Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda
Richard H. Via
Spring 2019
Theater Department, Occidental College

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Senior Comprehensive Requirement in Theater
Readers/Committee: David Crabb, Susan Gratch, Laural Meade
**PRODUCTION:** Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda

**WRITTEN BY:** Richard H. Via

**PERFORMED BY:** Richard H. Via

**DIRECTED BY:** London Murray

**LIGHTING DESIGN:** Isabel Schwartzberg

**SOUND DESIGN:** Richard H. Via

**PRODUCER:** Richard H. Via

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

I. Introduction
II. Inception
III. Choosing Stories and Developing a Theme
IV. Writing and Editing Stories
V. Producing the Show
VI. Designing the Show
VII. Rehearsals
VIII. Technical Rehearsals
IX. Performances
X. Next Steps and Conclusion
XI. Appendices
I. INTRODUCTION

For my Occidental College Senior Comprehensive project, I decided to write, perform, produce, and design a one-man storytelling show about my life. The show, called *Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda*, chronicles mistakes I’ve made throughout my impoverished queer life. I decided to pursue this project because I wanted to challenge myself and mount a project I felt would combine all the skills I’ve gained as a theater student at Occidental College. In this project, I had my hands in all of the pots ranging from playwriting, to acting/performing, to design, to production. In this paper, I will guide you from the early inception of this project, through the writing, the structuring of the stories, the production and design aspects, how I handled rehearsals, the performances, all the way through to what I envision being the next steps for this project.

II. INCEPTION

Before discussing my senior comprehensive project, I find it pertinent to explain why I felt drawn away from my initial project: an acting project for the Occidental College Spring 2019 production of *Urinetown: The Musical*. The original project would primarily focus on my process as an actor.

Throughout my college career, I always anticipated performance as a focus, whether in acting, singing, or a combination of the two. I felt the track of course work and production experience was guiding me toward a culminating acting project. However, as I studied more and took more varied classes, I found my passions did not solely align with an acting project, but within the entire multifaceted area of theater. For example, I had taken Professor Laural Meade’s Playwriting (THEA 380) class twice and thoroughly enjoyed crafting and developing a cohesive play with a compelling narrative. I had taken Professor Sarah Kozinn’s Justice Performed
(THEA 205) class and found myself engaged with plays focused around primarily political issues. In both Professor Brian Fitzmorris’s and Professor Susan Gratch’s Introduction to Technical Theater and Lighting Design (THEA 120 and THEA 325, respectively), I grappled with unfamiliar technical theater concepts. With all this in mind, I felt exhibiting mastery in a singular theatrical field would not properly demonstrate the proficiency I have developed in all the other aspects of theater in which I have immersed myself while at Occidental College. I wanted my Senior Comprehensive project to parallel my entire college education, showcasing the well-rounded skills I’ve gained over the course of my four years. All of these thoughts swirled through my head while I was writing my first project proposal, but I went against my better judgement and in the Spring 2018 semester I submitted my project for acting anyway.

For the first half of my fall semester 2018, I did not feel married or attached to my acting comprehensive project. It wasn’t creatively activating me in the way I felt a culminating project should. However, I couldn’t think of a new project. That was before I took Professor David Crabb’s Autobiographical Theater (THEA 290) class.

Crabb’s Autobiographical Theater (THEA 290) combined my two favorite portions of theater: writing and performing. Further, the class had an emphasis in comedic storytelling, which is an element I believe I thrive in. For the first quarter of the semester, I found myself remembering these stories from my childhood and feeling excited to share them with the larger group. The assignments for the class did not feel necessarily like work, but an opportunity to hone in on my performing and writing abilities all while exploring myself.

