

A Defense/An Indictment of Sir Toby Belch

“O cousin, cousin. How have you come so early by this lethargy?”

“I hate a drunken rogue.”

The deep dive of *what you will* was murky and troubling water. The silt sat in the corners of the eyes, blurring the vision and tasting of dirt as it ran into my mouth- carried there by the saline that had evacuated my head holes. I do not often seek to explain anything I do that can vaguely be lumped under the austerity of Art, nor do I hope to explain much here. I live in the hope that this will help others understand what I was attempting to create/explore/wrestle with. It is my sincerest desire that the experience of witnessing that attempt is interpreted however you like. If you are reading this, you are either in the Shakespeare Ensemble or the ensemble has decided it's worthy of sharing with others.

Twelfth Night, or What You Will falls into the “light-hearted-comedic-romp we all know and love” for many a bardophile, probably because producers and artistic directors recognize that it's a money printing play and it fits into any season...often. What's not to love? It has iconic speeches. It ends “happily”*. There is comedy. There is mirth. There is love. Aside from finding twins to take on two major roles, it's a slam dunk to produce. That's all well and good.

And yet...

To be clear, *Twelfth Night or What You Will* is my favorite play of all time. It is not just my favorite Shakespeare play. I believe it is as close to perfect as a play can be, and mostly for its flaws. Lurking just beneath the lustre of simple fun, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* is a grotesque examination of four dimensional humanity. Working on this project with the Shakespeare Ensemble invited us to peel some of that skin back, and like high school biology students meticulously take the owl pellet apart. In a play that is overrun with duplicity and reprehensible behavior, I had the gift and the task of inviting Sir Toby Belch into my life.

What do we know about him? In production, he's usually the goofy guy. Good with a gag, sneaks under the radar to have the most lines in the play, and appears in the most scenes. He's around. A lot. Why? We're never quite sure. It's only when he's ruined multiple people's lives that he sneaks away with Maria to marry her, and we can only assume reek havoc on her well-being in the play that is yet to be written *Malvolio's Revenge*. He uses and abuses. He puts Maria's livelihood at risk. He depletes Sir Andrew Aguecheek. He leeches off of his grieving niece. He creates chaos so that he can continue to skate under the radar and audiences walk away thinking how charming that guy is. It's astounding.

When preparing for this experiment, I was blessed to be guided by the ensemble as a whole and specifically by Helen Foan, Ben Crystal, and Will Sutton. In the earliest days of brain-storming Ben and I were working together on a document that turned into a three page spreadsheet which created a storyboard and the early thoughts of “engines” that drive these characters. Alcoholism was an early offer for Toby's and in gestation we worked towards the more intriguing, and more devastating lens, of Addiction. The time zones that were in play also meant I would be playing with my friends at 7am, 11am, and 2pm “my time” (which is Eastern Standard). I was struck by the line from the play “How have you come so early by this lethargy?”. In a first pass at improvisation, I was blessed to have the chance to watch the incomparable Colin Hurley (who has a permanent residence inside my heart) preparing his Malvolio...and the word preparation stuck. I began to think about the ways in which we prepare. Preparing a character. Preparing our Selves. Preparing for a day. And I played.

It became readily apparent that if I was to set off on this path, I must tell the Truth. It also became readily apparent to me that I was to set off on this path, I must be responsible. A mantra that has come up often in the work I've been fortunate enough to do with Ben throughout the years is "Art should be therapeutic, not therapy". It is critically important to me that this is not a knock against therapy. I am a firm believer every human being on the planet should be in therapy AND a firm believer that every human being on the planet should have access to Art and that those are radically different things. Sitting in with my old friend Addiction certainly had me scanning my imaginary rolodex for my old therapist's phone number. I knew, in accepting the offer to take on Toby, I would be opening spiritual doors and that demons are happy to sneak in if you aren't vigilant. I also knew, and know, that I'm a grown adult who works in theater professionally and I have an arsenal of tricks and training to keep my Selfe and those around me safe. I knew, and know, that if I was to take this on I MUST tell the story...the true story (#Paradox)...of life with Addiction. It was the job I was saying yes to.

