, "when an individual confronts the audience alone, the exterior mask that s/he presents is widely assumed to offer a refracted expression of some aspect of her or his interior subjectivity" (521).

Alan Cumming is not a shy man. For much of his life, he has been frank about his bisexuality, admits he is married to a man but remains attracted to women, and proclaims himself as "the acceptable face of sexual ambiguity" (Higginbotham); a title reaffirmed with aplomb through his previous portrayal of a gender-fluid Dionysus in the National Theatre of Scotland's 2008 production of *The Bacchae*. Cumming says, "I see a worrying trend among LGBT people, that if you identify yourself in just one

way, you close yourself off to other experiences. My sexuality has never been black and white; it's always been gray" (Sandel). It is not altogether surprising then that Cumming would find something compelling in the story of a husband and wife challenging their gender and traditional marriage roles.

These personal experiences, and his decision to make them a part of his performance, inescapably tangle questions of LGBT studies, gender theory, and Cumming's own sexual politics into the performance. By imposing his identity on the characters, our understanding of Macbeth as a character, and how he relates to Cumming himself, changes. Our understanding of what it means to "bring forth men children only" mid autoeroticism is colored by the intersection of the classic text and Cumming's own personal identity. As Cumming stated, themes of sexuality and gender inherently exist within Shakespeare's original text, but the audience is given a new interpretation they may have never experienced without a performance that complicates these classic characters with his subjectivity.

Cumming and the team chose to utilize Shakespeare's words to accomplish this task. However, there are other solo artists that tell their stories by transforming classic symbols into something almost entirely unrecognizable. Neil LaBute's *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* premiered at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre in New York City on June 24, 1999. It is a series of three one-acts, two of which take the form of solo performances and the third being a piece that features two actors who address the audience but never each other. The two completely solo monologues wear their Greek influences on their sleeves. The first solo is titled *Iphigenia at Orem*, Orem being an apparent reference to the city in Utah and takes inspiration for its plot from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Euripides' version of the myth concerns itself with

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek coalition in the Trojan War, and his decision to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis and receive safe passage at sea and prosper in war. LaBute's reimagining finds a Utah businessman sitting in a hotel room confessing the story of how a coworker's practical joke led him to "sacrifice" his daughter to preserve his standard of living.

Like the first, the second piece, *Medea Redux*, is a modern retelling of Euripides' *Medea*. Euripides' plot revolves around the actions of the titular character, Medea. After her husband Jason leaves her for a Greek princess, Medea takes vengeance by murdering his new wife and her own two sons. *Medea Redux* once again finds a soloist, this time a woman, sitting at an institutional table smoking. She recounts an affair she had with her science teacher at the age of thirteen that results in a child. Later, she finds herself destitute and alone with a child. Still idealizing her former lover, she takes the young child to meet his father only to discover he is now married. After being rejected by the man, she electrocutes her son in the bathtub by dropping a tape player into the water. The motive is unclear, but assumedly she was trying to harm her former love who "loved this boy". The two characters seem rather separate from the playwright LaBute. After all, LaBute has not committed serial infanticide. Moreover, not being a performer himself, Labute has never appeared in these plays. Despite this, *Bash* manages to circumvent these obstacles and reveal his own subjectivity when a compelling circumstance of the play becomes clear: all the characters are Mormon.

While dialogue-based plays often include their author's voice, in monologue-based plays the singularity of the originating voice tends to be much louder. There are no other characters to confuse, oppose, or complicate the intent of the soloist.

Only their own body, voice, and struggle exists. Even if it is obfuscated by fictionality, the audience receives the author's voice directly. In a way, even if the author is not performing, it is the originating voice we hear. This fact was not lost on the Mormon Church, which disfellowshipped LaBute shortly after reviews for the initial showing of what was then simply titled *Bash* appeared.

With this simple religious inclusion, *Bash* goes from a modern adaptation of classic myths to something deeply personal. Regarding the play, LaBute is quoted as saying the following:

I don't think I was ever really devout enough. When someone would ask me if I was a practicing Mormon, I would reply flippantly, 'Yes, but I need more practice.' I was doing things blatantly that Mormons were not supposed to do. Members of the church are asked not to see R-rated movies and here I was making R-rated movies – spending most of my days crafting them. At some point you hold up these two different ideas of yourself and choose between them.

(Gilbey)

LaBute, a man with a reputation for the repugnant, writes characters who are seemingly normal only to reveal the profoundly evil nature lurking in their private hearts.

LaBute's interest in questions of morality reveals why he would use Greek drama as an inspiration to channel his creative objectives. He does not consider himself a moralist. Instead, he is interested in questions of why people do what they do, and how they live with it. He says, "what is good, what is bad, what is sin? I guess that's the reason I'm drawn toward Greek drama and things like that [...] and how hard is it to actually stand up for yourself? When a gun's pointed in your face, you know, I get it – but when it's office politics, why is it such a hard thing?" (Strong). LaBute sees the moralistic questions of Greek drama as similar to the questions we

ask ourselves on a daily basis. LaBute's struggles may not seem as epic as Agamemnon (is it a sin to kill his daughter or is it right to kill his daughter?) but it is his struggle with adhering to his faith that inspires him.

In *Iphigenia in Orem*, LaBute's soloist is a modern, unexceptional version of Agamemnon. He has murdered his daughter, but the incident happened long ago. Now, he dispassionately recounts the story to a stranger, the audience, in a hotel room. The man's priorities have shifted. He has moved on, figuratively and literally, but the stakes of his conflict remain high. Regarding his faith, the man says, "you just go on. You do. You thank your heavenly father for giving you the strength to stand up to his trials and figure there must be a plan behind it all, a reason for so much pain and you just...go on" (161). Here, the man presents honest trust and faith in his God. One could almost admire it. However, after the young man retells his story, he closes the monologue by saying, "I can't tell Deb, it'd kill her. Kill us, as a family I mean, that's obvious, right? Can't tell anyone in the church, or the police, of course...so I chose you" (196). The man is represented as not being able to face the church. His actions, the murder of his own daughter, could never be accepted. Instead, needing to confess his struggles, he confides in a stranger: the audience. In this position, an audience is almost compelled to consider the identity of his author reconciling his only conflicted Mormon background.

LaBute writes his Mormon characters as people that find strength in their heavenly father to "go on," yet still perpetrate heinous acts they cannot escape. Being disfellowshipped for writing such "murderous Mormons" gave LaBute the strength to "go on" in his own way. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he said, "I had to make the decision to go forwards or backwards. I couldn't live in that limbo and

decided it was better for me not to be a Mormon than to be a 'bad' Mormon” (Gilbey). After exploring his feelings in front of an audience, LaBute left the Mormon Church. In this case, LaBute’s interrogation of self and expression of his personal feelings on his faith had a significant real-world impact, lending a tangible power to the potential effects solo performance can have on artist and audience.

The solo performance grants an artist a unique opportunity that few dramatic forms afford. It allows the artist to create tellingly personal stories. Sometimes, the best way to express themselves is through the works that inspire them. In choosing to present a solo performance based on classical work, the artist is exposing their interior subjectivity and presenting a new read of a classic story that reveals the power inherent in these texts. Buoyed by history, they provide role models and a comparison through which to define, relate, expand, or oppose our identity. By sharing their perspective on a classic, artists not only give the audience a view into their subjective mind but, potentially, a new way to think of a culturally formative text.

## CHAPTER THREE: MEN AND THEIR DRAGONS

The original manuscript of *Beowulf*, dating to approximately 1,000 years ago, remains in the British Library as a mostly illegible ruin. In 1731 there was a fire at Ashburnham House at Westminster, the location where the text was being kept. It might seem fitting for a poem that ends in a battle with a fire-breathing monster to perish under such similar circumstances, but the text survived the fire mostly intact. No, perhaps even more ironic, it was not a blaze of glory that did the most damage, but time. In the subsequent years, its edges have crumbled, ink has faded, and countless hands have scribbled over it in an attempt to emend missing portions of text. All this to say that the poem, and our understanding of it, can only be imperfect. There was never a “perfect” manuscript to begin with as the poem was transcribed by two separate scribes, each working in their own particular way, attempting to adapt an even older story from a different culture and language. *Beowulf* has always been a product of reinterpretation that has long been something that belongs to its inheritors.

There have been innumerable translations, critiques, articles, essays, and adaptations that add mounting insight to the colorful history of this incredibly lively artifact. Unsurprisingly, the conversation between these voices has only grown more conflicting with time. In his seminal lecture “The Monsters and the Critics”, famed fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien humorously summarized the decades of analysis proceeding his own:

Beowulf is a half-baked native epic the development of which was killed by Latin learning; it was inspired by emulation of Virgil, and is a product of the education that came in with Christianity; it is feeble and incompetent as a narrative; the rules of narrative are cleverly observed in the manner of the learned epic; it is the confused product of a committee of muddle-headed and

probably beer-bemused Anglo-Saxons (this is a Gallic voice); it is a string of pagan lays edited by monks; it is the work of a learned but inaccurate Christian antiquarian; it is a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, though the genius seems to have been shown principally in doing something much better left undone (this is a very recent voice); it is a wild folk-tale (general chorus); it is a poem of an aristocratic and courtly tradition (same voices); it is a hotchpotch; it is a sociological, anthropological, archaeological document; it is a mythical allegory (very old voices these and generally shouted down, but not so far out as some of the newer cries); it is rude and rough; it is a masterpiece of metrical art; it has no shape at all; it is singularly weak in construction; it is a clever allegory of contemporary politics (old John Earle with some slight support from Mr. Girvan, only they look to different periods); its architecture is solid; it is thin and cheap (a solemn voice); it is undeniably weighty (the same voice); it is a national epic; it is a translation from the Danish; it was imported by Frisian traders; it is a burden to English syllabuses; and (final universal chorus of all voices) it is worth studying.'

(9)

That lecture was given 85 years ago. Now it would be a logistical impossibility to read all the scholarship that exists on the topic.

Needless to say, *Beowulf* remains a subject of tremendous inquiry. While it can be easy to see the poem as a relic of the past, countless scholars are fascinated by the idea of what it says about the present. This line of curiosity seems almost encouraged by design, as the text is written retrospectively, narrated by an unknown voice wrestling with a past that is fading from their understanding. So, it almost feels fitting that each voice that sounds off on the poem views it through the same lens. What can a story from 1,000 years ago teach us about now? Here is the wellspring of *Beowulf*. Regardless of the era, its message of legacy, entitlement, masculinity, morality, and failure prove inspiring and, at least for me, moving.

As I read the first parts of *Beowulf* as a boy, I remember the titular hero being everything I wanted to be. He was powerful, dauntless, righteous, determined, charismatic, and (maybe most important to me as a kid) really cool. As I matured, though, the image that stuck with me most was not the oft-remembered severing of

the arm of Grendel in the golden hall of dreams or the underwater battle with his mother and her court of reptilian monsters. No, it was not any of the cool stuff. It was the hopeless and sorrowful image of Beowulf's steel shield exploding into sparks as he failed to overpower the one foe he could never hope to defeat: death.

I never knew why this moment stood apart more than all the others but I wanted to understand why. My curiosity encouraged me to analyze the poem and my interpretation of it in a different way than the copious amounts of scholarship that already exist. I wanted to put myself in Beowulf's boots and explore my interpretation of his life through his body. So, I decided to write a script in which Beowulf could reflect on his life and use the medium of solo performance to better understand my personal connection to the story and find a way to share my interpretation with others. My idea was to set the story of the play after Beowulf's death, in a limbo between life and death, and challenge him with retelling his story to a God in the vainglorious attempt to prove he had earned the reward of immortal glory through his actions. At first, I thought I might come to some new conclusion about the story, something cleverly informed by modern times. However, through the process of writing a solo script inspired by *Beowulf*, I realized I was only emphasizing the original poem's warning against living an unbalanced life in my own unique way.

The action that makes up the Epic poem can be easily summarized in a single sentence: one man goes on a journey to defend mankind against three monsters but in the end cannot fend off the ravages of time and dies trying to prove his worth. Easy enough, but this sort of simplification robs *Beowulf* of the intricacies of its main character. My personal interest in the epic has always focused rather squarely on Beowulf as a character and the theme most central to the story of his life: defeat. It is

a deadly serious theme that announces itself within the first line: “Lo! the Spear-Danes’ glory through splendid achievements / The folk-kings’ former fame we have heard of, / How princes displayed then their prowess-in-battle.” (1-3). A triumphant call to the remembrance of heroes long past and an urgent, immediate reminder that all heroes’ lives are a struggle that ends in an inevitable defeat. This theme is thread throughout the entirety of the work through allusion, digression, metaphor, and eventually the literal death of Beowulf.

Tolkien, one of the first prominent voices to consider what the poem’s narrative might teach us about ourselves rather than the past, states, “it is in Beowulf that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme [defeat], and has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time” (18). Defeat, failure, and death are not uncommon in heroic stories, even for the time period, but the devotion, beauty, and patience the topic is treated within *Beowulf* is uncompromising. To this point, Tolkien believed Beowulf was not an epic but an elegy: a 3,136 line prelude to a dirge (31). I believe my younger self and Tolkien would agree on this matter, even if I could never have hoped to articulate it so adroitly. Tolkien believed this was the universal message of Beowulf, that failure and death know no proportion. Beowulf boldly battles the forces of true evil to preserve the light of the world, in spite of the inevitable, but unacknowledged, cost of death.

Death is not the only defeat Beowulf suffers, but nowhere in the poem does Beowulf expose the pain of the inevitability of his defeat more clearly than in the several hundred lines preceding his death. In this section, Beowulf is presumably 70 years old. His youthful heroics are in the past, and when he first receives word of the

devastation the dragon has wrought on his people, the poet writes that Beowulf's "mind was in turmoil, unaccustomed anxiety and gloom confused his brain." (2331-2333). The brief reflection is an apparent allusion to an earlier character he met in the poem, Hrothgar, and his own famously harrowing experience with Grendel. For a moment, he experiences the same distress Hrothgar must have felt, an irony certainly not lost on the reader. After all, Beowulf, like Hrothgar before him, is now an elderly man ravaged by time faced with an insurmountable monster. Yet, within two lines of poetry, Beowulf rejects the lesson he should have learned from Hrothgar. Instead, he seeks violent revenge. At the cliff overlooking the dragon's lair, the poet's narration states the hero is "sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death" (2419-2420) and, initially, his speech to the elven men that join him on his quest reveals and reflects this emotional state. He starts by relating the story of his life in a more tellingly personal way than he has ever previously expressed. It is revealed for the first time that his father, the mighty warrior he invokes in his first introduction to buttress his own reputation, died by the time Beowulf was seven. He continues to reveal that he was shortly thereafter orphaned once again when King Hrethel, his foster father, took his own life because of the grief of his biological son's fratricide. It is a surprising exposure, but the speech finally mounts into a boastful account of his victories in war with the Swedes and propels him, a septuagenarian, to battle the dragon alone. Beowulf, and presumably the reader, are well-aware the battle will result in his demise, yet we read, in horror, as the poet entangles us in the mournful defeat of our hero. This is the moment at the core of Tolkien's famous argument about the poem concerning its meaning and value: "he is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy" (18). Tolkien and I would agree, but I believe there is

a more telling revelation contained within this statement. To modern eyes, what does it mean to be a *man* and why would it cause one to embrace tragedy?

Recent reads of *Beowulf* have examined it under the lens of gender studies. A cursory search will yield hundreds of results on the subject, ranging from explorations of queer theory concerning the main character's lack of romantic interest to deep gender role analysis concerning every female character in the text (including Hygelac's daughter, only fleetingly mentioned in a digressive speech). That being said, the dominant read of *Beowulf* remains a masculine one. Inarguably, the world of the poem is structured around and focuses on the actions and interests of men entrenched in a patriarchal society. However, I argue it would be unfair to claim the text is blind to the problems of masculinity. As Claire Lees so astutely puts in the collection *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, "*Beowulf* is as much about the limits of aggression in this male aristocratic heroic world as it is about its successes" (144).

