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Patti Siberz

Linfield College - Adult Degree Program

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**When One is Enough:
The One-person Play**

Patti Siberz

**IDST 490: Arts and Humanities Senior Project
Professor Millar
April 9, 2009**

When One is Enough: The One-person Play

The one-person play is educational. The solo drama provides a unique and intimate relationship between the character and the audience. That relationship sheds light on the character being portrayed and on a different time in history or place. Often the monodrama is biographical, a play written about a well know person. Whether the play is about a famous person or a totally made up character, the audience will have a unique insight into the mind and the heart of that individual. I will examine some of the different formats that solo performers have used, the history of the one-person plays and why some actors prefer them to multi-cast plays.

Along with this paper I have written a one-woman play called "The Bookshop". I will write, direct and perform this play. "The Bookshop" will unite the two passions of mine that I am most committed to: literature and theatre. Having spent most of my adult life selling books I have been dedicated to introducing readers to unfamiliar authors and titles. I have also been acting in a small community theater, Theatre West in Lincoln City, for more than twenty one years. I feel there is no better way to reach an audience than through the theatre, and that a one person play is finely honed tool. My goal is to entertain the audience, while enlightening them about: A. Books can change the way the reader looks at his life, at his relationships, and his viewpoint of the world. B. That the future of small bookshops is threatened. Rose, the bookseller in the play, treats her job more as a calling than an occupation. She has watched, over her fifty years in the business, the need for yet the eventual demise of her profession. In her reminiscing she will introduce the audience to authors with whom they are unfamiliar as well as reintroduce them to some old favorites. I am a native Oregonian and have always tried to

promote the abundance of the wonderful writing talent we have in this state. The play will highlight some of Oregon's favorite authors.

History of the monodrama

One-person plays are not a recent addition to the theatre. The monodrama has been a long-running theatrical tradition. It goes back to the ancient art of storytelling, where all literature and drama began. The shaman, or medicine man, told stories to explain what the gods expected from their subjects. They would explain life, death and the cycle of nature in stories that would entertain and educate. The Greek and Roman theatre used the one-person play to perform epic poems of great battles, or legends about gods and kings. The troubadours would tell tales of great loves. In medieval Europe minstrels would recite stories usually with a musical accompaniment. During the 1800's actors would do dramatic readings of literature called platform readings. They were popular because they didn't need much in the way of props, costumes or lighting. Charles Dickens, who is mostly known for his great literary works, had been an actor since he was twenty years old. He would do dramatic readings of his own works. Dickens would portray many different characters and was very successful with his one-man shows. Ruth Draper (1884-1956) was known as the "queen of one-woman theatre". She would write her own material and use very few props, sometimes only a table and a chair. She would challenge the audiences to use their imagination and thereby brought the audiences into the plays themselves. Lily Tomlin who has been performing her one-woman show for years, "*The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*" credited Ruth Draper as her inspiration.

What I had as a child I've never lost – the child's ability to pretend: to be what he imagines he is. If you give yourself completely to what you pretend you are, you will convince other people it exists, and only then.¹

Mark Twain, the journalist and novelist also wrote his own monodramas. He would create a bumbling character who would tell stories about his neighbors and his town. His satiric wit was a big draw for the intellectuals and the common man.

The first monodrama I saw was Hal Holbrook performing Mark Twain. I was captivated by this man and his stories. Hal Holbrook wrote the play for himself. He was meticulous in his research of this American icon. Holbrook started on the project while he was in college. Originally it was going to be a two person play with the other cast member asking question of Twain. He choose to make Twain seventy years old and thereby allow him to reminisce about his life. He developed *Mark Twin Tonight!* into a one-person play in 1954. Since then America would forever think of Mark Twain as portrayed by Holbrook. He had the wild white hair, the southern white suite and the huge mustache of the celebrated novelist. He was able to play a seventy year old man playing a young Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. He brought Twain's different characters to life. It was a new dimension to Mark Twain's novels. Then I saw Henry Fonda perform Darrow, the one-man show about the controversial lawyer Clarence Darrow. Fonda was great at dividing his time between personal introspection and the impressive courtroom drama. Darrow's life lent itself to a monodrama.²