The first time I thought of developing a solo storytelling show came when Professor Crabb gave us the assignment of watching his own solo show, *Bad Kid*. Growing up, I had
watched comedians do these style of shows and had always been fascinated by them. Upon watching Professor Crabb’s, I finally felt I had found a potential project: writing and performing a similar style of show. I scheduled an individual meeting with David Crabb and he explained how he developed *Bad Kid* and I explained how I potentially wanted to pursue a solo show as my senior project. Nothing but supportive, Professor Crabb offered his wisdom and guidance. After this meeting, I opted to embrace the impulse of switching my senior comprehensive project from the musical to the uncharted territory of a solo storytelling show about events in my life. This new comprehensive project seems relatively simple on paper: I would gather autobiographical stories from my own life, string them together, and perform them as a solo show. I would also include music to incorporate my musical theater education. Entirely written, produced, and performed by me, it was the perfect monster of a project I felt would adequately challenge me.

With all this in mind, I find it necessary to say I also wanted my senior project to feel individual in some regard. I wanted a unique idea that had never been done in the Occidental College Theater Department before. In the spirit of full transparency, I understand I am not reinventing the wheel here. Storytelling shows are not a new concept. Whoopi Goldberg has been performing autobiographical solo shows for years, *The Moth* has created an entire touring show and podcast out of performative storytelling, and, more commercially, Netflix seems to produce a new special once a month with famous comedians who have fused the craft of stand-up and storytelling.

I also wanted to challenge future students to push themselves in their creative endeavors. A senior comprehensive project does not have to be a chore, but rather a project that expresses
and explores a genuine interest of yours. I want my peers to view their senior comprehensive as an opportunity to demonstrate a true passion to others, to share their skills and their abilities.

III. CHOOSING STORIES AND DEVELOPING A THEME

After my project was approved, Professor Crabb instructed me to begin story-mining for material. For this portion of the process, I chose a theme I thought I wanted to work with. For my initial list, I wanted to work around the theme “Twitchy and Boring,” which, at the time, I believed would be a focal point of the show and the through line I would follow and explore throughout the piece. Loosely, this theme would hopefully generate stories that would demonstrate how my experiences have shaped me into the person I am today. The specific “twitchy and boring” story that would guide the piece details a class I took where a professor called me a “twitchy and boring performer” and how those words, in the moment, stung. I felt attracted to this theme and potential through line because I found it empowering to reclaim a phrase that originated from harsh critique. With this in mind, I sat down, set a timer on my phone for five minutes, wrote a list of stories I felt fell under this “twitchy and boring” umbrella. After this brief brainstorming process, I had a healthy list of stories. In fact, the list I generated was too long.

A challenge for this project was determining whether or not a story was “storyworthy.” For the sake of my work, I deemed a story “storyworthy” if I felt it could sustain audience attention for the entire duration, if I felt it connected to the theme I was working with, it demonstrated I changed in some way, and I personally enjoyed telling it.

When I first started this project, I worked with the list I had generated during my 5 minute free write. Because I only had a vague idea of the show I wished to pursue, I had
difficulty generating a more specific theme, or an overarching idea that would allow the stories to live within the same narrative. Having taken Laural Meade’s playwriting course twice, my playwright brain kicked in and I found myself asking myself Professor Meade’s golden question: what is this show really about? What is the narrative I wanted people to walk away with after the show? What do I want the show to stand for? At this point, I was working with a loose set of themes of mistakes, queerness, and reclamation; due to the vagueness of these themes, I found myself attempting to force the stories I had into one of these boxes. For some odd reason, cutting material from this storytelling show gave me the impression the stories lacked merit.

I had multiple epiphanies pertaining to this challenge, the first being my work with collaborators. For the first few months while I was developing the material, I met with Professor Crabb to go over my progress. During each of these meetings, Professor Crabb had me go over each story and give a brief summary of the material. After I finished describing each story, he would ask how each story fit together. For the first few meetings, I struggled to answer this question. I gave a vague answer about how they were all about mistakes and struggling with my sexuality. It was not until a later meeting in early February that Professor Crabb pointed out the links he saw between the stories. He pointed out how the piece almost felt like a Valentine to my mom because she was so heavily featured. He pointed out how the stories discussed class lines and poverty. Finally, he pointed out how I discussed queerness in relation to myself and the mistakes I felt I had made. Immediately when he said this, I knew the set of themes I wished to focus on: class systems, my mom, and I wanted to touch upon queerness. I would do this through the lens of the mistakes my mom has made and the mistakes I have made. Once I knew the story I wanted to tell, cutting stories became simple: if the story did not touch upon more than one of
these themes, I would remove it from the show. While I could tailor some stories to fit the theme (a process I describe in the next section), I did not want to push a story into a box it did not organically fit into.