As *Beowulf* himself reveals, his life begins in a defeat of sorts. He is quickly deprived of a father figure not once but twice. Following this tragedy, it was Hygelac, one of Hrethel's sons, that raised *Beowulf* as his ward. The poem states that Hygelac admires *Beowulf* and that *Beowulf* believes he enjoyed glory under his care but around midway through the poem a distinctly different interpretation of this relationship is established. When *Beowulf* relates the story of his victories in Denmark to Hygelac, the poet's narration explains that Hygelac and his Geats believed *Beowulf* "wretched, / so that sons of the Geatmen accounted him worthless, / And the lord of the liegemen loth was to do him / Mickle of honor, when mead-cups were passing; / They fully believed him idle and sluggish," (XXXI, 39-43). This does

not sound like the admiration of king and country. Instead, Beowulf was not well-liked, despite numerous monster slayings at home, until after his victory over Grendel. This description is paralleled in Beowulf's encounter with Unferth, a drunken warrior among Hrothgar's men. Early in the poem, Unferth questions the fitness of this Beowulf that has come to aid them. Beowulf responds to Unferth's challenge with 100 lines of dramatic posturing to overcompensate for the public slight. Be it the lack of father figures, his bad reputation amongst his kinsmen as a weakling, or his later failure to protect his king Hygelac and his heir during the war with the Swedes, Beowulf's life is one of compensating for the perceived weaknesses exposed by literal and figurative defeats.

The first chapter of David Rosen's book *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity* focuses on the subject of overcompensation in *Beowulf* and how a modern man could find a disturbing kinship with the titular character's desperate struggle for an unimpeachable reputation: "Today we may identify with a Beowulf who needed to do something stupendous to mute his, his folk's, and our appreciation of his failure. This type of compensation may seem familiar" (2). Rosen believes that modern men can relate to Beowulf's desire to appear as nothing short of a hero. This idea calls to mind the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: a valuing of strength, aggressiveness (and sometimes violence), competitiveness, achievement, self-confidence, and emotional control. While the idealization of the concept is largely a fantasy, it is a form of masculinity implicitly valued by many men due to the entitlements, and the protection thereof, they systemically inherit (Groff). It is a commonly held belief that Beowulf is a paragon of hegemonic masculinity. This interpretation is quite hard to challenge at the surface. After all, Beowulf is a self-

assured champion who resolves conflict with inhuman strength and violent glorious performances of masculinity. Therefore, it can be easy to read *Beowulf* as a model for this potentially toxic form of gender performance.

However, many scholars reject this interpretation of *Beowulf*. Rosen puts it best when he posits, “if *Beowulf* is a document about masculine heroism, then one must also deal with disturbing presences in the story” (2). Rosen points to how *Beowulf*’s exceptional use of violence and repeated self-isolation dehumanizes the poem’s hero. Considering this, *Beowulf* begins to show similarities to the evil he has sworn to fight more than a hero. Much like Grendel who is described as a giant, an “outcast from all sweetness,” cursed to dwell outside of the comforts of mankind, *Beowulf* is a solitary, inhumanly powerful killer who drowns his emotions in blood. Unlike Grendel, though, *Beowulf* lives in a society that rewards his shows of violence through “glory,” an ambiguous currency seemingly only won through slaughter. As bodies stack, more and more men join a chorus praising and rewarding *Beowulf* for his victories, but in the end, the value of glory offers diminishing returns as his body fails. *Beowulf* is left an old, weak man whose only solution to an insurmountable obstacle is to attempt to kill it alone.

This does not sound like a character one should model themselves after, but in actuality it is his defeats that yield a valuable lesson about the tragedy of manhood. *Beowulf* is an excellent model of a man let down by his hubris and reliance on strength. The poem offers many opportunities for the reader to reflect on *Beowulf*’s feats through digression, but a singular moment within the narrative highlights the problematic nature of *Beowulf*’s actions better than any other. In what is sometimes referred to as Hrothgar’s sermon, the old King of the Danes reflects on

his own journey to self-awareness via the horror of Grendel, but perhaps more importantly the pride he sees growing in the young hero who saved his life. He fears the warrior he loves and has adopted as his own son will follow in his shadow and overly rely on his finite strength. Hrothgar was a lifelong warrior who won fame and his crown through bloody conflict but by the time Grendel came he was weak and old. He wishes for Beowulf to never experience the sorrow, pain, and helplessness such a life has brought him so he moralizes as a warning:

Oh, Beowulf dear: Best of the heroes, from bale-strife defend thee,  
And choose thee the better, counsels eternal;  
Be not over proud: life is fleeting, and its strength soon wasteth away.  
Beware of arrogance, world-famous champion!  
But a little-while lasts thy life-vigor's fulness;

(XXVI. 14-18)

Afterward, it seems Beowulf has learned from Hrothgar as the two shed tears at their farewell, an uncharacteristic public display of emotion for the young Hero.

Unfortunately, as Beowulf rules for fifty years (just as Hrothgar had) before being haunted by an evil beast (just as Hrothgar had), and begins to feel helpless and sorrowful (the same emotions Hrothgar experienced) he chooses his pride and strength. A shield and a weapon that had long since dulled.

Tolkien writes that "Nowhere does a dragon come in so precisely where he should," because he believed a dragon is "a thing made by imagination for just such a purpose" (31). Truthfully, Beowulf's dragon appears much earlier in the poem. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, he is rewarded with a feast and treasure. At the celebration, there is a digressive story told in which Beowulf hears the legend of "Sigmund and the Dragon." It is a story in which Sigmund, a warrior, encounters a dragon guarding a hoard of treasure. Sigmund braves fire and death to single-

handedly slay the dragon. A victory that won him the immortal reward of songs and story being told long after his death. It's easy to understand how someone could desire the same fortune. So, when Beowulf is presented with that same opportunity he chooses the dragon and everything it represents over the cautionary words of a loving friend and father. After all, it is a man's duty to slay dragons.

This is the interpretation that inspired me as an artist. Having defined these ideas through research and analysis, I wanted to explore my relation to this tragic story of masculinity through performance and potentially discover how its implicit value to me as a person formed parts of my own identity and aesthetic. I could have simply done a reading of the poem in its entirety, yes, but I felt this would have been a disingenuous exploration (though, I feel compelled to acknowledge the fact most translator's estates do not license their work for public performance). I felt to truly express my interpretation of *Beowulf* I needed to use my own words. As I have discussed, the most fitting medium to obtain this level of reflection and expression is solo performance. So, I endeavored to write an original solo play inspired by the story. I do not speak Old English and do not currently have the skills to translate the poem myself. Instead, I used Lesslie Hall's public domain translation as a starting point to rewrite, augment, and adapt the story to best suit my needs, occasionally researching certain Old English phrases to retain the integrity of images or gently reinterpret them to suit the needs of my play.

I started with the theme of defeat, as it was always what fascinated me most about the text. Inspired by my personal connection to his defeats, I conceived to set the play after Beowulf's greatest one: his mortal struggle against the dragon. I wanted to expose the character's reliance on violence to craft his story so I set the

story in a place where these weapons would not be available to me. As such, I chose to set the script in a spiritual realm, something like the concept of the Christian limbo, in which the hero believes an indifferent god is taking the measure of his life's deeds in order to determine his fitness for "eternal rewards". This, to me, was a compelling point of departure for the action of the play to focus on Beowulf retelling his own story.

I wanted to follow the same course of the original story, focusing on his greatest hits as it were. So, as he tells the story of Grendel and his mother, he focuses on recreating the violent performances of masculinity he lived by heavily utilizing gesture and athletics. Then, as he gets closer to recounting his most notable failure, he grows noticeably furious and uncomfortable, forcing him to expose his emotions and reckon with the reality of his failure juxtaposed with his victories. My hope was that whirlwind of physical activity at the beginning of the play would exhaust the character, and actor, encouraging a more free and vulnerable finale.

To best facilitate this final contemplation, I highlighted the numerous defeats of his life through digressive tangents Beowulf shares throughout the play. These include multiple self-indulgent or sarcastic commentaries from the character that reveals his inherent pride but also help the character posture and overcompensate within the telling of his own story. The most prominent way I emphasized his struggle with his own vulnerability, however, was by emphasizing his moving and emotional relationship with Hrothgar. Hrothgar has always been my favorite character in the poem. The brilliant Maria Dahvana Headley articulates part of my interest in the old King in the prologue to her translation quite well: "The news cycle is filled with men Hrothgar's age failing utterly at self-awareness" (xxxix). Hrothgar shows flickers of the

familiar old, grey-haired men who helm our society by trafficking in fantasies of hegemonic masculinity without a shred of awareness; but, mercifully, Hrothgar has ripened with understanding through age. The advice and love he shows the normally stoic hero and Beowulf's uncharacteristically emotional responses to the formerly heroic man were the perfect dynamics to highlight in my interpretation. I believe there is tremendous power in allowing Beowulf to perform the character of his found father. To watch the care and affection he uses to characterize the most important man in his life and, in the end, force him into reciting the lengthy warning given to him about the dangers of pride.

In many ways, I wanted to create a play that allows the character (and artist) the opportunity to decouple harmful masculine characteristics from the idea of being a hero. I wanted my Beowulf to learn the lesson he taught me. It is the love and affection he showed other men and women that won him fame, not violence. To me, that is the lesson Wiglaf teaches Beowulf in the end when he tries to save Beowulf from certain death. Beowulf had no heir, no family, no remaining strength and he still insists on fulfilling the prophetic deathwish of his performative masculinity. In spite of that, as he dies, he leaves everything to Wiglaf. Maybe he believed it was a reward for Wiglaf's victory over the dragon (in reality, it *is* Beowulf who defeats the dragon), maybe it is because Wiglaf is a distant relative. I believe in the quiet moments he earned before passing he realizes that Wiglaf reminds him of the love he shared with an important man in his life. At that moment, I like to think he thought of all the men that served as his father (Ecgtheow, Hrethel, Hygelac, and Hrothgar) and how it brought him to this place, for better and worse. In my play, I wanted that to be his actual victory: that he was loved and he loved.

It can be said the entire play is inspired by a singular line that best epitomizes the meaning of this inescapable text. They are Beowulf's last words on earth: "Weird hath off carried / All of my kinsmen to the Creator's glory, / Earls in their vigor: I shall after them fare" (XXXVIII, 61-63). I have rewritten this line in my play as "I am prepared to depart. To where I know not, but I must follow my fathers."

## CHAPTER FOUR: *THE DEATH OF BEOWULF* PERFORMANCE DRAFT

*Open on darkness.*

### **VOICES:**

*(A whisper)*

Beowulf...

*We see Beowulf's face. His eyes open wide as he inhales sharply. He lays on his back looking to the sky. He looks about briefly before he gives in to his instincts. Ready to fight he surveys the area around him.*

### **VOICES:**

*(A whisper. Slightly more urgent)*

Beowulf...

### **BEOWULF:**

Who speaks?

### **VOICES:**

*(Kindly)*

Dear-beloved warrior.

*Beowulf checks his body for wounds. Nothing. He feels his skin, perhaps views himself in a nearby pond, surprised at its youthfulness.*

**VOICES:**

Beowulf...

**BEOWULF:**

Play your games, but these illusions that restore the flesh of youth-days passed do not erase the scars won across 50 winters thence. Nor does it reverse the fate that befell me. Welcome, Spirit. Tell me, who is it that comes to receive me at the end of my days? I do not believe it is the old gods who speak to me now. Otherwise, battle-clad Valkyries astride winged-steeds come to whisk me away to Valhalla. I suppose our gods lack the subtlety of a disembodied voice. No, you are of a different sort. I know of another being. Long ago, a man told me of a god that goes by many names: Almighty Father. The Creator. The Judge of Deeds- Are you this same King of Kings?

You need not respond. These otherworldly dramatics betray your obscure nature. I am told this Lord God rewards men after death. Life everlasting, if they are worthy.

**VOICES:**

*(a cacophony of noises spoken simultaneously:)*

Best of the Heroes

Seek eternal rewards

War-worthy Hero

Death is not easily escaped

**BEOWULF:**

Have I struck at your purpose? Have you restored my strength so I may tell my tale for judgement?

**VOICES:**

*(Magnanimously)*

Show, as thy spirit doth urge thee

**BEOWULF:**

I accept your challenge- and if this is to be my last hour on earth then it shall be a triumphant one! I have fought countless battles, ventured my life in pursuit of glory, and will prove myself a man worthy of life after death! O, hear me, god-judge, listen now and I shall tell you the story of Beowulf, King of the Geats.

My story begins as a mere thread inextricably woven into the legend of another. Far from my home, in the land of the Danes, lived a man. A Prodigy of Kings. Each of his forefathers was a hero whose names and deeds have echoed through generations, yet all their accomplishments lose luster when compared to their worthiest son: Hrothgar. To tell my story, I must tell his.

Of four heirs to the throne, it was Hrothgar fortune favored most. War won him fame and with it the hearts of men. Friends, kinsmen, and warriors flocked to him, swelling his army to a force far surpassing his ancestors. Soon, none could challenge him, and the people rejoiced when he was crowned King of the Danes. Hrothgar, a kind man, wishing to requite the love of the people

gave orders to construct a great hall. Built from the finest wood and iron, fitted with gold, rivaling only the sun in brightness. He promised it would be a home to all that was good and from within he would share the comforts and riches of the world with all. The day it was complete he named it "Heorot". Ever good to his word, he threw a feast and stuffed the young walls with song and dance. Through open doors, music invited all of mankind to partake in the feast, but the music spilled into the wilds and happened upon the ear of a stranger to such sweetness. A monster, by the name of Grendel.

*(He looks for the voices)*

Have you heard it? Christians spit on the name and condemn him as the unholy descendant of a cursed man. What was his name?

**VOICES:**

*(Scornful whisper)*

Cain...

**BEOWULF:**

Cain...exiled for the murder of his brother Abel. A just punishment for murder. but 'tis hard for s father, even the Almighty Father, to pass such judgment on his own son. Even so, I am told he exacted a greater price still. A curse was put upon him that from his loins only goblins, ogres, and all manner of monster would spring. This world is filled with monsters. If he was the grandsire of all these dark creatures on earth, then Cain was...busy...in his banishment. Unfortunate.

Unwelcomed by Gods or men, the demon, Grendel, haunted the marshes, far from people, misery his only friend. The merrymaking of the hall distressed him. For days of feasting he endured, until one night he crept about to see these happy Danes. What he found in the unprotected hall was a pile of slumbering men, fat from the feast, numb to pain and sorrow. His envy made him ravenous. There, in the dark, he prepared a feast all his own. He butchers them upon the tables where they slept. One by one, 30 Danes in all, staining the bright hall with blood. When he was done, he dragged the corpses to his lair to glut himself on their remains.

Dawn's first light revealed the carnage. Hrothgar, his stout heart broken, sat amongst the gore and prayed for intervention. Prayers that would be answered only with ceaseless cruelty. For twelve winters, Grendel wrought nightly bloodshed upon Heorot. All warriors would seek to cease his rampage met the same place. The Danes abandoned Heorot. So, Grendel reigned, and the Hrothgar watched as the greatest house in all the world was made empty.

This is the tale, as it was told to me, by a crew of wayfaring sailors fifty years ago on the shores of Geatland. At the first utterance of their news, I knew what must be done. I ordered a ship and announced my plan to sail in defense of the Danes. I gathered fourteen of the best warriors and together, we took to sea, the wind behind us, flying like a bird all the way to the cliffs of the Danish coast. As we approached, my eyes caught such a sight I thought I must be dreaming. Upon a distant hill, a second sun came into view. Man-

made but no less radiant. It was Heorot- and its jewel-encrusted walls beckoned us to glory!

We followed the paved road to the house of dreams, pushed open the doors...only to be greeted by a nearly hollow hall. Its ornaments and trophies, the benches and boards, all cracked and defaced by ragged scars. Amidst it all, the beleaguered sentinel of these tormented nights sat upon his throne. Old, grey, Hrothgar. A shadow of his legend.