¹Jordan R. Young. 1989. *Acting solo: the art of one-man shows*. (Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press) p. 38

² Ibid. p.69-79

William Luce

One of the most established playwrights of one-person plays is William Luce. Luce lives on the Oregon Coast and he is a friend of mine. I met him when a friend knew that I had been performing *Shirley Valentine* and knew how drawn I was to one-person plays. Luce was a, originally, a musician and singer who had written some lyrics for Jim Nabors and Doris Day. He also wrote poetry and loved Emily Dickenson's work. He was approached by actor/director Charles Nelson Reilly and actress Julie Harris to write a one-woman play about Dickinson. Luce wrote *The Belle of Amherst* which was the start of a lifelong collaboration and friendship between the three of them. In an interview Luce talks about a dream that furnished the opening lines of the play. "I dreamed of Julie walking out on stage, down to the footlights, and she was carrying lilies. And she extended them to the audience and said, "Forgive me if I'm frightened. I never see strangers and hardly know what to say.""³ Julie Harris went on to win a Tony Award for her performance as *Belle*. She revived the role in 2001 for the twenty fifth anniversary of the play when she was 72. Harris was so pleased with the play after the first run she asked Luce to write one about Charlotte Bronte for her. Harris wanted to perform it on Masterpiece Radio theatre in Boston. He wrote *Bronte* which won a Peabody Award. Luce then went on to write *Lillian* about the controversial playwright Lillian Hellman. Hellman gave Luce the rights to use material from her published memoirs, *An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento* and *Scoundrel Time*. He met Lillian Hellman in 1981. It was the only time that Luce was able to actually work with the subject of his play. Zoe Caldwell performed *Lillian* on Broadway. Hellman's last words to the playwright were "It's my voice. Thank you".

³, Georgiana Strickland, "Drama's Vitalest Expression: A Conversation with William Luce" *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin*, (May/June 2001)

Luce dramatized the life of Zelda Fitzgerald in his play “The Last Flapper. He obtained access to Princeton’s University’s collection of Zelda’s letters to her husband. He also wrote a one-woman play about the Danish writer Karen Blixen, best known as Isak Dinesen, “Lucifer’s Child”. Dinesen’s writings about Africa were the bases for the film “Out of Africa”. When William Luce was interviewed by Biblio Magazine he said, “Karen’s image onstage, as portrayed by Julie Harris, was unforgettably startling and poignant. She truly became Baroness Blixen, in her ‘old khaki slacks and pearl earrings,’”⁴ William Luce liked writing about women. “I admire their strength and depth of accomplishment – sometimes stoicism – but most of the time vulnerability, candor”.⁵ He also loves words and the theatre so he was drawn to John Barrymore the actor. Christopher Plummer performed the role in Luce’s play *Barrymore* in 1997 and won a Tony award. Ben Brantley of The New York Times wrote “It may be the productions chief accomplishment that it can have it both ways so successfully: it’s both fiendishly entertaining and blisteringly sad. Watching Barrymore, whether he’s reciting from “Hamlet” ... or singing “Yes Sir! That’s My Baby” while costumed as Richard the III, is watching a brilliant drunk at a party”. The one person plays by William Luce have always kept the audiences riveted and entertained.

In 1993 William Luce directed me in a shortened version of Belle of Amherst at the opening of the Driftwood Library in Lincoln City Oregon. Luce had written the vignette for Amanda Plummer, Christopher Plummer’s daughter. She had performed it at a booker’s convention in San Diego two weeks earlier. We had duplicates of some of the props that were used in the original production, photos of Emily Dickinson’s father and brother. It was fitting for

⁴ Grant Menzies “Luce’s Women,” Biblio, April 1999 p.21

⁵ Ibid Strickland

the opening of a library. The audience understood a “different side” of Emily Dickinson than they had before, by only reading her poems.