Almost instantly, I cut three stories I knew I did not need: my weight loss story, my story about getting a family evicted from their home, and, oddly enough, the twitchy and boring stories I had in the piece. Even further, I found that live music performance did not live within the specific confines of this piece, so I removed that as well. I discovered removing stories from this specific show does not mean they do not exist within a different theatrical context. It just means it does not live in this series of material. After this epiphany and the reassurance removing stories does not mean they possess zero merit, I found my ability to tighten and compress the remaining stories improved tenfold: by eliminating unnecessary material I had been attempting to force into a thematic narrative, I instead created a logical cohesive story flow with almost no effort.

In terms of structuring the story, I relied heavily on the themes I wished to display front and center. Once I had my stories for the two public performances set in stone, I knew I wanted to feature stories surrounding mistakes, growing up working class, and my mom; this also meant I wanted to keep queerness as more of a subplot, a theme sprinkled throughout but never at the forefront of the piece. After I made this decision, I opted for a storytelling show with a dual structure: the longer form stories would have their own narrative line, going chronologically through my life, and my coming out story would be broken into chunks and strategically placed within the larger story structure. The chronological story structure, at the end of the day, made the most sense logically. Audiences are most accustomed to linear story patterns due to modern
media and the traditional story structure. Further, longform storytelling that connects multiple stories exists on a linear timeline: one story exists because a previous story happened.

I chose to break up the queerness theme for a myriad of reasons. Most obviously, grappling with being gay has not been a one off event in my life, much like the other stories I am telling. In order to effectively tell this story, I need to span roughly 18 years. When I realized this, I knew it would be easiest to splice it up and properly place the new smaller stories within the larger timeline of the piece. Second, I wanted this storytelling show to exist as something other than a gay story. I’ve found, more often than not, once you inject queerness into a story, it becomes overwhelmingly about queerness. It’s like accidentally putting too much garlic into your dinner: once it’s there that’s all people notice. By sprinkling the queer theme throughout, I felt it gave delightful tastes of the theme without defining the entire show. Next, the coming out story snippets feature a lot of comedy and I think the comedy splits up more hard-hitting moments, which I will discuss later. At times, the coming out story snippets serve as a reset for both the audience and myself, an opportunity to laugh and breathe before progressing with the show. Finally, I use the coming out stories as a way to transition between stories and show the passage of time. Due to the fact I’m telling stories that span the course of my entire life, the timeline can become confusing and I use the coming out stories to fill in some gaps and some potentially missing information the audience may need.

IV. WRITING AND EDITING STORIES
When I landed on the themes of class systems, my relationship with my mother, and my queer identity, I needed to write and tailor stories that I felt could potentially fit into this theme.
Writing stories in prose was an unexpected challenge I faced early in this process. In Autobiographical Theater (THEA 290), Professor Crabb encouraged us to avoid writing out stories, and I listened to this advice in class. However, when I first started this project, I did not know where to start, so writing out stories in prose felt like the most logical path: it would allow me to organize my thoughts and have a physical representation of the show I was seeking to perform.

However, writing out the stories became a double-edged sword. I would write out these stories and become married to the material on the page. My intention with writing prose versions of the stories was to gather material and parse through details, but what actually happened is I unintentionally wrote a script for the unfinished project. During the first couple of rehearsals with London Murray, my director, I clung to this script. Due to this, I lost the free nature of storytelling. The scripted material also felt dry and lacked spontaneity and relatability, two factors I view as crucial in storytelling. Finally, the scripted material put a limit on how creative I could be. It capped how expressive, vulnerable, and potentially funny I could be. I had backed myself into a corner and while in this corner the project could not grow as it should.