“Good King Hrothgar, news of your terrible plight has reached as far as Geatland. Compelled, these men and I, have sailed for two days to offer aid. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Beowulf, son of the mighty warrior Ecgtheow, and kinsmen to Hygelac, King of the Geats. I stand before you on the merits of my own triumphs. Be they man or monsters, all fools who have come before me seeking death have left this world completely satisfied. With the help of these men, I seek to offer this same satisfaction to the one you call Grendel. This is my request: do not refuse my thanes and I the privilege of purging Heorot of evil. We may not be blood, but we heartily seek to restore the honor of your name and clan. So dearly do I, personally, respect your exploits, King Hrothgar, that I shall double the prospective glory in your vengeance. I hear the reckless beast scorns weapons in the pursuit of carnage. So, shall I. I hereby renounce sword, shield, and armor. Only man and monster. Fate shall determine the rest.”

With tremendous effort, the King stood, and the few souls still lingering in that once great hall silently watched as he lumbered toward me.

“Beowulf. Son of Ecgtheow. I fought alongside your father. I counted him a friend. I have prayed for an end to these harrowing assaults now Almighty God has sent the son of my friend to turn the tide of our misfortune. Praise be to God for this blessing! Fix a bench for these heroes. Send word to my warriors to fill these halls once more with story and song! We feast in anticipation of your triumph!”

I had not expected to find a friend of my father in this distant land. Nor a Danish King that praises a foreign God. Though fate never ceases to amaze. A feast was called to celebrate our auspicious arrival. The smell of meat and beer enticed Danes from miles around and people filled that abandoned hall reviving it with resounding joy. Drinking, Dancing, happiness in full view, men and women relishing in that long-lost sensation. As the last of light began to fade, I resolved myself to ensure this would not be their last night of peace. At twilight, Hrothgar stood and made a toast to our health and luck:

"Our hall is yours to keep, friend. It was once the greatest of homes and shall be again when this cursed beast is no more. Win this night, Beowulf, and there is nothing you shall wish. Skol!"

Our host departed, leaving us to our work. True to my word, I unburdened myself of armor, and entrusted my sword and shield to the youngest among my company. His name was Eofor, and his hands were trembling. He was not alone. Fourteen courageous faces, none expecting to return home. We all knew the stories Before we bedded down, I spoke to them knowing they may be my last words:

"Only Grendel should fear monsters this night. For I am the monster in this hall. Tonight, he shall face me - if he dares."

My whole company, wind, sea, and life loving rovers rested beside me awaiting fate.

Outside, shadows rustled. A hand, or worse, pressed against the iron-braced doors. The obstructions barred him for mere moments before surrendering to his rage. My kinsmen and I, feigning sleep, watched as he skulked into the hall. To this day what I saw defies creation. A man-shaped abomination, enormous and twisted out of proportion. Though no natural light dared touch that thing, his eyes glowed, smoldered, lit by an inhuman hunger. He saw his prey, strewn about the floor and his glee at the bounty was demonic. Quicker than thought, he plucked Eofor from our bunch and repeatedly bashed his skull against a bench.

*(Beat)*

We did not move. our plan was to take him by surprise. Mercifully, the boy's body was lifeless before the monster bit into bones, swallowing him in chunks. Still unsated, he sought another morsel. As fate would have it his attention turned toward my bare flesh. He reached his hand, close enough now that the reek of my companion on his breath infested my nostrils. Vengeance was upon me. I locked my hands around that evil things outstretched palm. He cried, recoiling from my grip as if he had never known fear. Strength abandoned him, replaced by desperation to escape, like a child caught.

I repeated my bedtime speech in my head: "I am the monster in this hall".

I strengthened my hold, each of his fingers crackling beneath the pressure. He stumbled about the hall, crushed tables, cracked floorboards, hammered the walls, but he could not shake me. I had manacled the monster! As if death awoke, my warriors leapt to their feet and labored with sword and axe to ensure the vile visitor would not exit alive. Unexpectedly, each and every blade harmlessly glanced off his hide. Their zeal could not have known, nor I when I forswore my sword, that Grendel could not be harmed by earthly weapons. Fortunately for us, his panic overwhelmed him. He wrenched his arm in my grasp, jerking with abandon, frantically toiling toward freedom. That's when I saw it. A gaping wound growing across his shoulder. I watched as his sinews split and his bones burst and in a mist of blood Grendel vanished.

Hopelessly, he fled into the night, but I gave no thought to chase. I knew only one of us had survived our mortal struggle. The proof of it remained in my hands.

Come morning, Hrothgar awoke and tottered into the hall. Blood dripped from the ceiling. There, nailed to the rafters, hung the entirety of Grendel's shoulder and arm.

"Hell has reclaimed him. Beowulf, only the king of kings can reward you for what you have done today. But allow a poor old man to offer an unsuitable gift to a hero who has already won eternal rewards for his actions. Beowulf, I wish to adopt you. Though, in my heart, it feels as if you have always been my son. Please, I ask you sit by me and bask in this hard-won peace, my boy."

He was wrong. Of all the gifts I would ever receive, his company was the greatest of all. Though, I do wonder about these eternal rewards he spoke of. So, there you have it, spirit. What say you?

*(VOICES remain silent)*

Grendel was an enemy of all mankind. Surely his slayer is deserving of infinite glory.

*(No response)*

There is more to this tale. I shall continue and let my story speak for itself.

At the feast to celebrate Grendel's demise, all the Danes gathered to gawk at the grisly trophy. They had great cause to drink deep that evening, but I fear their bliss invited doom. At daybreak, a howl roused us from our sleep. We rushed to the hall only to discover the massive arm of Grendel was missing. Hrothgar shrank into his new despair.

"The hall-guards were ambushed by a killer. Weeping in the dead of night disturbed their watch. There, in the middle of the hall, they spied a hell-bride cradling Grendel's bloody arm like a babe. She had come for retribution. The Mother of Grendel. She slaughtered several men before numbers overwhelmed her. She fled, but not before taking one final prize...Aeschere...Aeschere..."

Aeschere was Hrothgar's dearest friend. His heart, soul, and counsel. He had been abducted by the mother of the beast I had slain. It had not occurred to me that the creature had family. (Beat) Just as Cain was exiled for the death

of Abel, we too have ways of dealing with the murder of kin. We call it the blood-feud. The right and obligation to seek vengeance.

But the price of her son's death was mine to pay. Not Aeschere. If it was resolution the witch sought, she would have it.

" Please, grieve no more. 'Tis better to avenge those you love than linger in lamentations. Let us hunt her. She will not escape. She will find no refuge. Were she to hide within this hell you speak of, I would plumb its depths to find her and give you vengeance. This I promise you."

"Amongst the wolves, where waters boil, the Mother her home."

'Twas enough direction for me. We rode out in force, tracing her trail through increasingly foreboding scenery, the earth twisting into unfamiliar shapes. Finally, we arrived at the place Hrothgar spoke of: A lake whose waters boiled despite the frigid winter. Just beneath the surface a mass of reptiles slithered and writhed in the dark. This was no good place.

*(Hrothgar cries out)*

Behind us, Hrothgar had discovered a sight far worse than any infested waters. The head of Aeschere. Left to taunt us. I could no longer bear it. I would trade his suffering for hers.

"Hrothgar, remember your words to me. If I should not return, act as a father and take care of my men. I will gain glory or die!"

*(He plunges)*

I plunged into uncharted water, only to find the Queen of that strange lake waiting for me. It had been a trap, and I had played into her advantage. Unlike my brawl with Grendel, I had dressed for battle...not swimming. She dug her nails into my heavy armor and dragged me helplessly deeper into her depths. With a grin, she cast me into dark water abandoning me to her court of reptiles. From countless hiding places, they emerged and piled upon me with teeth and tusks, compounding with my arm, sinking me like a stone into the darkness.

*(He falls. After a moment, he sharply inhales and coughs as if coming up for air.)*

I found my self spit into an otherworldly cave deep at the bottom of the lake. It's vaulted ceiling preventing the onrush of water. I saw the flickering of firelight deeper in the cave. I followed its heat, through stony corridors, and found her. Huddled before a bonfire, the foul-woman was huddled over a corpse. I lifted my blade and brought the full might of steel upon her skull. Nothing. I should of have assumed she too was immune to earthly weapons. An infuriating family trait. Unaffected, she stood to meet me, her wet hair clinging to her like seaweed. I've always preferred my fists anyway. I threw her to the ground, but with wolfish reflexes she pounced from below sending us both tumbling to the floor. Caught in her grim embrace, she drew a dagger and took aim for my heart. Finally, my armor proved of some good, for it turned the tip and denied her the delight of vengeance. Though, I was no match for grief and rage. I needed help.

## **VOICES:**

*(Whispers)*

Suddenly, a sword has appeared.

## **BEOWULF:**

It was then I saw metal gleam in the firelight. The witch had an armory full of weapons and treasures. In it hung a blade, unlike anything I had ever seen.

The shining sword called to me.

I wriggled from her grip and rushed to the sword. It was heavy, refusing to be lifted. Bare feet slapped stone behind me. I was out of time.

He swings the sword in a glorious arc.

It severed her head entirely. She fell to the floor in a wet thud. That was a good sword. Suddenly, strange light filled the cave, as the sun would the sky.

I now could see the corpse by the fire was not that of Aeschere. It was Grendel. His recovered arm gently placed by his side. Laid to rest by a loving mother.

*He decapitates Grendel.*

I separated his head.

The sword, slathered in the caustic blood of mother and son, melted down to the hilt. No matter, it had fulfilled its purpose. I took the head and left that cursed place.

You should have seen their faces when I crawled out of the water with the remnants of a magical weapon in one hand, the huge head of Grendel in the other. They told me Hrothgar rode home, sick at heart, fearing I may have perished. When I strode into Heorot, he wept. I presented the head to a sea of astonished Danes. A head is a better trophy than an arm, after all. I dropped the thing before the feet of the King.

"Hrothgar, sleep soundly with all your company in these halls. Mother and son are dead. You have endured."

I then presented him the hilt of the ancient sword that had won the day.

"Ah. I too won glory with such fine tools, in my youth. Now the hilt alone weighs too heavy in my hand. For fifty winters, I ruled and counted no man under heaven a true foe. I believed my power was infinite, forever mine to wield. Not so, Beowulf. Strength is a gift from God. He lends it to us for a time and permits us to use it as we see fit. Such gifts feed our ego, cloud our judgement, lull us into ignoring the inevitable.

Grendel was the axe to punish my arrogance. I built a monument to my power and he came to push it down as if it were made of sand. It is a wonder I lived to see an end to this. Were it not for you, my son...Learn from my mistakes, Beowulf. Beware that same trap pride. Though we believe it is ours evermore, strength is brief; Death always arrives. Choose not pride, Beowulf."

The following day would be our last in the land of the Danes. Hrothgar met us on the rocks to say farewell. I told him he would always find friends in Geatland. In return, he told me, I would, one day, see myself King of the

Geats. Proper and noble words befitting a king and his hero. Though Hrothgar was no longer only a king to me, and his affection could not be contained by the fetters of good etiquette. The dear old man kissed me about the face and wrapped his arms around me as if to chain me to his side. He confided to me he had two troubling thoughts. The stronger of which was that he would never see me again. The other he never spoke of. He passed from this world, in peace, as we ventured home. Of any man who ever lived there were none more worthy of soft and quiet death than he. I gave him that gift- and it was gift I could not give myself.

**VOICES:**

Choose not pride, Beowulf.

**BEOWULF:**

Do not taunt me with those words, spirit.

**VOICES:**

*(With Contempt)*

Woe will be his who drives his soul into the clutch of fire.

**BEOWULF:**

I am the one telling this story.

**VOICES:**

Drives the soul into the clutch of fire. Choose not pride, Beowulf.

**BEOWULF:**

Let your eternal place rot! Pride makes me unworthy? I have earned pride. I have sundered infernal monsters. I have endured every spear that sought to snuff my life and supplied death without exception. I know not if my strength was mine own, or a gift from some god in the clouds, but I do know this: The people of this world know me as a hero. My name and my deeds shall outlive me tenfold. I do not need Valhalla, or Heaven. I have already earned eternal rewards. So, what is it, spirit, you seek to offer me?

*VOICES' words become a fierce roar; the space becomes filled with hellish red light.*

*Fire.*

**VOICES:**

*(Bellow, roaring like a dragon.)*

**BEOWULF:**

This has been your game all along, spirit. Tease me with what I have lost only to watch as I recount the circumstances of my own death. I am no coward. I shall indulge you, judge!

The atmosphere becomes hot, terrible, dangerous. Beowulf grows increasingly unstable.

A lot happened in later days. War consumed Geatland and with it the life of Hygelac, my King. Through blood, I avenged his name, and his crown fell to me. Just as Hrothgar foresaw, I became King of the Geat. I ruled for Fifty Winters. Years of peace and prosperity. But there is no more time for

victories. You wish to hear of my life's bane. The scale-skinned fire-breather.

The Dragon!

It was the darkest night we had ever known. A vile-shadow eclipse the moon itself, belching flames as if the whole sky rained fire. The land burned. The entire region, forts, homes, families- reduced to ash. Before the sun could expose it, the fire-bringer darted home to his barrow.

I received the news elsewhere. Told me it was Dragon. My hall, my people-

I had never known the gloom that darkened my mind.

#### **VOICES:**

*(The voices, almost sounding as Hrothgar)*

I have prayed for an end to these harrowing assaults.

#### **BEOWULF:**

No! I ordered an iron shield to safeguard me from its flames and gathered a company of fourteen men to join me on a quest for vengeance. As we embarked, Fate, as ever, provided a path.

A slave stumbled upon my band, a golden cup in hand. He told me he had fled his master. On the run, he found a cave. Within was an earthen-road forgotten to mankind winding and descending beneath the known earth. At its depth, a hoard of ancient treasure. Need and want urged the man to take a single piece. A gem-studded goblet. This theft was enough to awake the guardian from its slumber. "A winged serpent", he described he, "fire flaring

from its nostrils". The pitiful slave fled in terror, cup in hand, and did not stop until he fell, broken, at my feet. He offered the cup in return for safekeeping, but this man was the source of our tragedy. We forced him against his will to show us the place he so desperately fled.

**VOICES:**

*(Exhales)*

**BEOWULF:**

The smell of scorched earth greeted us. High above, on a cliff, we felt stony mouth exhale deadly heat from within.

Had I the might, these hands would choke life from the gold-hoarding serpent.

**VOICES:**

Death always arrives.

**BEOWULF:**

No longer had I the luxury of youthful boosts. All I had was a sword. When I returned from Heorot, my king, Hygelac bequeathed unto me a sword. Steel of such legend it was given a name: Naegling. It had been wielded by the great King Hrethel- the man fate would make my second father. The one I call my father, the mighty warrior Ecgtheow, died seeking glory in some distant place when I was only seven. He no more than a powerful name to me. Hrethel, was the one who took me in after my father's untimely demise, and despite having three sons of his own, spread his love with ease. His charity

would only be rewarded by misfortune. One day, while practicing archery, his youngest son loosed an arrow that would find a target in his eldest son.

Hrethel could neither punish his youngest for the deed nor accept the death of the eldest. So, he chose neither, instead he chose to depart, heartbroken, from this world. His death incited a blood-feud between his two remaining sons. A war his middle child would win: Hygelac, the man that was my king. He took me in out of familial obligation, but he never respected me. He counted me a weakling. Feared I would bring shame upon his name with my foreign adventure. My victory over Grendel impressed him enough to give me this. The sword of our shared father. I carried it for decades, but it never felt as heavy as it did that day.

Fourteen courageous man gathered on that cliff. Brave faces, none expecting to return home. They knew the stories. The youngest among them, a boy named Wiglaf, was trembling.

"Wiglaf, when I was young, I sailed with fourteen brave men to defend the kindest man I have ever known. To honor him, I forswore all weapons. I'd do the same for you, but now I am old- and must rely on other arms. But so dearly do I respect you, and all these men, that I will find a way to double the glory in this quest. Warriors remain here, high on the rocks. Your King stands for you. I shall win this day alone or death take me. (spits) I am resolved."