William Luce and Patti Siberz,

Belle of Amherst 1993

Jackson Miller

Jackson Miller teaches in the Communication Arts and Theatre Department at Linfield College. He has written three one-man plays: *Quest for Understanding: An Evening with John Dewey*, *Griswold*, about Rufus W. Griswold, and *Cicero Speaks*. *Cicero Speaks* was taken from five of Cicero's speeches and scholarly writings and letters. The play was part of Oregon's Chautauqua Series in 2005, which is sponsored by Oregon Council for Humanities. I watched his performance of *Cicero Speaks* at Salishan on the coast last year. I had not been interested in the

Roman orator until Mr. Miller brought him to life.

Shirley Valentine

Shirley Valentine was written by Willy Russell in London, in 1988. It is a one-woman play about a middle-age housewife who has two grown children, and a husband who wants “things done the same time every day.” Shirley longs for an adventure and goes against her husband’s wishes when she plans a Greek vacation. The play written and performed in London, and then brought to Broadway . It was later made into a film. I have performed the play dozens of times over a ten year period on the Oregon coast and in Portland. Many women would tell me that their husbands hadn’t wanted to come. The men thought they would be bored by listening to one woman for 1 ½ hours. After the play, often, the same men would come back stage and ask me about what was going to happen after the play was over: “Does Shirley go back to England with her husband?” or “Does she get back with her Greek lover?” They had not only believed the premise of the play, they became so involved in the story they didn’t believe the story was over just because the play ended. *Shirley Valentine* had the one character describe other people in her life, her husband, her daughter, her friend, her lover. She invites the audience into her parlor as if they are sharing a cup of tea, similar to Emily Dickenson in *Belle of Amherst*. *Shirley Valentine* shares a sorrow that many women share today: the children are grown and gone and the husband doesn’t want change. This is a theme of the play and most women and many men can relate to it.

The Premise behind the Play *The Bookshop*

My first job in a bookstore was in 1972. The book business was very exciting then, if you were passionate about books and authors. The publishers were thriving. I went to my first Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association annual trade show in the early 1970s. There were huge, lush displays of books by publishers like Random House, Doubleday, Simon and Schuster, Charles Scribners, Harper & Row and William Morrow. Money was spent on lavish dinners and all-you-could-drink bars. Even a little bookseller from Portland Oregon could rub elbows with the famed and fabulous authors. The publishers would send out their sales reps to your store loaded with gifts of their newest publications. I was known to have a penchant for black and white photography and was given many expensive books like the one by Avedon, the Vogue photographer and Alfred Steiglitz, who was known for his photos of Georgia O'Keefe. It was a good time to be in the bookselling business. When the reps would come to town they would take the buyer out to nice dinners that I certainly couldn't afford on my booksellers salary. Time went by. Computers became a household staple. Super bookstores, like Barnes and Nobel and Borders started dotting the landscape. Then stores like Fred Meyers and Safeway began selling books at discount prices. All small businesses have been threatened by the huge super stores but the book business has been hit especially hard. From the start of bookselling the publisher has printed the price of the book on the jacket. The store couldn't change that price. The markup, over cost, is one of the smallest in retail trade. A book that sells for \$10.00 cost the store \$6.00. That didn't change over the years. Costco now sells that same book for \$6.00. There is no room in the small margin of profit for a small bookstore to exist.

There is another problem which has also contributed to the closing of many small bookshops: the internet. Not only does Amazon.com and websites like them price books below what booksellers are forced to sell them at, the convenience of not leaving your home is very

attractive to many people. The customers who use to go into bookshops and ask for recommendations, are going online and reading recommendations from strangers or reading about titles that Amazon wants to push.

I wanted to write the play *The Bookshop* for many reasons: to educate people about the vanishing business, to show the magic and the mystery that bookshops hold and to show the passion of a traditional bookseller.