When I realized this issue with my prosed material, I deleted the entire Google document. This was one of the best actions I could have taken in this entire process. Instead of a prosed script, I would use a bulleted list of beats I felt I should hit for each story. Rehearsals became more about playing with the material, finding bits both London and I enjoyed, finding moments of softness, and discovering scenes that would warm the viewers’ hearts. The process became more about creating and attempting to make a coherent piece to share with the audience.
Once I made this shift, I knew I still needed a way of monitoring what I said. During each rehearsal, I would record each story in the Voice Memo application on my iPhone. Essentially, instead of writing and rewriting stories physically, I would speak, listen, and respeak using audio files. My life, for practically two months, involved listening to myself telling stories about myself. Walking to class, to the store, and sitting alone in the dining hall were some of the many places you could catch me listening to myself. If I felt something was funny in the recording, I would laugh, write it down, and keep listening. Listening to these stories also allowed me to highlight my own problem spots in terms of my storytelling abilities. I could effectively pinpoint language that I drifted to, tones I defaulted to, and pacing I felt most comfortable in. Essentially, I was able to modify performance and writing in one fell-swoop.

After finding this far more effective way of writing the stories, I set my eyes on tailoring the pieces to fit within the context of my three themes: my mother, my working-class upbringing, and my queer identity. In most of the piece, each story at least briefly touches upon each of these three topics; others touch upon two. If for whatever reason they did not naturally touch upon these topics, I would find ways for them to incorporate one of the three themes. This involved adding parts to a story to have them sit nicely in the grand scheme of the project.

For example, early in the process, my story “House on Fire” did not naturally fit into the storytelling show; with this in mind, I was very hesitant about cutting that portion of the story. Tonally, it did not feel natural to jump from “Bootycall Baby,” the story about how my mom almost aborted me to a heavier story about how police officers invaded my home when I was 7. Further, I felt cutting the piece would not allow the audience to ease into the theatrical style I was diving into. Without “House on Fire,” I felt the overall project started off in a stumble, like I
did not properly transmit the rules in which we (myself and the audience) would be playing with for the duration of the show. I briefly toyed with the idea of finding a new story from this portion of my life that fit the themes better, but I could not remember a story that felt as high stakes as “House on Fire.”

Due to the fact I wanted to keep “House on Fire,” that meant I had to tailor the piece to fit the project as a whole. Before modifying it, the story existed as a quick romp: I did laundry for my family because my mom hated it; I found a lighter; I started my house on fire; I got in trouble. When the story existed this way, it felt out of place. However, when editing the piece, I found there were places to insert further details to tie back to the theme. For example, I included the fact my mom hated doing laundry because she worked incredibly long hours to meet the bills. I added the fact I would pickpocket my family because it was an opportunity for a poor kid to find some spare change for spending money. Finally, I incorporated the fact my mom missed work the day following the fire, meaning we would be behind on bills because of me. Because I felt I structurally needed the “House on Fire” story, I found ways to add to it to serve my tonal needs.

I also heavily tailored the “Chandelier” story where I broke my teeth. Similarly in “House on Fire,” when I told this story previously I would focus primarily on my relationship with my appearance and my own insecurity with my teeth. In order to allow the story to gel with the rest, I added, like “House on Fire,” new details that would allow the story to mesh better. First and foremost, at the top of the story I made multiple references to my queer identity:

*With this new rule, I became hyper-aware of the things I did. In an effort to avoid my mom and family discovering I wasn’t gay, I avoided a couple things I had a secret deep infatuation with. America’s Next Top Model. Magic Mike. And, most*
specifically, color guard. I have never been much of a dancer, but I had always been so fascinated by the girls and the openly gay guys who could so openly express their desire to twirl flags and dance. (APPENDIX A)

By doing this, I continue the through line of queerness through the piece and directly tie color guard back to being gay. It’s a touchstone for the audience and a point of familiarity. It keeps them in the loop of how at this point in my life I’m still struggling with my identity. Next, I found ways to incorporate the working-class theme. In previous iterations of this story, I never mentioned the reason I had never gotten my teeth completely fixed was due to financial reasons. In this version if the story, I needed to directly address how the $5,000 bill complicated things for me:

She then proceeded to perform two emergency root canals. She also ripped out my tooth that was dangling by a nerve. At the end of the process, she came over with a bill.