My whole band, wind, sea, and life loving rovers stayed there. Upon the cliff. As I descended. Alone.

I approached the cave, with only my shield and the sword of my fathers beside me. No, I maybe I was not alone.

**VOICES:**

*(With finality)*

Death has arrived.

**BEOWULF:**

I am Beowulf. Son of Ecgtheow. And Hrethel. Hygelac, and Hrothgar. And I am not afraid.

**VOICES:**

*(Roar)*

*Beowulf then releases a tremendous shout. An embattled storm of anger, part reenactment, part pain, part fear. VOICES roar back. Beowulf lifts his "shield", and the lights consume the stage in red. The "shield" shatters, he charges, struggling against an unseen force. Finally, he collapses. Grunting, heaving, dying.*

**BEOWULF:**

Fire...there was only fire.

But then it was replaced by a voice.

"Do not give up, Beowulf! I stand beside you!"

It was Wiglaf, the youngest, our bodies warded behind that savior's shield. He was only a boy, never tested in battle, inspired to risk life and limb in the face

of death to turn the tide of my misfortune. I could not let the fool die here. I  
threw all of my weight into a sword-stroke.

*He swings. He fails.*

That sword. Naegling. Broke. Fangs sank into my neck. Venom coursed into  
my veins and fire charred my body.

But Wiglaf, my boy, lunged and drove his sword clean into the stomach of the  
beast. Fire burst from its belly scorching his hand forcing him to drop his  
sword at my feet.

*He lifts the sword once more, and with the last of his strength, defeats the dragon.*

The Dragon fell. So did the man. The fire of life extinguished for both.  
Replaced by soft and quiet dark. I am grateful, the last sight thing I felt was  
that young hero's hand closing my eyes for good.

## **VOICES:**

*(A tender whisper)*

Beowulf...

## **BEOWULF:**

You need not tell me. Doom approaches. Yet, please, let me stay a moment  
longer and indulge my final musing.

Fate has swept my whole clan from this world and though I never had a child,  
in my heart, I found one. Wiglaf. The son I left behind to tell a story of his own.  
One that is inextricably woven into that of my own legend. He is what remains

of me now. And Ecgtheow. Hrethel. Hygelac. and Hrothgar. He is our victories and our mistakes. I have faith he will learn from both. This consoles me. I am prepared to depart. To where I know not, but I must follow my fathers.

**VOICES:**

*(A whisper. With Pride. Welcoming.)*

Son, warrior, king, sit by me and bask in this hard-won peace.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: WRESTLING WITH MYSELF: THE PROCESS OF FINDING MY BEOWULF**

Characterization in solo performance is a complicated beast. The medium not only calls upon the skills required in other forms of acting and performance but further demands a higher level of vulnerability by the sheer fact of confronting an audience alone. The artist is more fully exposed, and the audience is directly invited into the illusion of reality and spontaneity in a more immediate way. As discussed in Chapter 1, this encourages deeper scrutiny of not only the artist's work and material, but the artist as well. In essence, all solo performance becomes about the exposure of the artist: artist as art. Knowing this, how does an artist craft a role for solo performance?

The artist's implicit and explicit identity will always be a part of this process. This is most apparent in anecdotal monologues because the artist is literally portraying some version of the self. However, the keyword is portraying. As David Krasner observes, the act of "simply 'being oneself,' whatever that is, is a practical impossibility" (521). One cannot be themselves when they are performing. This is because performance is an act of public storytelling with a presumed artistic objective, making any realistic presentation of the private self (assuming this is what one means when they say "be oneself") impossible. Instead, the artist is typically making a concentrated effort to dramatize the self. They are cultivating an identity based on the facets of their self that are most appropriate to portray for the performance. In this way, it is not entirely different from how an actor goes about creating a character. There are given circumstances and tactical palettes of what their "character" might do to complete their objectives just as in any other play. The

difference is in the minimizing of friction between artist and subject because in this medium they are essentially the same. Presumably, this is a bit easier to communicate when you are playing the dramatized self. Of course, not all solo performance relies on an obvious portrayal of the dramatized self. In the case of *The Death of Beowulf*, the artist is not enacting the dramatized self but the fictional character Beowulf. This wrinkle might encourage the artist to approach the role with the usual tools found in the psychological realism approach to acting popularized by Konstantin Stanislavski. In other words, they might obscure the self behind the mask of the character. In solo performance, though, this is a dangerous path to take as it fundamentally goes against the express purpose of the form.

Characters in dialogue-based plays often rely on their relationship to other elements to establish their reality. In solo performance, the artist only has two relationships. The first is how they choose to interact with themselves. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the actor's relationship with the audience. As a reminder, the heightened scrutiny and intensified relationship the soloist intrinsically builds with their audience complicates the identity and very concept of "character" in a solo performance:

[...] even if one presents a wholly fictitious character onstage, just as one might in any dialogue-based play, the decision to perform it oneself, solo, will nonetheless mean that an audience will tend to see the character presented as an expression of something very personal to the writer-performer. [...] when an individual confronts the audience alone, the exterior mask that s/he presents is widely assumed to offer a refracted expression of some aspect of her or his interior subjectivity (Krasner 521).

In other words, the audience is interrogating the artist's identity as they watch. This is true even when presenting a fictional character due to the simple fact of the artist's direct interaction with the audience and their singular presence. The audience may be wondering "why did this actor choose to play Beowulf?" in a way they may never consider in dialogue-based plays. The logical assumption is the material holds inherent value to the performer and, as Krasner suggests, it offers a refracted expression of some part of the artist's identity. This assumption is only deepened by the frequent case of the artist doubling as writer and performer of the material. That being said, even if this is not the case (as discussed in the example of Neil LaBute and *Bash*) the originating voice of the piece is heard, scrutinized, and present.

I came to odds with this concept in the exploration of my script *The Death of Beowulf*. Initially, I had intended to entirely mask my own identity behind that of the character Beowulf. However, through the devising and rehearsal process, I determined this was both impractical and artistically inadvisable. As I have suggested thus far, the object of fascination for an audience in solo performance often relies on the identity of the performer. Their interior subjectivity is the art on display and to obscure this too much only denies the greatest strength of the medium: the honest, personal, and vulnerable connection between artist and audience. As the writer of the piece, my own voice is inherently woven into the fabric of the script. The piece is personal to me in a way most material I perform can never be. Therefore, it should be treated as such and great delight should be taken in exploring it. With this in mind, the deployment of traditional psychologically realistic characterization appeared less appropriate. Instead, to enact the truth of this fictional

character in solo performance, the determination became that I must value my own authenticity to create a character that does not entirely abandon the self.

In order to do this, however, one must interrogate one's own tenuous awareness of self. Earlier, it was stated that the exposure of self is "presumably" a bit easier in the case of anecdotal monologues. This is not a universal truth because one's self is slipperier than it might appear. More often than not, the reality of one's self has already shrouded behind a type of performance. Psychoanalyst W.D Winnicott, most influential for his studies in developmental psychology, calls this the "false self". The false self is comprised of the necessary socialization one experiences as they grow up. Take, for example, a boy scraping his knees. The "true self", as Winnicott would call it, is in pain and cries out. In response, the boy's father tells him to "suck it up." The next time he is hurt, the boy is at an impasse. If he follows his father's instruction and chooses not to display his pain, he empowers his false self. The true self is in pain and wants to express that, but the false self, forged out of societal necessity, wins. This is often the result, as socialization is an unavoidable consequence of living, but it does remove us from our awareness of our true self.

Outside of the social application, the false self also separates us from our creativity. Most actors can think of an experience in which a performer uttered a phrase sounding something like, "I *wanted* to do this, but I did not let myself." That phrase is referring to the moment when we see an actor betray their own body, eyes, voice, breathe, or emotions because of some internalized pressure from a life of socialization. This is the actor equivalent to the scrapped knee. The true self wants to do something, but the false self prevents them. As a result, the truthfulness of their

performance suffers. In this way, it becomes clear that the obstacles presented by the false self are detrimental to any performance; however, it is fatal for a medium that requires the self-assured exposure of the interior life of an artist such as solo performance. If you are not in touch with the true self and its genuine spontaneity, then any performance of the dramatized self is actually a performance of the dramatized false self. In short, no true exposure at all. So, one must strive to bypass the false self in order to utilize the true self as a creative building block, regardless of the fictionality of the performance.

This pursuit of the true self is the crux of the work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. Briefly put, Grotowski posits in *Toward a Poor Theatre* that the intimate relationship between actor and audience can be compared to lovers. He believed that the actor must give themselves over in totality to the audience and that this act of pure self-sacrifice would encourage a reciprocal self-donation on the part of the spectator (176). In other words, he believed if an actor could fully exteriorize their interiority, they can command the attention and imagination of their audience.

The logic beneath this statement is that an actor cannot be fully truthful on stage, even under fictional circumstances, without being in touch with their own authenticity. André Gregory, a collaborator of Grotowski, put it best when he wrote, “to enact the truth on stage, the actor also needs to be authentic, and so he too must remove the layers of camouflage that hide the being he himself never knew he was. And to fully reveal himself, an actor needs to know that his authenticity is valued” (Wangh 326). In simple terms, to find truth in fiction one must find the truth of their own reality first; or, in simpler terms, find the self that exists behind the false self. If the artist can not find that awareness, truth itself is a foreign concept. Therefore, the

technique practiced by Grotowski and his collaborators insisted that an actor learn to understand and value the true self; only, Grotowski called it the authentic you. This phrasing is more suitable for acting because, practically speaking, one is not performing oneself onstage but rather using one's self as building material for a character.

Of course, accessing the authentic you is difficult. Gregory likens the process of uncovering it to a child learning to walk: "It depends on time, but it also depends upon the support and delight of those around him, not just in the accomplishment- the walking- but in the learning process. If adults were to criticize little infants every time they fell down, they would never learn to walk. But in fact the falling is just as interesting as the walking" (Wangh 326). So, an actor seeking the authentic self must allow themselves to fail, as if learning to walk all over again. This takes time and, perhaps more importantly, support, but the result of deconstruction "Les Exercices Corporels" and "Les Exercices Plastiques" – two intensive and rigorous series of physical exercises designed by Grotowski to challenge and discover the limits of the body and voice – is a stripping away of everything extraneous until all you are left with is the authentic you. For this reason, the application of Grotowski's teachings is a worthwhile endeavor when exploring solo performance. His work's emphasis on the rediscovery of the self and its utilization as a foundation for creative freedom goes hand-in-hand with the goals of good solo performance. Thus, Grotowski's teaching served as the starting point for preparing my character in *The Death of Beowulf*.

Admittedly, there were several challenges outside of the norm in practicing Grotowski's work for this project. These can be summed up by the unfortunate arrival

of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which collided directly with the beginning of my process. As a result, theatre lost most of the public resources it had come to rely on as the world was thrust into an unprecedented level of isolation. This made it impossible and dangerous to pursue in-person education in Grotowski's teachings. Furthermore, finding online classes on the subject was difficult and neglected the intimacy necessary for such vulnerable work. This was particularly challenging because of my limited exposure to Grotowski's work. In brief, the outbreak deprived me of the option of hands-on tutelage as well as the support of a community of students. Fortunately, the pandemic gifted an all too precious resource in copious amounts: time. Armed with that, I made the best of what I was given to supplement my exploration. I turned a room of my apartment into a safe space for rehearsal; I enlisted my partner (and sometimes my pets) as willing participants in exercises so I was not entirely trapped in a vacuum; and, as my teacher, I turned to Stephen Wangh's *An Acrobat of the Heart* as my guide in isolation.

Wangh's book became a vital resource in my practice. This was primarily due to the fact it was the most familiar entry point for me into Grotowski's technique, as we had used it as a supplement to our movement training at the University of Central Florida. However, working through Wangh's book with dedicated attention stirred new revelations about the text. Wangh describes his work as teaching "the task of undoing" in order to rediscover the full and free expression of the body, voice, and emotions. By undoing, Wangh is suggesting that the actor must learn to shed the so-called armor that protects the self in everyday life, resulting in greater access to the authentic self. This work begins with activating and exploring all the parts of the body

to find free and full access to the extent of its abilities and moves into freeing the breath and resonators to engage every text with all the power of the voice.

To pursue this awareness of self, I scheduled time to explore each exercise the way one would in an in-person workshop. Quickly, I began to push against the shape of my false self. The false self can take many forms. Personally, it manifests as a tiny voice inside my head that is always worried about how something looks from the outside. The voice does not interrupt performances, *per se*, but it does at times prevent the taking of risks and the full engagement of my emotional life in my acting. This internal critic kept rearing its ugly head in my early practices. I worried if I “doing it right,” or if it “looked good.” To combat this, I began with the deconstruction of actions down to simple isolated movements in order to communicate solely with the body. These moments, primarily used in warm-ups suggested by Stephen Wangh, lack imagery attached to them. The goal was to teach myself the simple value of one’s own body, how it works, and what it can do. Then, I could layer on images and question how I respond to them.

Wangh makes use of Grotowski’s “Plastiques” to teach this. It is a technique that begins with simple movements, such as the lifting of the shoulders. However, as soon as one senses that a lift becomes a “jerk” or a “shrug,” it is no longer simply an exploration of movement: it is an action asking a question. For example, “what am I shrugging at?” In essence, this teaches one that movement can be the keys to emotional life. When one shrugs, one is aware of what emotions correspond to that sort of emotional gesture and because the gesture itself is imbued with emotion one need not work it. Ultimately, the goal is to surround yourself with such imagery so that one can believe the imagery is coming from outside; even though this is not true.

There is something truly invigorating about honestly realizing the legs can walk, run, jump, and kick and how the simple addition of working with the eyes can transform the movement into an emotive gesture that communicates internal truth. In a way, it leaves nothing for me to judge. When my body and mind are working together to find truth in the imagery there is no room for doubt (Wangh 76).

My movement studies, particularly for my monsters and Hrothgar, greatly benefited from this exploration via Grotowski's Plastiques. These characters exist only in the imagination of the character. They are not real but the emotive life of them is very real to Beowulf. So, to take on their shape honestly, it must stem from the authentic self. For example, Grendel is a giant of a being. My words describe him as "a man-shaped abomination, enormous and twisted out of proportion" (6). How does one mask themselves in this creature temporarily while being honest and emotive? It relies on images. To me, Grendel is an embodiment of pain, fear, jealousy, sorrow, and resentment. I practiced finding the gestures in my body that fired these emotions in my body. A withdrawing and raising the right shoulder inspired discomfort within me as if backing away from something frightening. Then, retracting the arm of the same shoulder stretched the muscles, feeling strong but simultaneously as if I was recoiling from the world in front of me. A loose and free left shoulder felt like a slump and left me feeling a bit sad. Finally, focusing on moving forward with the upper body, disproportionate and heavy, inspired flashes of violence; like an injured bull ready to fight back. Without this work, it can be easy to see how one might craft a caricature. However, finding how Grendel's circumstances relate to my own emotional interiority helped me discover a monster that felt momentarily real and dangerous to myself and something I could spontaneously embody.

That being said, the challenge of characterizing Beowulf and augmenting him with my own authentic self is not a simple task. I knew that my embodiment of Beowulf needed to be an exposure of my interior subjectivity as an artist, but I did not want the character to read as a performance of the dramatized self. Instead, I needed to find a way to examine the authentic self, connect it to the character, all without allowing either to be lost in the process. This struggle is reminiscent of Michael Chekhov's concept of "creative individuality". In *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*, Chekhov explains that the creation of any genuine character on stage is the result of the artist's imagination as opposed to any recalling of their own personality and experiences. He writes, "the usual, everyday feelings are adulterated, permeated with egotism, narrowed to personal needs, inhibited, insignificant and often even unaesthetic and spoiled by untruths" (89). Needless to say, Chekhov was categorically against the concept of performing "oneself." Rather, he believed that all we experience is eventually purified of egotism by our imaginations and time. In other words, these memories and parts of ourselves become less personal.