I drink like a fiend and am *addicted* to social media, the Boston Red Sox, and doubling down on ten against a six. Mercifully, other vices have come and gone throughout my life...often at a distance. I have many friends who have not been so lucky. Some have fought and won. Some have fought and lost. Having worked for a decade in the bustling restaurant scene of New York City I have "seen some shit". I wept like a child at the passing of Anthony Bourdain...not because he was a friend, but because he was so much like so many of my friends and he succumbed to The Disease. And he Lived so beautifully. He did not live flawlessly. He lived fully. The play is not flawless. It is full.

After the first improvised pass as Hazel was recording her amazing music and I danced in the depravity of belch, I spoke with Ben about the function of the bottle in framing the shots. I was reminded of work with Helen in preparing *Hamlet* and a deeper understanding I have of puppetry thanks to her genius and guidance. The bottle became the puppet and I the puppeteer. Often shots were framed so that IT was the character, and Ben & I began discussing how that relates to an addict's experience of the world. We played with cultivated sloppiness. I received a note from Will reinforcing the quest to groom laziness...putting lots of effort into making your hair look like you just woke up. My deepest love, the pursuit of paradox, crept in and we got to dance next to and in the fire once more. I began to think about all the things one can be addicted to and challenged myself to smash as many of them into 45 minutes as possible. As artists, perhaps something we all are addicted to is approval from others. The applause that says "we like you" or "we like what you did". Challenged by the ensemble to "have an audience", I invited the notion of running into people by mistake without actually inviting anyone in the room with me. This manifested on the day in the form of my roommate's cat wandering downstairs to check on me for the first time in eleven months and my neighbors heading out to get their morning coffee. Seeing their smiling faces as they waved and went on their day reminded me of Sean Garrett's guidance while working on clowning---"Gotcha." And Toby is a clown. He's a fucking clown.

An element of this project that I was DEEPLY interested in exploring is voyeurism. It isn't a word we discussed much in the preparation. Helen brought it up in reflection on the first pass and I've seen it pop up in reviews, much to my delight. 2020 has thrust the doors open to voyeurism and I felt very much that this project was leaving that door open for folx to walk through if they desired. Like a ten against a six, I was elated to double down. This led me to choose the bathroom as the place I would play the most. It's uncharted territory in the culture of surveillance. It's where we are our filthiest and cleanest versions of ourselves (Paradox). It's the sketchiest part of any restaurant...and it was to be the canvas on which I chose to paint. (It doesn't hurt that I also get great WiFi in my bathroom and it's the size of my apartment in Brooklyn). The bathroom was the invitation into my world and into the world of belch. For everything Shakespeare wrote, and I have often said he wrote about "EVERYTHING", I don't recall any scenes taking place in a privy. Oh brave new world. It became and is important that this would be an exploration of vulnerability. I was reminded of my friends who

struggled with all kinds of addiction and how hard it was for them to express vulnerability. Standing in a running shower naked, hoping against all hope I had set the camera up correctly so we wouldn't be banned from the internet, with two active pieces of technology in my ears was terrifying...so much so that on the third pass I took the earbuds out and left my clothes on.

Entertainment has often been a source of escapism. A place to go and forget about our troubles, or "turn the mind off". Addiction can be seen as the same. Are we culturally addicted to entertainment? Does it make life easier? Does it help us get through our day? The Trojan Horse of the screen (computer/television/cellphone...what you will) has shepherded us into an age of invasion-ism. "Reality" TV has taught us the show is less interesting than how the show is made. We have been tricked into believing everything we see and we have been tricked into not believing anything we see.

Paradox.

"Most Wonderful."

In joining this ensemble and saying yes to this project, I knew it would not be enjoyable. I knew it would be hard and necessary work. I knew I would be making something y'all would not enjoy watching and I never wanted you to. The appeal of glamorizing addiction and creating something that was sexy and satisfying would be a disservice to my Selfe, to you, and to the many, many souls who lost their battle. I invited them in to my bathroom to play with me and did my best to be a conduit and share their story.

Toby's final line in the play is "I hate a drunken rogue", often to the amusement of the laughing audience. I posit that what he is in fact saying is "I hate my Selfe". Perhaps we can see beyond the laughter, underneath the clown's make up, and realize that the last thing he does in the play is apologize to Olivia for contributing to her Grief.

Or in this instance, we can just minimize the tab and binge something mindless. What you will.