The Challenges and Rewards of a One-Person Play

You require an exceedingly large ego to stand up there and think you can hold an audience's attention for a couple of hours. But there's nothing I know that's more satisfying... It's just you out there - on one else. There's no one to foul you up by stepping on you laugh or giving you the wrong cue.⁶

For the actor: A one-person play is a challenge for any actor. You can no longer rely on getting your cues from another actor. If you hesitate on stage the deathly silence can be deafening. On the other hand, you don't have to worry about another actor giving you the wrong cue, or talking over your lines. The actor can feel like they are in complete control, that they can make the choices that are best for them. The artistic freedom can be very persuading. A multicast play must be under the guidance and direction of the director. Since many one-person shows are written and performed by the actor he/she often directs himself/herself. There are

⁶ Jordan R. Young. 1989. *Acting solo: the art of one-man shows*. (Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press):

pitfalls an actor may fall into without the help of an unbiased eye. There can be an opportunity for the actor's self-indulgence. The actor may feel the need to over act. If you are the only one on stage you feel you should cover the entire stage with movement, that your laughs should be larger, and your anguish greater than in a multi-cast play.

Actress Colleen Dewhurst performed the one-woman play "My Gene" in 1987, which was about Eugene O'Neill's widow, Carlotta. She felt it was the worst experience of her theatrical career.

Not the worst in terms of working but the worst in terms of the sheer unadulterated tension and fear. After this it's going to be so exciting to look across a stage and see another actor going, 'And then what happened?'⁷

The one person play has been the best vehicle for many renowned actors: William Windom performed as James Thurber, Cloris Leachman has been Grandma Moses, Leonard Nimoy was Theo Van Gogh and Harold Gould presented Sigmund Freud.

Lighting: Often the monodrama, at least starting out, has a very small budget. Again with one person you can get by with general lighting and only one spotlight.

Props: These are probably more important for one person than with a full cast. The actor often uses the props as a reminder of a past event, or of a past relationship. In *The Belle of Amherst* Emily Dickenson carries a box to the audience. It is her box of poems. The box is the most important prop on the stage. As Dickenson holds the box out to the audience she recites one of her poems:

"This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me-
The simple news that nature told-

⁷ Ibid. p65

With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
 To Hands I cannot see-
 For Love of her- Sweet-
 Countrymen-
 Judge tenderly – of Me⁸

In *Vivien*, the one-woman play about Vivien Leigh, there was a ladder, a scarf and a love seat. All action took place with her climbing the ladder, or going under it. Sitting or lying on the settee and draping the scarf in different ways to portray different characters.⁹

Copyrights: The copyrights are not a problem for a paper or a play if you list the citations of the material that you are using. I would like to read from the books, on stage, as part of the play. I am investigating if I need permission from the publisher to read sections of the text as part of a public performance. I would like to perform the play in the future, and charge for admission so I will probably need to get permission.

The Audience

The one-person play is a unique theatrical experience. The audience must feel a part of the action on the stage. There must be a reason that they should spend an hour or more in their seats. Jo Bonney was quoted in an essay by Amy Pinney:

More than any other kind of live performance, the solo show expects and demands the active involvement of people in the audience. They are watched as they watch, they are directly addressed, their energy resonates with that of the

⁸ William Luce, *The Belle of Amherst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976) p 94

⁹ Rick Foster, *Vivien* Self-published

very intimate portrayal so the audience has to buy the reason behind the confession. In *Belle of Anherst* by William Luce there were critics who felt that Emily Dickenson would have never spoken to strangers about her personal life. She was known as being far too shy. Luce wrote the play as if just a single visitor or two stopped by. Emily was only sharing with an intimate friend. In *The Last Flapper* Zelda Fitzgerald was in a mental institution. She had been declared incompetent so it was not unusual for her to be talking to people who were not there. *Lillian* had Lillian Hellman sitting in a doctor's waiting room, waiting for Dashell Hammett, her lover, to die. She shares with other visitors in the waiting room.