Take, for example, the idea that someone has lost their mother or child. If one chooses to recall this exact memory for performance, the sadness they feel can never truly belong to the character. It is genuine sadness, but not that of the character. It is your memory, not theirs. However, through the process of purification that Chekhov describes, this experience can become a creative feeling of sadness, and this experience can unlock compassionate views of the feeling. You have a pure, genuine concept of sadness; therefore you can empathize with any sadness

your character might experience and share your creative concept of what sadness is with them.

As such, an understanding of creative individuality is necessary to view the connection between Grotowski's authentic self and the character. In the terms of Grotowski, these purified creative feelings are what form the foundation of emotive gestures. They are the source for why movement reveals honest emotional depth. For instance, It is not the act of recalling a specific moment when you shrug that triggers an emotion. Instead, the act of shrugging has become a universal gesture immediately understood, interpreted, and usable due to your impersonalized previous experiences. Thus, when the artist shrugs, that shrug can be your character's action rather than solely belonging to the artist. That being said, the action remains an unfailingly authentic and unique interpretation based on your creative identity. In other words, the value demonstrated by the exploration of the limitations of my body, gestural vocabulary, and voice can be a personal expression of my experiences and perspective as a human being, while being impersonal enough to not entirely distract from the character. Your body and voice can be a bridge between you and your character: inseparable, intertwined, but unique. After all, as Wangh states "There is no Stanley Kowalski," really (282). He is fictional. Your interpretation, creative individuality, and authentic self give him life. Therefore, the two are not that different to begin with.

Thusly, the illusion of a separation of character is emphasized by examining the ways the character is different from you and adding those truths to your authentic self. Wangh posits that one can only add on the foreign concepts of a character's circumstances once they have understood the authentic self. This way, as Chekov

suggests, you have a foundation of compassion for the truth that can assist the artist in finding a reality for these qualities that is genuine. This brings me to Beowulf himself. In my mind's eye, Beowulf is many things: charming, violent, powerful, dauntless, impulsive, overcompensating, masculine, fit, and compassionate. Some of these qualities do not ring true to my authentic self. In the process, I looked for a way to make them fit. I took Wangh's advice that all characters start with feeling their body in yours and allowed my body to undergo a significant transformation to better relate to my imaginary Beowulf. I cut my hair, grew a beard, and exercised daily to find the lean body of a warrior. At first, I did not look like me. I looked like someone else. Eventually, however, as I lived and rehearsed this way, it started to feel less like a costume and more authentic. After all, the way I looked before was just the costume I was accustomed to. This one felt more appropriate for the task at hand.

The new musculature I developed helped define a new range of movement. The gestural tactics (such as longer strides, a desire to show off the toned physique, and displays of athleticism) I believed belonged to Beowulf quickly found a truthful home in my body. However, there were parts of Beowulf's authentic self that needed deeper examination and practice to find authentic connections to. The prime example was Beowulf's enjoyment and artisan-like execution of violence. For much of the process, Beowulf's engagement with such tactics felt uncomfortable. To begin to untangle this, I practiced Wangh's "Character Word Jam" exercise. In simplest terms, the activity concerns itself with finding a moment in the text that doesn't fit and learning what vocal, rhythmic, and physical choices start to make the text feel workable. Wangh uses the comparison of "the Word Jam is like the slipper scene in Cinderella. The text is the slipper, and you are trying to find – that is become – the

foot that fits it” (271). For example, a short section that did not fit at first was “I am the monster in this hall” (6). I knew this was an expression of dominance and aggression that felt foreign. So, I took these words and jammed. That is, I tried various character choices (changing pitch, placement, intonation, and rhythm while allowing my body to play with gesture and images) until I started to feel like something fit. In this case, it was a deepening of the pitch with a growling back placement while dedicating all of the musculatures of the arms, shoulder, back, and legs to the task of committing violence. Then, I applied these choices to similar lines. If it did not fit, I jammed more. Eventually, I uncovered a tactical palette unique to Beowulf that was inspired by the words he used. At first, it felt a little “characterly,” but with rehearsal, I was able to attach it to my authentic impulses and enact it with truthful intention.

This process of bridging the gap between my authentic self and the character comprised the primary work of my rehearsals. I developed a traditional workbook consisting of plot objectives, super objectives, tactics, and given circumstances but it was surrounding myself with Beowulf’s imagery that allowed me to most successfully feel as if I was enacting the truth. Certainly understanding that Beowulf’s primary tactics consist of captivating, championing, overpowering, fighting, charming, and the numerous other verbs I gave him helped me find my actions, but the images I attached to them made them real; and each of these images came from my very personal and authentic understanding of the story. In that way, Beowulf was me and I was Beowulf.

Hopefully, the result allowed the audience to see how I relate to a thousand-year-old text and what it means to me, but also see a fresh take on a familiar

character. This process enabled me to craft a character steeped in my creative individuality and authenticity in a way I had never done before. Of course, I was not always successful in accessing the authentic self with immediacy and spontaneity. Some of this is due to the oppressive circumstances of rehearsing and performing during a global pandemic. The other factor is simply that fully uncovering the authentic self takes time. That being said, in the moments when it happened, I felt more in touch with what it means to truly be an artist and actor. Primarily, because the art was me and it was authentic.

## CHAPTER SIX: A REFLECTION

When I first conceived *The Death of Beowulf*, I had a fairly simple goal: tell a story I love in my own words. Over the course of the journey, however, it became a constant struggle for that passion to not be buried by other factors. This was primarily because of the reality of my life during this process became as heartbreaking and dire as that of my subject. As I began this project, I lost one of the most important people in my life, and while I grieved the world slowly transformed into a dangerous and foreign place underneath the appearance of a global pandemic. I retreated into myself physically and emotionally as the world began to socially distance and isolate in place. As such, in order to complete the project within my timeline, what was conceived as a solo theatre performance needed to be manipulated into a short film performed with no audience. It became unadvisable to have a director, designers, or even other eyes to watch as it endangered my own health and the health of others. Suddenly, I was no longer just performing a solo performance. I was quite literally alone. It follows that these would be the ideal circumstances to undergo the process of deconstructing the false self in order to reveal the authentic self. After all, I had more time and fewer distractions. However, my isolation only encouraged more intrusive thoughts and external worries.

As a result, the act of deconstruction became one of self-destruction. I began to habitually judge myself and the process only damaged my already fragile ego further, tested my personal bonds and my mental wellness, and became a source of near traumatic stress. Thus, I cannot recommend replicating the process I undertook for this project. That being said, it was a time of tremendous growth for me as a person and artist even if that can only be gleaned through reflection. Taking the time

to rely on myself eventually helped me rediscover a delight in my own authenticity and the value of sharing my singular unique perspective with others.

I have spent most of my artistic career trying to hide behind my art, trusting that it will be self-demonstrative. The truth is in hiding myself I betrayed the purpose of art: self-expression. Even while trying to discover the “authentic you” as Gregory describes it, my mind wanted to believe this was a way of shedding the performative aspects of myself and finding a blank canvas on which to paint a beautiful picture. However, that is not the goal. Gregory says that an artist must value their authentic self in order to be honest on stage. That means an artist needs to value their own beliefs, creativity, and understanding of the world if they hope to honestly express any truth through their storytelling.

This becomes particularly true in solo performance where the medium demands you position your own identity as a piece of art. In order to have any success doing this, you must trust that your identity has artistic value. Michael Kerns’s book *The Solo Performer’s Journey: From the Page to the Stage* drives this point home when he asks a simple question for the solo artist to consider before embarking on the journey: “Do you trust that you have something to say?” (11). This question is terrifying for any artist lacking in self-esteem, but in the end, I realized the answer to that question returns to that beautiful and simple reason I wanted to perform Beowulf in the first place: I want to tell a story that I love. Purely and simply, this is reason enough to stand in front of an audience and perform. While it is true that people may have heard the story of Beowulf a hundred times before, they have not heard it the way I read it. For if an artist, or person, is fully authentic in their retelling of a story it will always be singularly unique.

As I discussed in my introduction, the act of storytelling is the act of conveying information from one source to another. In consuming this information, we translate it through our individual experiences and beliefs. As a result, the way we understand a story is unique to us. No one can fully share that exact perspective.

To drive this point home, Eliot Weinberg once said in his lecture “Anonymous Sources: Talk on Translators and Translation” the following:

Every reading of every poem is a translation into one’s own experience and knowledge- whether it is a confirmation, a contradiction, or an expansion. The poem does not exist without this act of translation. The poem must move from reader to reader, reading to reading, in perpetual transformation. The poem dies when it has no place to go.

(6)

While Weinberger was speaking specifically on the subject of poems, the same holds true of all stories. They move from person to person, taking on new life and meaning. If writers, storytellers, artists, or just people, in general, choose not to share what a story means to them, it dies and the potential to have learned something about their unique experience is lost forever.

Of course, to authentically express a story with any kind of vulnerability is intimidating. This is even more true when you are expressing a reading of a familiar story that is unique to your perspective. It may not line up with wider cultural understandings of the text. As such your perspective might be rejected by an audience and it is this fear of being rejected, I believe, that causes artists to not unabashedly demonstrate their love for what inspires them and what they create. That is why taking the time to learn to value oneself and one’s authenticity is of dire importance to the arts and its practitioners. There is no guarantee anyone else will value that, but in expressing it honestly and trusting in its value one creates

the opportunity that a connection might be forged. If in the end, that connection is just a deeper appreciation for yourself that is in and of itself an artistic victory.

Discovering the unique value of my authenticity as an artist has been the most important lesson I learned from this project. In another time, hearing the validation of an audience would have been the salve my ego needed to help propel my continued artistic endeavors. While the response to *The Death of Beowulf* was overwhelmingly positive, for the first time the most important feedback I received was ultimately mine. When I watched the live stream of my performance and personally enjoyed it, it confirmed to me that I had learned to value what I have to share as an artist.

When I produce this show again, I will do it under less lonely circumstances, and I will endeavor to ensure more people can see it. After all, I see a greater value in what I have to share as an artist; if the over a hundred pages I have written on the subject has done nothing more than serving as an excessive validation of the importance of artists valuing and demonstrating their own authenticity, than it has been a resounding success.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: JOURNALS

**May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**

Due to the global pandemic Covid-19 (Coronavirus), our semester came to an abrupt conclusion. With it, all of my carefully laid plans to perform my thesis project, *The Death of Beowulf*, were indefinitely postponed. My original intention was to perform the script as a stage play (the script was written for this purpose, after all), though with the nature of the pandemic, and the timeline for my thesis slipping further away from me, this would no longer be possible. I needed to develop a new plan. Now, after months of rewrites, investigating possible mediums, communicating with designers, and allowing myself to sink into general anxiety and depression I have arrived at a solution.

*The Death of Beowulf* has been adapted into a loose screenplay. The plan is to record the performance in an outdoor location (at this time, the location is the UCF arboretum) with the assistance of single-camera operator recording and following my movements.

This, of course, has raised new challenges and considerations. The original concept was to produce a short (40 mins or so) solo performance that utilizes movement and language to reimagine the epic poem, Beowulf. Movement and acting are a different beast in the film medium. Economy of movement is king as it can be quite challenging for film to frame complex movement without the proper equipment and crew. This is especially true considering the budgetary constraints (read: \$0) and single-camera operator using an iPhone. That being said, I believe this emphasis on movement and language as storytelling can still be accomplished. Consider short excerpts of the filmed performance of *The Constant Prince* directed

by Jerzy Grotowski: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvYNCgWWgWk>). While this is a live performance that has been recorded, there is something fascinating in watching the camera follow the actor's movements. As such, I am working with a person who will be operating the camera in rehearsals to semi-choreograph the actor and camera movements. Furthermore, in the example, the actor exhibits tremendous control, deliberate movement on a micro level, and captivating vulnerability. It is a new challenge to scale back these kinds of epic emotions but one that I believe is possible.

My first rehearsal for this new iteration of my project was rather simple. To begin, I did a warm-up and focused on movement activities. I have been exploring primal movements (monkey walks, etc.) to expand the action palette that Beowulf (and monsters) would have at their disposal. A timed read-through (plus audio) followed (45 mins...cut some stuff) and Following that I started to block the opening (first 3 pages or so). Trying to take the camera into account has been a difficult consideration but one that I am not shackling myself while I do not have my operator. Instead, I am exploring different variations of the same scene. Some more stationary, others less so. I, as an actor and person, can be something of a direct presence. What I have been finding, in leaving myself open to the influence of the character, is a more indirect movement pattern emerging. This led me into applying different tactics: coerce, manipulate, lead, etc. Fascinating options for a character speaking to a higher power. All in all, I believe it was a productive first rehearsal. More to come.

**June 13th, 2020**

It is disheartening to write that date. I could never have imagined what the state of the world would be during these summer months. If I am being honest, which I must, the time between my previous rehearsal and this one has been solely colored by depression, confusion, and anxiety. I do not want to linger too much on this, but I believe this period has been beneficial for me as a person, an artist, and this project.

My initial research questions for this thesis revolved around the idea of “why is Beowulf important?”. With everything that has been happening, it was all so easy to let doubt creep into my heart. I kept thinking “Beowulf is not important”. What I am doing is not important. In the face of this historic period, no, it is not. Ultimately, my opinion of the work I was doing, my career at large, and art, in general, suffered for some time.

Without hopefully seeming to cliché, weeks into all of the chaos, it occurred to me that I had more in common with the character of my script than I thought I had. An initial concern I had was that when people look at me, they do not see Beowulf. I don't look like a hero of legend. I'm too small. My accomplishments are not large enough. But that is the crux of Beowulf's story. In the end, he is just a man. He falls into the trap of pride and makes a critical mistake. A mistake, stemming from doubt. In my script, this is a Beowulf who is reflecting on his life after becoming a casualty to his own doubts and pride. He is questioning if someone weighed all of it is it worth it? Emerging from the cloud I've found myself in, I realized I had been doing the same thing.

As my research suggests, in solo performance, especially when the performer is also the writer, the artist enviable is playing a dramatized version of their own self.

Even when playing a fictional character, it is the interiority of the solo artist on stage that an audience is watching and, ultimately, experiencing. It is this confessional-like quality, the vulnerable exposure of the implicit interiority, that makes solo performance compelling.

I have realized, through this difficult experience, why I selected this subject for my thesis. When I was younger, *Beowulf* inspired me. Its fantastical world and moral questioning in many ways became a pillar of my aesthetic as a human being and artist. Revisiting it, I see myself, my concern, in its characters. I want to tell the story of Beowulf. Not just the story people have heard, but my subjective idea of Beowulf. What it means to me. It makes me cringe to write it, but I am Beowulf. This will be my story on display. Just like my version of Beowulf (and, to me, the original version) all I can do is throw my heart into it and, in the end, hope someone is listening. Even if it's just me.

### **July 13, 2020**

I have been experimenting with Laban effort shapes to create a movement study of my monsters. In this rehearsal, I focused on Grendel. I played with him having sustained, strong, and direct movements (press) and quick, strong, and direct movements (punch). I'm toying with some quick, strong, indirect (flick) during his attempted escape as well. These are very powerful choices in rehearsal and allowed me to begin to discover the preternatural movements of this creature. During the "Grendel Fight", after a lot of experimentation, I settled upon a great movement piece for his arm being torn off. I was wrenching and twisting my arm back behind me (to suggest the idea of Beowulf playing Grendel, and the invisible hero tugging at the

limb) and I felt a familiarity in the movement. What it reminded me of is the Discobolus of Myron, the classic Greek statue of the discus thrower. There is something wonderful about taking this classical symbol of human athleticism and beauty finding its way into the desperate, violent thrashings of a beast.

Additionally, I wrote out considerations for Grendel's Mother's movements: sustained, light, indirect (float), and quick, strong, indirect (slash). I believe these will give her more of a wolfish quality, but I will need to experiment with it.