I panicked and I said, “Doesn’t my state insurance cover that?” because that’s the one benefit I’ve always had is that the state pays my medical bills.

“The state covers the necessary procedures, like the root canals and that kind of stuff. They will not, however, cover the cost of cosmetic procedures, which is what you’ll need to fix your smile line.” She handed me my bill and walked away.

This bill said $5,000 fucking dollars to make my mouth look normal.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I did not have $5,000 to fix this mess. My dentist sent me home without a tooth that day because she had to wait until the following week to make me a new one. (APPENDIX A)

Previous versions of this story did not include my dentist delivering the bill or the fact I was on state-issued insurance. These simple additions, which I typically pass off as comedic bits, root the piece in the poverty theme that partially guides the story. Finally, in prior editions the story ended with remarks about how losing my teeth made me find other reasons to love myself.
because I didn’t love my smile. While that ending works in a short form Moth style telling, it did not necessarily fit within the context of this project. To find a way to firmly ground this story into the world, I knew I needed to deeply incorporate my mom into the story in some capacity. I decided to highlight my mom’s anger because it would do both add my mom to the story and also highlight the fact I made a mistake I needed to fix.

One story in particular presented challenges I did not necessarily know how to overcome in the early stages of this process: “Merry Christmas, I Need A Dollar.” I identify this story as the most vulnerable moment in the show for a couple reasons. Primarily, these stories tested my ability to craft scenes instead of ideas. In the early inception of this project, these stories were simply extended thoughts I had about my family’s experience at our most impoverished. About halfway through rehearsals, I contemplated cutting that portion of the storytelling show entirely to avoid the frustration associated with trying to make it work.

For “Merry Christmas, I Need a Dollar,” the first versions I told seemed to live in almost an ethereal, as if I was telling the story in limbo. I tend to avoid thinking about trouble points in my past, mostly because it’s easier to just exist in the present. When I first attempted to prose this story, there was no grounding to the piece and it felt more like a treatise to impoverished children (which would make a fun autobiography title). I would start telling the story and I would lose my thoughts. I did not feel like present day Richard anymore, but rather the kid who was scared he was going to lose his home because his mom couldn’t pay the bills.

One day, while telling the story, my director London Murray asked me to explain to her why I was struggling. I explained how I became scatterbrained while telling the story because so many memories came flooding back when I told it. I also told Murray I didn’t think people
would understand how deeply poverty-stricken my family was. This led to a conversation about my experiences growing up impoverished. Ultimately, Murray encouraged me to include the spaghetti monologue in the show because Murray and I agreed it would give the audience an accessible opening into my family’s experiences and, as I’ve learned, many other impoverished families’ experiences.

The next step for “Merry Christmas, I Need a Dollar” was to find ways to firmly plant the piece in scenes rather than ideas. In storytelling, stories are most effective if they stream together scenes with actual events and characters rather than broader concepts. Murray gave me the task of sifting through all my memories from my family’s dark years and told me to choose two I felt an audience would find most relatable. I chose the pizza party dollar story because I felt most audiences would understand the severity of not having a dollar to give your child. Next, I chose the Christmas scene for a couple reasons. Selfishly, anyone who knows me knows I adore Christmas, but I’m never too keen to share why. Further, while everyone may not celebrate Christmas, most people celebrate a holiday season holiday. I felt a holiday story would be a good entry point for the audience because they could see themselves in the piece. With the inclusion of these two smaller stories within a larger story, that moment in the show finally felt like something. It didn’t necessarily feel like a full-fledge story, but it felt like a beat in a larger show. It felt like the moment spent telling the story felt like I was sharing a portion of who I was, which was incredibly rewarding.

Writing the “Coming Out” portions of the show also presented a unique challenge. These stories usually exist as a longer story, but I opted to splice it up. Because I split the larger story up, I had to deal with ironing out the cuts involved with making this decision. For example, in
the larger form of the story, I do not spend much time reaffirming rules throughout the story. In this project, however, I constantly reminded the audience the rules. This allowed the audience to remain deeply invested in watching my coming out journey unfold and it also served as a strong through line in the entire production.

