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Perform/Ability: Terry Galloway's *Just the Funny Bits*

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There is an intriguing tension set in motion watching the performance of Terry Galloway in "Just the Funny Bits." Her subject and craft of presentation stimulate questions about the dynamics of disability and about being an audience member of such a performance. I am watching and re-watching this performance in interludes as I watch over my husband, who has become more conversant with disability than he or I ever imagined he would be.

I watch Terry's selected sketches that on the surface describe flailing and despair but are guided by a woman who has developed excellent means of surmounting fears, vulnerability, and physical limitations. Terry is an expressive performer who has the power to draw us in and hold us through both her body and voice. The text – the introduction given in her persona and the ensuing hyperbolic manifestations of suicide, paranoia, and schizophrenia shaped into characters that may or may not be autobiographical—sets us up for comedy and social critique.

Comedy is immediately evident in the choice of props—the dorky combs for Terry as a young adolescent, the enormous glasses she dons to emphasize the awkwardness attendant with seeing and being seen, the book and pearls worn while discussing the right and wrong way to end it all. Critique emerges implicitly in the discordant clash between disability as subject and the humor with which it is presented in both text and performance. Although these are "just the

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funny bits," we are acutely aware that they are selected from among manifold unfunny bits in a longer untold life. The lacunae speak loudly. Disability makes all of the "normal" growing pains larger, the same, more so, different. The isolation of the individual within her own body is emphasized by the solo performance form and by the fact that with the exception of Terry's mother, who Terry briefly depicts in the vulnerable pose of female on her back, legs in the air—woman as "done to," woman as flailing bug—we are not actually introduced to anyone else in Terry's life. The attempt to show the development of a fragile autonomy instead focuses upon the difficulties of building strength in isolation. The isolation of an individual with disabilities is often heightened through other's decisions whose understanding is mediated by regulations and distance. Terry's artistic development of the hapless individuals in these sketches, shaped by the unenlightened people we do not see or hear much about, invites us to imagine their roles in forming thoughts of suicide, paranoia, and schizophrenia. The extreme sketches help us witness the mind left to insular avenues of despair without effective resources for coping, whether the inadequacy arises from the stultification of social forms, the indifference of people who are absorbed by their own lives, ("For two solid years I lived like that and nobody noticed"), or the inadequacy of social institutions that may cause more harm than good.

Terry's performance underscores the idea that disability transforms our definitions of normalcy. She establishes common ground for able-bodied folk by creating characters whose irreverence and "deviance" poke fun at the ostensible stability of a correct way to do things. These characters appear "whacko," and we may simultaneously recognize ourselves in them at certain moments of our lives. What woman who has lived alone, for example, has not engaged in paranoid ruminations reminiscent of Terry's character who is sure that someone has entered her apartment? Terry not only establishes characters with whom the audience can share a wink, such as the morbid Diva of suicide etiquette, but more importantly, she taps into certain shared assumptions about the value of performance, art, and humanity.

Terry's story is ultimately a narrative of overcoming. The biographical introduction she offers tells us of her emergence into life at the hands of medical clinicians run amok. The sketches are presented without addressing the line between truth and imaginative fabrication: it's clear that the veracity Terry offers lies in the struggle we hear between the lines, in which survival of spirit and self-esteem become as crucial as development of the body. Although deafness is visited upon her by the ineptitude of experimenters, the care-less practitioners who use her mother as a guinea pig, she remains in charge in the telling. The imaginings that we watch are products of a strong agent who has seemingly adjusted to the havoc of disability. She is no longer a victim but a vibrant performer who has control over her voice, her body, and her selection of "just the funny bits." These bits parse the imaginary mental careening between extremes. "So that was my childhood. It left me at times suicidal, paranoid and schizophrenic." The structure is clear, well-crafted, and imaginative. The ability to narrate pain, vulnerability, and loss lies at the heart of all performance, and Terry's work reflects the possibilities intrinsic in the skills of the performer as she wrests control from experience.

Thus, Terry's performance exemplifies an aesthetic design that is very much her own making (in tandem, we note, with others—her friends, fellow artists, and significant other that are acknowledged in the credits—who have entered the insularity she tells us about). The emphasis on the self in isolation is transformed by the collaborative act of performance production we see. The relationship between this poised, polished performer of the present and the wounded mess of the past provides a representation of the active role of imagination in constructing and rewiring a life on the outside. The past becomes material for progress. The visual and aural immediacy of the performance belies the difficulties of which she speaks.