The one character in *The Bookshop* is Rose. She has worked in the same bookshop for 50 years. It is all she has ever done. The play takes place on her last day and she is telling a customer, the audience, about some of the people she has met over the years. She is the solo storyteller. The audience will not have any information about the shop or about Rose herself if Rose doesn't tell them or show them. The action takes place in present day. She takes the audience back into the history of the 50 year bookshop and in her life with books. The story evolves with Rose explaining why she has been devoted to books and the cost that devotion had on her personal relationships. The amount of information that Rose shares has to be realistic. She would not pour out her entire life to a stranger. As mentioned above, the audience needs to believe that Rose would be sharing this information. It is Rose's last day and she is reminiscing about her life. The premise needs to follow a natural progression. That progression brings the audience into the story. Ruth Draper, who was previously mentioned in this paper, said

"It is the audience who must supply the imagination. What is really important is not to put anything 'over', but to bring the audience up onto the stage and into the

lone artists ... The presence of a single performer in front of an audience of many instantly creates conflicting roles for both performer and viewer – great power and great vulnerability. (189)¹⁰

Shirley Valentine became my greatest challenge. For an hour and 45 minutes I was alone on stage, telling the story from my kitchen, then my sitting room and the last act on a beach in Greece. The terror certainly exists, as you look over for someone, anyone to give you a cue line. Then the play starts to flow, and Shirley asks the audience “You know what I mean?” and many of them answer back, Yes! Soon you realize that you are not alone. The audience understands. Shirley identifies with the audience with questions like “They’re not like us in London, are they?” or “Guess where I’m going?” She shares her plans with the audience, her fears, and her dreams. The audience is a co-conspirator. There are a number of rhetorical questions that the character asks of the audience and that women shout out the answers. The play was written so the audience feels that they are part of it.

In William Luce’s *Barrymore* the star confides his past deeds to the audience. The best monodramas are not one person alone on the stage, but one person engaging, confiding with and at times cajoling the audience. Rose, in *The Bookshop*, asks the audience if they had a favorite children’s book. She confides that she had been in love once, but it must be difficult for the audience to imagine considering how aged she is now. The more the audience can relate to the actor the more they become involved with the story. Hal Holbrook would always bring up how silly politicians are and would ask the audience “Do you know what I mean?”

There are other problems inherently connected with one-person plays. One of the problems that most critics see in a monodrama is “Why is he/she telling us this?” The play is a

¹⁰ Amy Pinney, “Between a Director and a Cast of One; A Beginning Aesthetic” *Theatre Topics* (Vol. 16, Iss 2 2006)

scene with you. It is they who must give you even more than you give them in the way of the imagination and creative power.”¹¹

The Power of the Play

I wrote *The Bookshop* to enlighten people about the magic of bookshops and also to make them aware of the disappearance of the small book store. I included actual writings from some of my favorite books. In *The Bookshop* Rose reminisces with the audience about their favorite children’s book. She describes what affect books have had on many of her customers over the years; how the customers changed their view of the world, or simply were able to escape from the stresses of their day to day life. She presents the benefits of reading. Rose is proud that her bookshop is a center of knowledge, culture and criticism. She also shares her disappointment in the closing of bookstores due to online shopping and big box stores. She shares some personal information so that the audience can relate to and appreciate her position. She teaches people about books and therefore enriches their lives.

In conclusion, one-person plays educate. The monodrama is particularly successful at connecting with an audience. Plays about historical figures as well as newly created characters can educate and enlighten an audience. When asked what the theater is to him Luce said in an interview with the Dramatists Guild Quarterly “There are times when it’s the Ship of Fools. Most of the time, it’s home to me. Julie (Harris) says it represents church to her, an actual feeling of worship. I’d say dedication, which both religion and art include.” Literature and theatre can show us a world we haven’t known or acknowledged. A one-person show does that.

¹¹ Jordan R. Young. 1989. *Acting solo: the art of one-man shows*. (Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press) p38

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