The coming out portions also served as passages of time. They gave me the opportunity to gloss over long periods of time without having to address all the nitty gritty details. Instead, I could clearly monitor and track my life and gaps in time through the framework of my coming out journey. I could fill in an audience with all the details necessary without overwhelmingly detracting from the narrative at large. I was particularly proud of this usage because these portions informed an audience of boring necessary information without the continuous feeling of expostional unloading.

I put a ton of thought into how I wanted the storytelling show to end. I could talk about how my family is doing much better now, that my mom escaped the clutches of paralyzing poverty, but that did not feel right. The ending of the piece came after I was talking to a friend about my project. When I told her I was going to tell stories from my life, she stared at me, mouth agape and said, “Wow! I wish I had enough material to write a full storytelling show, but I don’t matter that much!” Hearing her say this got me thinking, “But how could you not matter enough? That makes zero sense.”

This is how the ending, where I make a call for people to tell their stories and to share who they are, came to be. I wanted the final moments of this show to be about recognizing the audience for taking an hour to really see me, to listen and appreciate the words I had to share. I struggled the entire time writing this storytelling show and I constantly held myself back saying
“No one cares what you have to say. Why do you expect them to listen?”. Eventually I got over that roadblock, but I knew that I wanted to end the performance asking them to share with others. In the real world, I would find a way to properly end this piece, but within the academic context, this ending made so much more sense. Also, I don’t think I’ve reached an adequate ending in my life where I can neatly tie together the entire project.

Another aspect of writing I did not anticipate challenging me was the process of writing about myself and, in turn, being vulnerable. I identify as a rather closed off person. I have my walls. Further, to avoid upsetting myself in any way, I tend to compartmentalize my emotions so they do not bleed into other facets of my life. For example, if I have an issue in my love life, I do not let that affect my school work. In broader terms, I do not let emotional moments in my past influence my actions today. Yet most of storytelling involves revisiting and re-expressing emotion. I struggle with letting myself go and feeling emotions. I have noticed this in my acting, singing, and dancing before, but it has specifically been a heavy burden throughout this storytelling process. In further detail, I hold tension in my body and when I’m confronted with a challenge or a task I am not immediately good at, my body tenses even more. When I have to play an emotion I’m not comfortable with, I skirt around the edges and avoid. Likewise, in storytelling, when confronted with the task of sharing a deeply personal story, I tend to run or I diverge to comedy.

In all honesty, I fear vulnerability and “letting go” so deeply because I am afraid of looking/feeling stupid. I feel I’ve cultivated an image and I am afraid of sacrificing or compromising that image for a performance. I revert to comedy because I know and understand comedy. People in my real life have seen my comedic, dry sense of humor in action. They have
not, however, seen my more emotional moments because I do not wish to share them with anyone. Further, I think going into this process I had a misconception pertaining to emotional expression. Storytelling does not mean I have to perform like I did in the moment (ie. if I cried in the story that does not mean I have to cry during the performance), it just means the delivery of the story must be charged by the emotional content of the piece. For example, in the story “Freddy Vs. Jason” which describes the time a group of police officers raided my house, I tell that piece from the place I was during the story: a state of confusion. Yet I also combine the confusion with the years I have had to identify and sift the events. In this particular story, the vulnerability comes through the content of the story and my willingness to share it. I still do not enjoy being vulnerable and I do not look forward to moments I have to be vulnerable on stage, but I feel the process of developing this show has heightened my willingness and my ability to be vulnerable and “let go” in my performing.

Finally, when I first set out to do this show, I thought deeply about what I felt the Occidental College community needed to hear in this specific moment. My main goal was to find points of contact between my life and other people’s lives so they could discover ways they see themselves in my narrative. When I sat down to think about the stories the Occidental College campus needed to hear right now, I decided on a couple.