The success of her accomplishment leaves me pondering a precarious dynamic. I have witnessed a polished performer who has focused upon the messiness and vulnerability of her life in a way that assures me she is in control of her history, developing skills beyond the cultural powerlessness of her sketch personae. The past as narrative takes shape through the present craft of the storyteller, demonstrating ultimately a story of growth and positive discovery even though it is couched in the frame of marginality and madness: trauma is reshaped through the efficacy of art in which the past can be molded. This revelation, to me, is the real "hidden subtext" of this piece. Disability as it unfolds, however, is an ugly, powerful monster. Terry knows this. She lets us hear about its outlines; she demonstrates the clanking and clanging awkwardness of who she was during the ragged time but does not appear to be now.

My husband has had brain cancer for fourteen years. After four surgical interventions, which helped preserve most of his skills, he has finally lost most of his ability to move. Inoperable tumor cells have crossed into the motor skills area of his brain. Nearly every day he is forced to say goodbye to skills and accomplishments that, in some cases, he has used since childhood: walking without assistance, climbing the stairs, shutting his eye, moving one side of his mouth. Still other skills that no longer do his biding are ones that he has developed successfully over the past few decades such as cooking, gardening, making espresso.

Time is a major factor in stories of disability and the crisis of identity that such stories shape. The contradiction between Terry's story and her storytelling leaves us to consider how identity is informed by an awareness of the past in relation to the present and the hopes for a future. How do a sense of autonomy and identity emerge differently based upon the period at which one loses one's abilities and whether that loss becomes stabilized or is ever-changing? My husband and I think of the irretrievable past with longing, and we attempt not to let our minds contemplate the future. The tasks of every-day living occupy nearly all our attention and force us into the now with a rawness that does not necessarily capture the attractiveness of existential thought. Some days, my husband fills a moment of deterioration that mocks the future with his own brand of humor: "From now on, I'll have to eat only with people I'm confident are friends," he told me last week as it became apparent that the food in the paralyzed half of his face would not behave with social decorum.

Social decorum is a major theme in Terry's performance of "funny bits." It guides her introduction as she tells us who she is and offers the "hidden subtext" that she is deaf. Invoking the propriety of social forms is one way that Terry calls our attention to the idea that individuals with disabilities are thrust into breaking established "norms" by simply trying to live. While these norms are constricting and repressive to many of us, for someone with disability, they are all that and often impossible as well. Their appeal to those who follow them is the security of not having to think due to the established way of doing things they provide, generating comfort and a safe distance to most people's involvement with others.

For me, the introduction of a "hidden subtext" of deafness assures that I don't become uncomfortable with the subsequent "madness" that fuels the personae and sketches I watch. Explanation and justification dissipate the awkwardness that might otherwise be engendered in watching someone contemplate the social etiquette of suicide, grapple with paranoia, or struggle with schizophrenia. An introductory explanation and justification for the behavior we're about to see in the sketches is clear and assuring. Acting "crazy" with a justification explains the behavior and therefore, on some level, contextualizes and "normalizes" it. I consider how the performance might have unfolded with the "funny bits" offered to us without explanation, with the introduction, for example, placed as an epilogue, with decorum thrown to the winds. What shifts in audience perception, aesthetic distance, and social critique might have been engendered? Might Terry's goal of performing "works that test the limits of decorum" have been more powerfully served by such a rearrangement of the sequence?

Terry's performance elicits consideration of how one tells stories of disability to those who have not experienced such problems. I think about this issue each time I am asked to tell someone who has not had experience with disability how my husband is doing. I am not the subject, the body whose visuals cannot hide the obvious, but there is still a tension in attempting to know how much of the nature of fundamental loss should be told. For on some level, despite illusions of a limitless horizon, many people know that the cruelty of loss is at the heart of human experience and it justifiably terrifies them. We all carry within us tectonic plates that may shift through accident, illness, medical malpractice, genetics, and aging, and although we are fascinated by people who carry on when these plates shift, we are also apprehensive that they embody terrors that will somehow envelop us as well.

Disability humor takes hold of the beast and names it. It sets the agenda for perceiving difference not from the eyes of the beholder but from the person who lives with the special set of circumstances thrust upon them. It braves the unsafe ground inherent in the fragility of us all, and it harnesses this vulnerability to one of the things that makes humans different from other life forms who also can feel pain: humor. Tapping into the wellspring of humor while watching an individual who has struggled or is obviously still facing adversity encourages an audience member to ask: What does it mean to be whole? The juxtaposition of disability and humor provides entry points to the ongoing discussion about the human condition of which we are urgently in need. Terry knows this, and she draws us onto the path and into the dialogue gently.