Today, I also gave a lot of thought to movement, language, voice, and the actor. In reading the script aloud with my girlfriend, she would often state she didn't think a certain section required any movement. This got me thinking about campfire stories. All great campfire stories are essentially solo performance. They feature a single speaker and often utilize a great deal of stillness. Thinking back on my own experiences camping with my dad, it was always when the spooky stuff happened that movement found its way into the story. When we are speaking of something terrifying, different, and larger than life we throw up our arms, make ourselves big and change our voice. The stillness preceding the change built a certain level of tension. I'm not considering making the movement studies contained completely within the "monster" sections.

This led me to consider how J.R.R. Tolkien famously stated he does not believe Beowulf is a story about 3 monsters but 2. The dragon is not a monster. It is death and there is nothing more natural than death. This got me thinking about my version. My Beowulf has doubts about the heroic nature of his murder of these "monsters" and eventually his doubts about his own actions erupt during the "Dragon" segment as he violently lashes out the voices. Perhaps in my version, there

is a third monster: Beowulf. I'm going to play with Beowulf being the monster in the third part, not the Dragon. His movements being reflections of the more primal fiends he has slain. These foes thoughts are portrayed as only being concerned with utility. Their emotions are stronger than rationale. Grendel is miserable and seeks to cure his condition. Grendel's Mother is angry and seeks to cure it with vengeance. When Beowulf no longer has his heroic stories (knowing he dies in the final segment) as a shield, all he has left is his emotions. He is scared of dying and being forgotten. An emotion he has seen in Hrothgar and Grendel but never allowed himself to feel. He believes he can satisfy his life by having vengeance on the dragon. Again, something he saw in Hrothgar and Grendel's mothers. So, his storytelling becomes more primal, like his own portrayal of the so-called monsters. I believe I am going to play with bringing back, inverting, and/or showing complementary movements to that of the monsters in this third section. One example of this is inverting the Discobolus pose to harken back to Grendel during the moment when Beowulf's shield breaks.

Looking forward to playing with this stuff

## **July 14<sup>th</sup>**

This rehearsal primarily concerned itself with developing an action palate for Beowulf. This has been enlightening in several ways:

1. I started to notice a habit of drifting toward similar actions. I think this is common in most actors. Every person has an action palate that they are most comfortable using when it comes to everyday life. That being said, I have never had to perform a show in which I am speaking nonstop for 40 minutes. Repetitive actions would be boring. I remembered my analog of the campfire

storyteller. How does he keep the Voices (the audience) engaged? What does he want from them? It allowed me to explore tactics I haven't quite utilized before (at least knowingly) such as bait and dangle. Strong tactics to use to keep an audience's attention when they are essentially your acting partner.

2. I realized how exhausting this is going to be. I am writing tactics and the amount of text I need to do that for is daunting.

Following some small exercises to practice these tactics (my girlfriend bravely played the box game with me\*), I wrote out imagery for the first 3 pages of the script.

\*The Box Game is an exercise in which two participants sit across from each other. They are given an action and a line, and it is their job to successfully make their partner "feel" the action. You are given a time period and then are allowed to repeat the line and action as many times in that time period as it takes for the partner to raise their hand acknowledging they "felt it". The important thing is that the partner recognizes the exact action. If you are trying to "intimidate" them, they should not raise their hand if they feel like you are "terrorizing" them. It's a lot of fun but also a good way to find the action.

## **July 15<sup>th</sup>**

Continued action work and blocked the first 3 pages of the script (which I will from this moment forward refer to as the opening). The first hour was spent finding an organic movement to the scene. It ended up being rather indirect in the initial go-around. As if I was "circling the wagons" against the Voices.

After finding that frame, I folded in actions in the second hour. This was my first time exploring the script, and character, with actions applied. BOY HOWDY does that make a difference! Suddenly, the words I wrote had life. They were pretty before, but just doing reads of it made me afraid they were stiff or stilted. Applying life underneath those words finally generated meaning. This should not be surprising, but it was a relief. I tried a slew of different actions. I had written at least 3 actions for each beat to play with. Considering this is, in some ways, a dramatized version of myself, those actions that were most similar to me (humble, evaluate, intrigue, contemplate, champion, etc.) were easiest. I challenged myself to find actions that felt right to the character as well (bait, brave, challenge, coax, threaten, etc.). These were more challenging but successful application added dimension to Beowulf.

This rehearsal was successful in the simple fact that I have blocking, action options (which I can access with some success), and a shape to the first 15% of the script.

I need to work on following through, acting with the transversus, and not losing it when a new action makes me forget the lines (so many lines).

## **July 17<sup>th</sup>**

Did research on potential recallable images to portray for Beowulf and Grendel. I have come to the conclusion that part of the visual story being told here is that Beowulf is not that different from the quarry of his greatest victory. Parts of that monster exist in him. They are both lonely, prone to questioning, and react with

aggression. I am looking at the statue of David. There are elements there that might be fun to incorporate.

I started to do some small cuts as a new idea came over me. I spoke about how Beowulf is one of the monsters. It fascinates me that in this story Beowulf (and Hrothgar) essentially does exactly what the monsters do to achieve their goals. Grendel is sad, so he kills. Hrothgar is sad, so Beowulf kills for him. Grendel's mother seeks vengeance, Beowulf seeks vengeance upon her. The Dragon destroys Beowulf's home, he despairs like Grendel and seeks to destroy what has caused him emotional harm. How do I communicate this imagery? I realized that sometimes the words don't help. There is a compelling visual story to be told here. How does he physicalize these emotions that are not that different from monsters? How monstrous does he become in his physicalizing? How much of their visual imagery does he take on when he himself becomes unhinged? I think it needs to be stark. I'm planning a rehearsal to explore Beowulf's monstrous physicality. That will have to come after Grendel and Mother, as I want the images to be familiar. I'm starting to think there are multiple levels to this story. The "words" as Beowulf calls it and "The works" as the voices call it. Beowulf's verbal story is the one he is telling with language. Beowulf's physical story is a different one altogether. One that he might not be aware he is telling but might be more revealing than his carefully chosen words.

I wrote the subtext for the opening and begin to work through the section I will be calling "Hrothgar's Story". This is the first section that is just straight storytelling. It consists primarily of Beowulf retelling the story he heard about Grendel. I wrote actions and imagery for this section and am looking forward to shaping this scene with blocking tomorrow.

**June 18<sup>th</sup>,**

Today's rehearsal had many moving parts. I started with a thirty-minute warm-up. (come back and include the warmup routine). In the beginning, I rehearsed the opening multiple times to ensure my chosen tactics had been properly folded in. I made some changes to the blocking to change up the dynamics. Now, Beowulf does not "Challenge" when he welcomes the spirit. He permits them. Acknowledges that he finally died, and his time has come. I started to find the places in which Beowulf could make discoveries. A big one exists in his discovery of his younger self. How does he thoroughly investigate this? How does he find out? Multiple runs of this unit started to bring about a familiarity with the actions. In the following rehearsal, my wedge will be to focus on the **imagery** behind the lines.

Following this, I played with actions for unit 2 (Hrothgar). This section is the beginning of Beowulf actually telling his story. In a way, it makes it become more challenging. It is less active to tell a story. Bookly Beowulf's objective "Prove his worth" makes him want something in the telling. This makes it possible to apply numerous varied actions to the text. He always wants something from the voices and audience. Even when just telling a story. That being said, I have decided to add new sources to my reading list to boost this. 1) Michael Wilson's *Storytelling and Theatre*, a book that explores the contemporary overlap between acting and storytelling. 2) A fun book titled, *The Art of Story Telling* by John Walsh. It is a less academic book that just focuses on telling better stories. I'm curious what insight I might glean from it.

I did 2 runs of Hrothgar and then added the opening. Interesting, or obviously, new discoveries are made doing all four of the pages in sequence with actions.

When I get out of the way of the character (thank you, warm-up) fascinating choices start to emerge. It's okay for Beowulf to feel defeated in the beginning. It only gives him more ground to cover empowering himself.

Some additional research was done into heroic statues. In the first mentions of Grendel, I am messing with twisting the statues of "The Victorious Youth" and also "Laocoon and his sons". These statues are very arm focused. This makes them a good candidate for Grendel as I plan to center Grendel in the fingers and shoulders of the right arm. A challenge I ran into was corrupting these simpler figures. I need to keep exploring this.

Very successful rehearsal. Things to work on:

1. Add imagery now.
2. Explore transition between Unit 2 (Hrothgar) and Unit 3 (Cain).

**June 20<sup>th</sup>,**

Today's rehearsal was eye-opening. I wrote out actions and images for Units 3-5. Physically, I started with my daily practice (refer to warm-up). Following that, I performed an exercise from Stephen Wangh's "An Acrobat of the Heart". The exercise in question was the plastiques. With the help of a partner, I worked through the exercise from eyes to feet. This felt great. There are a lot of discoveries to be made about how images are formed from the simplest of movements. Take for example, how the pelvis is used in the act of lifting. I spent about 20 minutes with this and moved into my rehearsal.

Excited, physically vitalized, and pliable from the exercise and warm-up, I flung myself headfirst into these units. I had intended Unit 4, which introduces Grendel to

the story, to first utilize “Monster Movements”. Working with an exercise I first discovered working with Christopher Niess, The Shakespeare Sonnet Exercise, I took each word of the text and found a movement that comes from that word. It does not need to be literal. Instead, it should feel like it comes from the rhythm, feeling, and response to the word. The perform must take the word, say it and simultaneously make a movement (it can be as much as a step or a flick, or as big as a jump or swing). If it feels right, move to the next word. If not, begin again, repeating the word. I spent a lot of time doing this, considering the plastiques, and contemplating the appearance of Grendel’s monster...hood (?). I created something that I felt captured the words feeling and rhythm but also included the actions I want to affect the Voices with. I rehearsed this a few times and then brought it in for my partner to view. After sharing some notes, she said the thing that is the death knell for this sort of exercise: “it was dancery”.

This gave me a full meltdown. This isn’t intended to be a dance piece. It’s not even meant to be a movement piece first. It is a story. If it comes across as dancery then something is wrong about the balance of, or quality of, movement. It is interesting. Reconsidering the plastiques exercise now, I can see now this made me excited to maybe “over engage” in the fluidity of the body. Instead, I need to consider what a plastique is again. According to Wangh, something is a plastique when “the movement is specific, that it is filled with life, and that it is related to an image.” (84). He also insists that the slightest focus of the eye changes the image. Something I felt when I was doing the exercise. If you are running and looking forward, it might suggest that you are running toward something. However, if you are running and your eyes are focused on something behind you, it might appear as if you are

running away from something. To me, this comment that the piece was “dancery” actually was an acknowledgment that the individual movements flowed, with specificity, life, but the image was not right. My Beowulf is a warrior storyteller. I return once more to the campfire story analogy. When he says “crown,” it shouldn’t be a dancer’s image of the word crown. To extend the arms high above the head and slowly crown yourself, chest out, soft eyes forward look like a dancer. Instead, how does a person telling a campfire story depict one being crowned? There is a bit of flare, sure, but that of a showman. Something that communicates how he expects an audience to feel about the act of crowning. He watches them, maybe out of the corner of the eye. Perhaps it is not so legato as much as playing a character of one being crowned.

Ultimately, this rehearsal revealed just how specific I am going to have to be with every piece of movement in this piece. It’s not a dancer. It is a man telling his story hoping someone enjoys it enough that they give him eternal life. It’s a play. Duh. But still, sometimes I just want to make things too pretty. A storyteller wants to awe, haunt, compel an audience. Not just make them say, “aw, that’s pretty”. This isn’t pretty. The stakes are life and death damnit! Literally!

So, I’ve decided to contain the “movement pieces” more. They will have a sort of build and arise out of an objective. The transformation into Grendel will come because Beowulf wants to show The Voices what sort of creation haunts mankind. He wants them to fear it, so it is all the more impressive when he tells them he killed it. To frame this better, I’ll engage with stillness. Like I said earlier, a campfire story builds that tension. They go still, lean forward, draw you in, and once they have you

BAM! Monster. That's what this needs to be. That Bam moment for this unit is the butchering of the Danes. Time to figure out how I make that happen.

Campfire Storyteller:

- Big symmetrical arms.
- Lean forward
- Eye contact
- Narrow eyes
- Point gaze
- Dangle, then Bam
- Noises... (really think about this. Just tried this. This is goooood. Try this more. Actually, be the campfire storyteller. Spook God with a bit of dramatics. Loud noises!)
- A dedication to the exaggeration of pitch, rhythm, and volume.

## **June 22nd**

I performed a shorter warm-up (focusing on the flood gates and opening the hips and shoulders). Following this, I performed a plastique river focusing on the shoulder through the right arm. The goal of this exercise was to find fluid movement, that tension could be applied to, to help find recallable physical imagery for Grendel. Following this, I returned to Unit 4 and retooled the dancery segment. My wedge was to focus on the actions I had decided and less on the movement. When I introduce Grendel, what do I do to startle the audience, for example? What I found, is committing to a protracted movement presence in this section, I was losing the specified of the actions and why Beowulf is telling this story. It is important to note

that any storyteller wants something from his audience. In this case, in behaving like Grendel, Beowulf wants the Voices to understand the sort of creature they may have helped create and how it terrorized the people. He is also setting up his confrontation with the beast and how cool his ultimate victory is. Therefore, it really just needs to be a glimpse. Shape the body of Grendel, an impression of what's to come in the real face-off, and then focus on getting what I want. Startle them, worry them, entertain them, etc. It's not ballet. It's a story.

### **June 24<sup>th</sup>**

This rehearsal caused a bit of a headache for me. I have been reading a new source, *The Art of Story Telling* by John Walsh. The book has proven to be as tangentially distracted by Christian Religious instruction as Beowulf itself. Ironically, and much to my bemusement, it has made it an interesting companion in trying to tell a story about a hero whose tale is needlessly intruded upon by religious symbology. That being said it has been presenting a lot of compelling new ideas. One particular piece of information provoked a lot of thought. In his section about crafting the story you want to tell, he states, "While books written for adults are full of written description designed to entertain readers. This gets in the way of storytellers." (Walsh 26). I had been struggling with sections that I had written. I wanted it to be more poetic, and "Shakespearean". The issue there being I am not Shakespeare, and while some poetry is meant to be performed, just as much is meant to be read. Plus, my version of Beowulf is not a poet. He is a storyteller. What does it mean to be a storyteller? Do they really rely on the words as heavily as I have been? I don't think they do. As a professor of mine is keen on saying, "Words have no meaning".

It's been a statement that has been difficult to swallow. The thing is...they really don't do they? Sure, they have basic definitions that might assist you when hearing them. But it is the way they are said, the context, the place, the person, the pitch, the rate, the volume that give them meaning outside of simplistic and rigid definitions. The word dragon to most is a scaly, fire-breathing creature of legend. To Beowulf, it means death. How does one vault this barrier to have the word Dragon mean death? Do you add more fluffy words? No...I do not believe so. You make that word mean something. Pitch, rate, volume. Body language. Facial expression. It's quite simple. When Walsh says that the additional descriptive language gets in the way of the storyteller, I believe this is true. I don't need more words. Most of the time, I don't need words at all. Later I will be talking about the power of suggestion and encouraging an audience to use their imaginations and how that is far more powerful than any words you can use. Of course, Shakespeare uses all these big words. Yes. In his time though, the barrier we have to his language was not so large. In fact, his poetry is fully designed to make it easier to listen to and take in. Emphasis, length, stage directions, everything is right in the text. Can you imagine the herculean task of reading some experimental books aloud? They are meant for that. They are meant to be read, where the brain has time and range to play with the thoughts. Plays move. Sometimes at a breakneck speed. You don't have as much time to imagine. You need to be shown.

Too long didn't read: I cut a lot of language (almost a page and a half worth) to make room for the action of storytelling.

I know there are some that might disagree with the assertion that these things just get in the way, but every story needs to be told the way it needs to be told. The

original epic poem is beautiful and perfect. I am doing something different. And maybe, just maybe, it ends up being more “poetic” by actually playing with a smaller palate of words instead of cloying the ear with needless distractions. I am afraid that’s what I was doing before. Luxuriating in so much language was a fun exercise, but I need to tell the story.