I felt the Oxy community needed to know a little bit more about me and my history. I believe I have gone through most of college without revealing many personal details about myself or deeply personal stories. We, as social beings, tend to only share the successful moments of our lives. We do not share shortfalls or mistakes. I wanted to challenge this notion. Like in traditional forms of theater, no audience wants to hear the story about your success;
instead, they want to hear the stories about your failures and how those failures changed you. Through my storytelling show, I aim to encourage the audience to share our failures and share our shortcomings. Through these hardships, we become the people we are today and these hardships lead to compelling narratives.

I also feel the Occidental College community needs to lighten up. A large portion of my senior comprehensive project involves comedy: I could be in the throes of an emotional moment and I will toss in a joke to lighten the mood. I feel our campus hyperfixates itself on the negatives in most situations. I want the student body to see bad events can happen that produce positive outcomes. In a world and a political climate that focuses primarily on depressing national turmoil, I wanted to offer our community an escape. I feel the Occidental College community need to see bad emotional events can work out, that your past is not a detriment, and we can move forward and find a silver-lining in the most depressing of situations.

V. PRODUCING THE SHOW

A hat I had never worn before Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda was the producer hat. When I wore the producer hat I was responsible for creating advertising materials and getting those to the proper channels for distribution, organizing schedules, securing spaces for rehearsals, obtaining funding, and making sure everything went off without a hitch.

One of the roles of producer that I did not fully anticipate was the fact I had to advertise the show. This involved multiple meetings with Theater Department Chair Beatrice Gonzales. I was responsible for relaying information and all advertising materials to her so she could send them to the student body. Doing this was relatively simple because working with Gonzales is a treat, but it also meant I had to design advertising materials.
When I set out to do this project, I wanted everything to look as crisp and clean as possible. Ranging from staging to the programs, I wanted the project to feel the same caliber as an Occidental College mainstage productions in the past. I had a vision for the promotional materials and I contacted Elena Sanchez (‘18), who is a working graphic designer in Los Angeles, to bring my vision to life. I was in contact with Sanchez at the beginning of February, where I told her my ideas for the poster and I asked her if she could make it happen. I also at this time explained I could not offer much in terms of payment besides my undying appreciation. Sanchez agreed, explaining she would love to help me, so we went started with realizing how the poster would look on the 11in x 17in paper. About midway through February, I received a text from Sanchez explaining she had to back out, that she had received multiple paid gigs and would be unable to give my project the attention that it needed. After Sanchez backed out, I decided I would have to design the poster myself. While I do not have any graphic design training and minimal experience with photoshop from Introduction to Design (THEA 175), I did have a can-do attitude and a passion for succeeding.

I am being generous when I say my attempt was a total failure. My attempt was so laughable my friend Dahlia Theriault (‘20) offered to do it for me in exchange for a dinner at the Cheesecake Factory. I graciously agreed and we sat down over dinner and we sketched out a new plan. Working with Theriault was fantastic because I would describe what I saw in my head, and she would just make it happen. I explained to Theriault I wanted the poster to look like a messy collage in a middle schooler’s room, but clean and crisp at the same time. The process felt like a collaboration between two artists. Theriault taught me some neat tricks in photoshop, the ins and
outs of graphic design, and she also taught me efficient ways of communicating with graphic designers. Theriault also cranked out a very aesthetically pleasing poster in 3 hours.

Another role of the producer was making sure everyone would show up at the same place at the same time. College students, speaking from experience, are some of the most overworked students on this planet, which means getting me, my director London Murray, my lighting designer Isabel Schwartzberg, and occasionally my project mentor David Crabb, into the same room was almost impossible. I overcame this obstacle by prioritizing who was most important at specific rehearsals. For example, if David Crabb was coming to a rehearsal, I would prioritize his schedule because I only had him for a select amount of time. If Professor Crabb was not coming, I would prioritize Murray’s schedule, as she was the director, and fill in Schwartzberg what she missed at a different point. The scheduling was mostly about finding effective ways to make the most use out of all of our time.