### **June 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>**

Something of a breakdown. My efforts have been sidetracked by a tremendous lack of faith in my ability to do this.

### **June 28<sup>th</sup>**

Let’s try it again.

### **June 1<sup>st</sup> and June 2<sup>nd</sup>**

Travis Fimmel and Gustaf Skarsgard.

For this rehearsal, these sections proved the focus, or wedge, of my exploration. I have been considering the claim that an actor in a solo show is inevitably exposing their interiority regardless of whether they are playing a fictional character or not. The reason why is due to the singularity of the voice on display. We have a single actor, who is sometimes the author as well as the performer. In this way, regardless of what is being played, the author/performer’s voice is being received directly by the audience. So, an audience, in a manner of speaking is being asked to consider *why* the material chosen is important enough to the artist to express it through the singularity of their voice. This is going to be explored further, and likely, more clearly

in a chapter of my thesis. This is just setting up a character study I performed. You see, I have been grappling with the challenge of whether this Beowulf I am performing, is me, or a character of my creation that represents my ideas, interpretations, and interiority. Does he have his own psychological life, gestures, voice, and other cetera?

The answer is of course he does. Beowulf has lived an entirely different life than me and his story is something bigger, to history than me. I would like to play a semblance of the character people expect. That being said, as I've discussed, I've begun to embark on a character study to create my Beowulf. To start, I've turned to Stephen Wangh's book, *An Acrobat of the Heart*. Within, he has a section about imitation, character and caricature, and anti-typecasting. This seemed as good a place to start as any. So, I jumped in.

I have a very specific image of what I picture when thinking about men like Beowulf.

There are films like *Beowulf and Grendel*, the ill-fated (and poorly conceived) animated feature *Beowulf*, and countless others that seem pulled right out of Viking myths. Longboats, circular shields, and warrior culture.

Beowulf, of course, is not a Viking. The term "Viking" refers to something different than what most people imagine. A Viking is not a person. Not a culture, a group, or anything of the sort. It is more of a verb. One goes Viking. It's simply means "to raid". Of course, history has given it a different life, but the point here is that Beowulf himself is not a Viking. The large-scale raiding, colonizing, trading, and conquest of the Viking age did not occur until around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Beowulf can be presumed to be taking place in the 6 centuries (Hrothgar was a real person. This is when he

would have ruled.) So, *Beowulf* takes place pre-Vikings as we know them, instead in between the Migration Period and Vendel Age. However, artists tend to make little differentiation between these periods when putting them into the media. Which makes sense. Little of their culture was lost in the early parts of the Viking age. They just expanded. Accrued more wealth through raiding, trading, and expedition. *Beowulf* and Grendel might as well be Viking aesthetic. And *Beowulf 2010* is a movie I watched. To me, the difference is the world was bigger than the Vendels. So much unknown land. So many myths yet to be unproven.

All of that is said to understand, once again, *Beowulf* is old. It is impossible to imitate the idea of what a Vendel period man was like. It is barely possible to emulate an actual Viking with the information we have. However, there is a type people imagine because of myths and stories. Since my retelling has so much to do with the spinning of yarns, I believe it is important to play into this mythos to a degree. In considering the character I turned to actors who have played Vikings on screen to see the choices they have made.

Two, in particular caught my eye, both from the same television show: *Vikings*. The actors in question are Travis Fimmel and Gustaf Skarsgård, playing Ragnar Lodbrok and Floki respectively. Both actors take the typical typing of a Viking warrior and make it something more three-dimensional. As Stephen Wangh says, "what makes a character different from caricature is the detail". Fimmel's portrayal is certainly closer to the typing we imagine. Powerful, a fierce combatant, crazy-looking eyes, tattoos. However, Fimmel brings an introspective, restless, sensitivity that doesn't go along with the stereotype. Skarsgård, likewise, uses some of the classic trappings. However, he adds these eccentric details and humor that create

something familiar and strange at the same time. I observed the specificities of their movement. Both actors have power in stillness, fully grounded to the earth. They stand tall, centering from the chest (sometimes the stomach). When they locomote, they have a freedom to the shoulders and hips. They exude confidence but have a quiet, pensive, stoic quality to them. They are elements I spent some time trying to imitate for my Beowulf to see how they feel/how I can find my own choices from them. Slowly, through imitation and exploration, I started finding a new quality to Beowulf. He liked bold, powerful gestures (his namesake, a bear), indirect movement (in the body and around the space; like a wolf (his other namesake)). His voice, similar to Skarsgard's colorful portrayal, enjoyed an incredible range of pitch and volume. Overall, it was an excellent experiment, however, many of these things did not feel like me at all. The fear was that it felt false in some way. To me, this meant, my mind, voice, and body were not working together to complete the actions. There was a judgment, either from actor or character, preventing the reality of the movement.

This got me thinking about Grotowski's concept of the authentic self. He claims that truth cannot be enacted on stage without revealing the authentic self. It compounds with Chekov's concept of the creative individuality of an artist. An artist needs the freedom of their higher self (the intellectual artist) and lower self (the instinctual artist) in order to find the soul of the character. This moment sort of reminds me of the struggles I've been having with this project. How is it important? To whom? Why? Can I do it? To me, the success of these exercises is starting to reveal the delight in the performance, but the judgment belies a lack of confidence in the authentic self still. More work needs to be done to find this.

## June 5<sup>th</sup>

Review of working out. Primal movements.

This is something of a different journal. In reading Stephen Wangh's book, he discusses dressing up. He encourages a class he is teaching to, "Use costumes and makeup to transform yourself so thoroughly that you look and feel like a different person". In doing so, you are to see what new things these new exteriors inspire.

This is always something that I wanted to do, but the characters I have been cast as never truly allowed me to "transform". In the relative safety of quarantine, socially far away, I decided to allow myself to undergo a significant change. I looked at haircuts Vendel men might have worn in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. I cut my hair, grew a significant beard and already I looked like an entirely different person. However, I saw this transformation, and newfound time, an opportunity to tackle an even greater stumbling block.

A huge qualm of mine when first undertaking this project, was a belief that I cannot play Beowulf. Not because he's not my type, really, but because of the image people see when they picture him. Long, blond hair, tall, rippling muscles. I have, let's see, none of those. However, the feature I attribute most to Beowulf is strength. That does not necessarily equal bodybuilder physic. He is a warrior. His feats are superhuman. Regardless of how strong he looks, is it believable for a human to rip the arm off a ten-foot-tall monster? Not really? But I could certainly be confident in my own strength. I decided to add a workout regimen to my daily practice. Cardio, Core, Arms & Shoulders, and Legs. 5 or so times a week. I don't have a gym (COIVD-19, might need to find a shorter thing for that) but I have bodyweight. So, I have been improving my self-image, my physical strength, and changing my body

significantly from what it once was. In exploring some games (Word Jams) I even found a moment where Beowulf wanted to shed his clothes and get primal. My newfound confidence in my body (not to mention the flexibility and strength I had gained) allowed me to follow this impulse. That would have been our hard sell to me a few weeks ago.

This is a long way of saying that I found something interesting. Stephen Wangh says, "It is a common trap in character work to confuse character with mood." What I was finding is there is a difference. Beowulf is fit, quick to fight (and enjoys it too), he buries his emotion beneath piles of glory and pride, quick-witted, funny, and charming. Wearing a tunic and plain pants with a belt robbed me of the armor I had been wearing. Beowulf suddenly had to fill a beige and grey shapeless costume (traditional clothing for a warrior like him) with something greater. And really the canvas could not have been better. His movement was not restricted. He could jump, roll, run, and swing a sword with ease. His hair never gets into his eyes tied in a knot. His beard serves as armor, a mask, for a face that doesn't want to share weakness. In fact, these were not things I thought about before all of these things. It helped put me in the mind of a warrior, to perform Beowulf's actions in his body. That's what this all created after all...his body.

It is also worth musing on the idea of creative individuality at this point. I have been thinking about Chekov's idea of this and how it mingles with my own insecurities as an artist. I thought I couldn't play Beowulf because I didn't look like him. Yet, the whole purpose of this project is to expose my interpretation and the value of that upon a classic story. It is okay if this Beowulf doesn't look like what others imagined him as. I always looked up to heroes like him, wanted to tell stories

like him, and be strong like him. As I've said, in a way, I am Beowulf. Only now, I am letting the artist in me use the building blocks from my personal life to build this unique Beowulf. Something new.

### **July 16<sup>th</sup>**

This was the first time running part 1 in its entirety. Wow. Okay. So yeah. First run of part 1 (the first half) down in the book. I underestimated how exhausting this would be and believe you me I thought it was going to be exhausting. Before I get too much into that, here's an exercise I did.

I started this one with a character word jam. I found the exercise in the "Acrobat of the Heart" book. Here's how it works: You start by selecting a phrase that feels weird in your mouth. For this exercise I took the line, "I am the monster in this hall". Not something I'd say. I'm not a violent man. After identifying the line, you "jam". This means trying the words with all sorts of character choices. Change pitch, placement, intonation, and rhythm. You allow your body to change with the voice, moving while you work. The book encourages you to purposely make choices that won't feel right, then return to ones you like better. You are supposed to find the choices that make the lines sound more "speakable". If the choices work for that line, move on to some others and see what happens. If it doesn't work, keep jamming. Eventually, you might find something that works but might seem "stereotyped". This doesn't matter so much; the point of rehearsal is to refine these choices and keep playing. Eventually, you find a way to make these choices feel more real.

The exercise brought about several realizations. I had been making the assumption that Beowulf is a "masculine man" and had been stereotyping his voice

to be deeper. This wasn't necessarily making the lines more speakable. What I found is giving him a wilder variation of pitches and a bit more edge helped. This actually caused the pitch of the voice to raise, not lower. It challenged a few of my preconceptions in writing the character, but it was working.

In playing with other lines, like the sarcasm or sardonicism, I was finding something closer to my voice was making the lines more speakable. It started to fracture the text a little. There were "voice changes" happening. I'm not speaking of the other characters he puts on. No, Beowulf was finding color to the voice. Like a person. Suddenly Beowulf was having modes of communicating. The intimate, playful voice. The grand storyteller. The introspective warrior. The proud son. The fearful man. The poetic and the mundane.

Anyway, run the first part (ending with the introduction of Grendel's mother). Was a lot. The stamina, energy, and brainpower to do any one-person story are remarkable. In this case, it feels all the harder due to the scale and epicness of the story being told. There are giant monsters and gods. It's huge.

I ran it for my girlfriend's feedback. It was interesting receiving feedback on a complete chunk of the text performed. Sidebar here: I've been teaching since my undergrad and have had the pleasure of sitting in on many a feedback session, talkback, masterclass, etc. Something has always driven me nuts. Feedback too often veers into criticism that can be simplified into a simple statement: "If it were *me* doing it, this is what I would have done." This is an entirely unhelpful framing for feedback. In our studies with Julia Listengarten, we explored Liz Lerman's "Toward a process for critical response". These guideposts resonated with me. She suggests that we as artists need to be able to question our own work in a somewhat public

environment. We also need positive feedback that is not just “wow, great job! Loved it”. When we agree to give feedback, there should be a common goal to help the artist succeed on their own terms. John Walsh, author of the art of storytelling, takes a similar approach in his book in suggesting creating feedback groups. He suggests a particular process in the order feedback should be given. I am trying to incorporate that in future rehearsals with my girlfriend (and a “feedback group” I am creating). More information about that will likely be included somewhere (once I make it).

Anyway, the framework I gave my partner was “for this rehearsal we are focusing on affirmation. Examples “when you did such-and-such, it helped me understand the story better”. The focus was placed on whether or not the story was being told. Overall, feedback was more constructive in this format. Certainly, stuff I could use to improve. Going to keep playing with this.

## **July 17**

Block Part 2. Review of primal movements.

This rehearsal was about blocking part 2. Ran into a struggle and a boon in this section. I learned, through character jams and playing, sometimes what I wrote doesn't work because of characterization but sometimes it doesn't work because it's not how I (actor and author!) want to tell this story. Lines change. Sometimes I adlib. The process is starting to feel more devised. Which makes sense! I am here, alone, director, actor, and playwright playing in my living room. and devising is fun. Do I take my hair down to be the mother? (No, this takes too much time, might be distracting for the audience, and how do I tie it back up? However, this choice is emblematic of me feeling free to try something that might not work. It often helps me

find something that does work I'd never would have thought. Like transforming into Hrothgar from Beowulf by taking his hand morphing into him as I stand up.)

Sometimes, I interject a joke because it feels like I am deflecting. Sometimes I'm mad at my fate so I mock God (bold move). Sometimes I introduce more movement. Such as drawing the confines of the lake. It's great.

In this experience of being stuck inside, I need reminders of why I create art. I have a desire to express myself and if I want to express myself, I need to allow myself to make choices that resonate with me. Not choices I think might look good or "fit". It taps into Grotowski's belief of the genuine self and how by finding that you are finally able to enact truth onstage. I can't claim I've ascended to the point of fully revealing the "genuine self", but I've been working for some time on this and it's no longer feeling like I am taking the first choices but arriving at the *inevitable* choices. The ones that feel truly authentic for character and artist. When I find those moments, brief as they may be, they feel powerful.

## **July 18**

I blocked part 3 (Dragon) today. The big thing I learned here is words are not always the best way to express things. At least strictly defined words. Non-verbals have power. At one point, the dragon fight had words but after a few hours of playing with blocking the fight with the dragon I discovered something. What if it's just a battle cry?

Stephen Wangh talks about telling a story. He gives an example of an actor telling a story about her mother and how she wants to slap her (or something, I might be making that up). As she tells the story she swipes the air rather realistically and it

changes her words and how she says them. When she removes the gesture, the story is no longer authentic. I say this to suggest, as I spoke the words with the movements it felt inauthentic. I felt like I was trying to say a poem, not kill the literal embodiment of my demise. I ditched the words, tried to shout. It added a tremendous level to movement and voice! Suddenly, the body wanted to thrust, muscling the sword into an impenetrable beast as the breath and voice followed the gesture. It was powerful, exciting, and uncomfortable. I found myself thinking, is it too much? I rejected that idea. It feels right. It just needs to be refined.

## **July 19**

That was it! The first stumble through. Julia watched. Felt good. We had a framework for doing the whole feedback process I am devising. Focusing on affirmation, moving into questions (from artist and person giving feedback), clarifications, and finally direction (or opinions). I think the process works. Primarily because I was able to sit and listen to Julia and sense the common goal. She was seeing my vision (from me asking questions, it's easy to start to intuit someone's intentions) and asking questions and offering direction that would benefit my goals. Awesome.

I worry it was slow and boring but those are just self-critical. Here are some important things.

What's the difference between storytelling and acting? This is a question I keep coming back to. Interestingly, by posing some questions about it we got into a discussion of *Hamilton*. To Julia, the parts that worked best were the simple moments. She liked the grandness of the poetry but loved best when I spoke rather

plainly and honestly. Like a friend telling a story and ribbing the listener. In other words, she loved the wild transitions between poetic and, almost, slang. It made me a bit uncomfortable. I wasn't trying to necessarily do that. I was afraid it was dropping character and just exposing the modern man. It doesn't. *Hamilton*, and early pieces like *A Knight's Tale*, have this similar juxtaposition. There is something almost classical and modern simultaneously smashed together. To Julia, the story was most clear in these moments. When the classical images would soar into the sky, watching me see them and describe them in crisp poetic language, only to have me drop to earth and comment on my own story in a modern voice. It's like playing opposites in any character. There is something very human in these shifts. When we tell stories, do we not try to tell beautiful stories only to editorialize or go on tangents? Julia was right. When I would tell the story of Cain only to mess with god for it being his fault, I felt the most like Beowulf. I think I need to invite more of this polarization into the text. The lyrical and the mundane.

All that being said, I am concerned about pacing. I am really feeling myself in those beat changes. They can happen quicker. Something my advisor told me is that thoughts happen rapidly. Beowulf is in the direst moment of his...life...well, he's dead. The stakes are high. He doesn't have time. I told Julia my wedge for the next rehearsal is to play the show as if "I have only an hour to tell my life story and it needs to be amazing". We will see what that does.

## **July 20<sup>th</sup>**

I took time to review parts 2 and 3 for pacing. I used my wedge. It's interesting how much that helped. To focus on the stakes. I need to tell this story. I need it to be

great. But I do not have all the time I might want. It is a strong obstacle. I don't think I have been thinking a lot about the obstacles in a one-person show. For the story to remain dramatic, it needs obstacles that are not only internal. The obstacle of the judge, my own impending death, my lack of control, how do these affect me? This is what I played with. Time went down. Later I focus on Hrothgar's moralizing, Father's speech, Beowulf saying farewell, and physical movement in full costume. These were problem spots in the run. I was interested in not just treating Hrothgar like an old man, but in this moment exposing a bit of the man he was. The one who Beowulf mythologized in his head. Is he still in there? I explored adding this in. What I found is it brought a bit more joy to his character overall. He wasn't just a "mood" anymore. Unfortunately, in this moment, he was maybe too youthful. I started to look at this idea of his mind being sharp, his heart full, but his body failing. Slow gestures, quick mind, beautiful wordplay. Loving his mind and the person he's talking to but regretting his fate because it makes him weak. I'm starting to love this segment.

A note I received was that in one section the voice got kind of samey. This was an interesting note. An affirmation I had received is I was finding strong variation in pitch, rate, and volume. Later, in clarification, I was asked if the more subdued voicing was intentional during the farewell to Hrothgar. It most certainly was not! It was meant to be a touching reflection. A cherished memory. The most important man Beowulf ever knew leaving his life for good. It shouldn't be understated and monotonous. It was fascinating to me because I felt emotionally connected to what I was saying. I really felt it. Which was clear to Julia because I was tearing up. Yet the *voice* did not match the *body*. In effect, I was painting a mood. Yes, I felt it, but I was

hiding it behind a measured voice and breath. That is what the plastiques are trying to convey...only the inverse. The mind, body, and voice must be working in tandem to find authenticity. So, in this rehearsal, I let the voice follow the body and images. The result was surprising. Some chuckles emerged at good thoughts, smiling. I was sharing how good the man was once. How I embraced him. I wanted to warm the hearts of the audience. Not smash them. I was still tearing up but now it was more genuine. I missed the man. Again, this is playing the opposite and finding the truth.

Lastly, it's really hard to take the tunic off. I tried to find a solution. It works...for now.

### **July 21<sup>st</sup>**

Today was the first full run using the prerecorded voice lines. Julia ran sound. A lot of discoveries today. One, responding to something real is different than imagining it. That may be an obvious observation, but it is true. I had spent so much time imagining the voices in my head that I didn't know what it would feel like to hear them. The great thing is it gave me so much more to work with. Julia noticed that the show was funnier! I think this was because I had something to play with. Normally in a one-person show, you'd have an audience to bounce off of in a lot of ways. For the longest time, I've had nothing. Now, I could make fun of the voices, kid around with them, judge them, condemn them, challenge them, etc. It made the tactics a bit easier to play. Not as much extraneous work of imagining something and then putting all the work behind it. In fact, it helped give me a little more energy to push forward with the show. It was something new, invading the space. Overall, it was a great experience that took it to the next level.

## July 22nd

Rough spots (Speeches), breathing, and speaking on the impulse (no suspension). Specifying the movement of Hrothgar. Full run with sound and camera. Watching the footage.

So, one big thing I noticed is a habit of mine. I will take a breath, find the inspiration, then speak. I suspend at the top of my breath. This was going to have to go. One, it is a misuse of precious inspiration and energy. Two, it is dramatically slowing down the show. Before the full run, I took time to do some rough spots with this in mind. Then for the show, I set a goal of not taking unnecessary breath. Every breath would serve a purpose.

Today was also the first time I had Julia in the space working a camera. That was a new thing altogether. How do I interact with the camera? So, I made the choice to deliver a lot of the show directly into the lens. The way I would if I had a live audience. It felt good. Before I was talking to nothing, but now I had a target, and behind it was a person smiling and nodding. That all too precious energy feedback loop that had been missing.

Julia did great. We watched bits of the footage to see what was working and what wasn't. Direct eye contact to the lens works. It feels like someone is talking directly to you. We made some blocking tweaks. Tomorrow is the first time I am going to perform this for an "audience". I have put together a feedback group that's going to watch the show over zoom. I'm anticipating technical problems, but most of all I am excited (and anxious) to hear what people think of the show I've been working on so hard.

## July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Full run with the audience. Feedback session. The big day has arrived. For today, I invited my committee and a number of close friends and colleagues to watch a dress rehearsal and provide feedback. I wanted to do my best.

Several things. One, as always, I started with my 30-minute warm-up. Two, this run would feature a bit more artistry to the camera work with the help of my partner. Three, the wedge I was working was to drive the story. I gave Beowulf a new obstacle: this is his last hour of life. He must tell his story, the best he can, but he has no more than an hour before he dies. The concern here was that part 1 was running a bit slow compared to parts 2 and 3.

The run went excellent! A few baubles (I should have taken more time to recalibrate after introducing the project to the audience) but overall, very proud of the work I presented.

The Feedback reflected this. I archived some of the feedback sessions for further use.

We used an adapted version of Liz Lerman's critical process for the feedback. This was excellent.

The most intriguing feedback related to the choices of lyricism vs. plain-speak and various images. Let's start with lyricism. People really seemed to appreciate the mix of poetic language with the commentary of the narrator being written in a modern voice.

An overview of images. My chair liked the contemporary image of Beowulf. The muscled body, ponytail, shirtless, all depicted a more modern Beowulf. The simplicity of the costuming worked. Just a tunic, pants, and a belt communicate a palette to

paint a specific character on. Brings attention to the face, body, and story. A specific image brought up was the opening “dead” image. The opening image works, but my chair had questions about the repetition of the image through the show. This was intentional. However, maybe not sculpted enough. It appears again in the Grendel’s mother scene. The reason for this was to communicate a chance he had died here. But putting it there is confusing. I am considering having the image appear in Grendel (pseudo-formed), Grendel’s mother (semi-formed), and The Dragon (fully replicated). I think this will make the intentionality of each of his near-death experiences being represented (and his idea to mess with the audience as they don’t know “when” he died).

Also, they loved the limited prop usage. Staff really good. Pride speech and Hrothgar speech were particular favorites.

Lastly, people saw my passion for the piece come through. Beowulf, that is. They saw I love the story and that love, they believed, helped me create a far more approachable Beowulf. This isn’t really something I thought about before.

**July 24th-July 30th:** break and reflection.

I am taking a break to cool down and reflect on the process. I have been obsessing over this performance for months now. Given the current state of things, it has been too easy to overfocus. There is very little to be looking forward to right now and this piece is the only clear expression of art that I have right now or in the near future. There is a lot of bad stuff happening and those constant nagging thoughts of the relevance of my piece keep haunting me. Especially with what is going on in the world. I am thinking about it far too much. Annoying people talking about Beowulf.

I keep thinking about Andre Gregory's afterthoughts in *An Acrobat of the Heart*. He insists upon a near immersion in the piece. Spending as much time with it as possible to find the inevitable choices. The way it must be played. Now Gregory suggests that this process he has prescribed is not "realistic," provided the demands of the real world. However, the world is not what most recognize as the "real world" anymore. The need to make money is less of a concern. Jobs aren't available. So, yeah. You could spend endless time on your work right now but after having that for the first time in my life I see that there must be a balance. It can't all be art all the time. No no no no. Part of that is the question of risk and safety. There is a lot of risk inherent in the performance of this show for me right now. Personal risk. It is emotionally and intellectually important to me. I am not sure where the safety is. So, I am going to take time off. I need to create a safe space to perform in my brain. I am putting too much pressure on myself to excel. I need to be able to express myself from a safe place if I want to find the truth. Right now, the truth I am expressing is not the one I want to. Going to try and make a safer space. Acknowledge more of my successes and what I am doing well.

### **Week 1 Filming**

Wow. This. Was. A. Lot. So, the break helped me mentally, but I don't think it could have prepared me for this week. I have never done anything like this. I have worked on camera, yeah. But filming a 50-minute-long one-person show outdoors with limited tech, one camera, and COVID? Woof. This was challenging, stressful, upsetting, and revelatory. Okay. Let's recap.

One: Florida Outdoors. Finding a location where I could safely wield a sword in public away from prying eyes was a challenge. We chose the UCF arboretum. There is a lovely space far from civilization. However, it is hot as hell. I was already sweating through my tunic by the time I started speaking. This exhausted my precious energy stores that are necessary to get through an entire run of this demanding show. On the first few days, I simply couldn't get through a run. I would just get tired. In a way I never had before. That has to do with...

Two: Stimuli. Cicadas. Loud. Birds. Loud. The forest? open and epic. There are airplanes. Distant cars. So many stimuli to ignore or use. But furthermore, the epicness of the sounds, the location, made me feel like I had to overpower it. I was basically shouting. Railing at the skies. Like I was doing Greek theatre outdoors. Julia had to keep adjusting the mic. Between the heat oppressing me and treating everything as if I was speaking to the gods (well...I am? but not always on an epic level) ensured I would lose steam before long.

The thing is it is hard to figure out how to perform this show (due to content and style) on camera outdoors. It feels weird. It's hard to find a reality. It is almost like there is less room for imagination? Like the birds, the sky, the lake, the sounds fill my mind. It's hard to add more to that. I want to talk to the "god in the clouds" but there are clouds. Is he way up there? or closer. It's a lot harder than the constrained and restricted area of a living room. It is weird. I would have never thought this would be the case, but my living room was a safer space for creation. Maybe because it is familiar? Less sound? Closer quarters. More predictable. I had control. The chaos of the bigger world comes to bear in a real way and the frame is so small.

So, I resolved that the first few days are more rehearsals. Test shots. None of it is going to be usable. I have to get used to this and make new choices suitable for the environment.

Okay, by the end of the week, we got a full run. Is it usable? Yeah. Do I love it? no. It is slower-paced. The airplanes are terrible (one flew so low. So loud.) I think it is the pacing issues I dislike really. Otherwise, I think I am starting to find a more natural delivery.

The real discovery here is the effect that a new environment can have on a piece. Especially, given the circumstances.

## **Week 2 Filming**

More disasters, more discoveries. As the semester approaches, they are preparing the arboretum. So, lawnmowers have entered the fray. The real enemy here are fire ants, though. I won't belabor this, but I got eaten up bad. Guess bare feet seemed like a pretty good idea in an enclosed environment but not so much outside.

This week, overall, proved to be a week of incredible frustration and exhaustion. Frequently, I would run out of stamina, inspiration, or heart early and just need to stop. The mental and physical toll this is taking on me is surprising. Each failed take piles on me and distresses me. We will film for hours, not get a useable take, go home, and my mind will still be obsessed with Beowulf. What can I do better? How do I keep going? Am I losing interest? Passion? Am I not good enough to tell this story the way I'd like?

It's all exacerbated by the fact that we arrive early (6AM) to avoid people. I warm up, eat breakfast, but sometimes my brain isn't truly ready for hours. Then, by the time the brain is ready, I am tired from failed takes and now people are starting to roam around the arboretum. And people aren't going to take kindly to seeing a shirtless man waving a sword around.

It makes me self-conscious and vulnerable in a way that feels unhelpful. I yearn for a safe space.

We got a complete, useable take, I believe. It felt pretty good, but it comes down to watching it. I felt particularly good about the physicalizing of Hrothgar. I also had some good moments hearing the natural world and using it. We will see how it looks.

### **Watching the tape Aug 11<sup>th</sup>**

I feel broken. I watched the second tape, the one I thought is usable. It is garbage. I hate it. I probably should have been watching more takes over time. Because what I saw here is...it's hard to explain. It's just not what I saw in my head. This I don't like.

There is this quality to my voice that is wrong. Forced. Fake. Like pressure is being pushed upon it. Hrothgar, Wiglaf, all the other characters? Fine. But my Beowulf? Ingenuine. I sound like I'm performing. I sound like this is laborious. There is no love here.

I think I had what could be called a nervous breakdown afterward. I have one week. I don't want to show this to anyone. This isn't what I wanted at all and after months of working on this, that is a terrible realization. Can I make it what I wanted? People won't like this. This would be an embarrassment. Fuck. I was raging about it

and Julia took my anger very personally. I don't want to talk about that too much. It certainly just depressed me further. I feel like I am letting her down too by not being able to reframe this in a healthy way. I just want to impress people. I want them to like this as much as I want to like it. This is boring.

I know people are supporting me in this. Obviously, Julia is. Yet, I feel cripplingly alone in this. Do people care about what I am doing here? In the end, even if it is good (or bad) will it make a difference? To anyone? I don't really know that journaling about this is helping. I'm going to lay down. I want this to work. How can I make it work? I feel nothing but stress and dread.

### **Final shoot**

Okay. I am writing this one day before streaming the video. With Julia's help, and checking in with some people, I came to the conclusion to get one more take. However, I've tried to dramatically change my frame of mind for this take. I need to be genuine. Something that was said to me in my run for the committee is that my love of the story was so clear. That has been missing. I wanted the love back. The love comes in when I find the genuine self. When I make myself vulnerable and bring myself to the character. When I allow my personal experiences to come to bear and act as both Beowulf and something of a curator of the story. When my voice is Beowulf and Beowulf is speaking through me. SOOOOO that's the "simple" task we tried to accomplish in a matter of 3 days that we had left. Well, there was more construction. More bikers. More ANTS. More Planes. but there was also more vulnerability. After watching both takes and having my meltdown, my mind felt cleared a bit? I was applying so much pressure to myself. I have felt so trapped in

quarantine. So distant from my creative network and support groups. It's difficult to feel connected in any way. So, who am I doing this for? I mean this quite literally. I came to the realization that I am doing this for myself. I am doing this because I want to share my love of an underappreciated piece of art that has been a formative work in my life. I want to share it in my words. I want anyone who is willing to watch it to enjoy it, but they will only enjoy it because I do. The reason my committee loved what they saw is because they felt the fun, the love, the heart of the story. It's that damn campfire storyteller idea again, isn't it? That's all I want to do. Only more dramatic. So, I took time to breathe but most importantly I allowed myself to perform for the only two people present. Julia and me. We are the only two people I need to be happy right now. Jeffrey wants to be genuine and I want to see Julia smile. So, I did it for us. It was a bit sloppy. There were mistakes (including a debacle with trying to take that damn tunic off) but those "mistakes" lent credence to the much more genuine performance I found. Beowulf sounded like a living breathing person. The previous run had run too long. Part of that was I was not breathing to speak or act but letting air and inspiration be wasted. This? was breathless. In a good way. I desired nothing more than to tell my story. New tactics. New humor was found. I was playing games and finding the mystery. I was in the moment. Bouncing from one story to the next, tangents felt like tangents, but I was pulling and the audience back in. All it required was trusting myself and believing I can be Beowulf and an authority on this story. That, in many ways, this is the story of my life too. The people I love are in it. I needed to tell it to them and talk about them.

We watched it. I am pleased. It was a relief to know that my reaction was not just me hating myself on camera. Don't get me wrong, my reaction was not healthy. This

one was. I saw mistakes, but it didn't make me like the performance less. They might have made me like it more, in fact. Because I felt alive. Like someone actually experiencing something. At times, I distinctly see me, but I also saw my Beowulf. This was an exposure of the two coming together. The intersection between the artist, the voice of the playwright, and Beowulf coming together. All of which are just different facets of me anyway. There is no escaping it and embracing that was the greatest struggle. I was once told by all of my instructors at an end of the year meeting that I am doing technically great work, really excelling, but I don't always seem like they see the fun in the work. I finally saw what they meant in the previous take. Part of my reaction to it was the horrible realization that I had lost the joy of performing. Realizing that there is, at times, a complacency in the work. This? I had fun doing this. I know that because watching it...it made me smile.

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