Securing spaces for rehearsal was relatively easy. Theater Director Brian Fitzmorris was accommodating when it came to occasionally letting London and I use the Keck mainstage for rehearsal. Further, once New Play Festival was done, Theater Coordinator Gonzales booked out chunks of time for Murray and I to rehearse in Keck 208. If we weren’t in one of those two spaces, Murray and I would rehearse in my dorm room, an easy space to secure considering I had a spacious RA single.

For this project, I also needed to request funding via Omar’s Cookie Jar, something I had never done before. The process was rather painless: I filled out a form and the department met and decided if I would receive funding and, if so, how much. I got all the funding I needed (and
then some!) and I mostly used these resources to print posters and to provide Murray with an honorarium.

Part of the funding from Omar’s Cookie Jar also went to printing the programs, which I had to design and build myself. Gonzales provided me with a template from the Fall 2018 production of *URU*. Programs, I have learned, are incredibly important. Aside from the lobby, the program is one of the first interactions audiences have with a show. In the program for *Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda*, I wanted to make sure the storytelling show read as a comedy from the jump, so I made sure to spend a lot of time perfecting and ensuring the program transmitted humor.

Another important aspect I tended to while wearing my producing cap is making the lobby more of a fun place for people to hang out. For the performances, I put up collages of pictures of me from across my entire life. When choosing these pictures, I made sure to choose the most embarrassing photos because I wanted people to realize I was not taking myself too seriously. Further, I wanted the show to feel interactive, so I built a crossword puzzle people could fill out while watching the performance, which would encourage engagement with the audience.

Finally, because I was performing, I asked Megan Johnson ('19) to act as the head usher and also the P.I.C (person in charge) for the performances. I asked Johnson because she is one of the kindest and most responsible people I know. She also has plenty of experience in technical theater and she had worked with many P.I.Cs in the past, so I knew she was familiar with the role.
While working on this show, I learned production is about making sure all your ducks are in a row. It also taught me producing is about anticipating tasks/potential dilemmas and responding accordingly so hopefully the issue doesn’t arise. Most importantly, however, is producing an event is about how effectively you respond to problems and tasks that must be done.

VI. DESIGNING THE SHOW

When I set out to do Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda, I knew I wanted a full production, which meant lights, sound, and a simple set. Unfortunately, my budget did not allow for anything extravagant, so I had to work within the parameters set forth.

The first design aspect I encountered was deciding on how I would utilize the Keck 208 blocks to create a minimal set for me to play around with. I wanted the set to be versatile and simple enough to serve all of the functions it needed to with minimal “set changes.” Further, I wanted the space to retain it’s choppy feel (ie, how messy the blocks were, how the stage wasn’t swept) because I felt like that served the story the best. With my director London Murray, we toyed with using different chairs and black blocks to create different areas on the stage. Initially, we just had three blocks on stage: one in the center and then one on either stage right and stage left. While this was adequate and it served the blocking well, I felt the single black box limited perspective for the audience. For example, in “Coming Out 2” I tell the story of how I came out to my friend Savannah in a moving car. Most cars, as many people know, have two front seats; because we were just using one block, it lacked the illusion I was in a car. While everyone ultimately would know I wasn’t in a car the entire time, I wanted to give the audience the tools necessary to properly suspend their belief. By adding the extra block to the center, it added more
than just another set piece, but rather an element that would further enhance the illusion I was seeking to create. We ultimately decided to add another block stage left because I used that area as my living room in “Freddy VS Jason,” “Merry Christmas, I Need a Dollar,” and “Chandelier.” Adding the extra block mirrored the spacing of a couch. Murray and I also decided to completely eliminated the block on stage right, instead replacing it with a black rehearsal chair we found backstage. The chair was easier to move for the dentist scene in “Chandelier” and added variety to the stage picture.

Another element of “scenic design” was choosing where to let the piece live. During our first rehearsal on Keck Mainstage, both Murray and Professor Crabb pinpointed the issue of how large the Keck Theater stage is in comparison to me: the more open the stage felt like, the larger I had to feel/perform to adequately fill the space. To counteract this, Murray and I toyed with using fullstage blacks to trim the playing area. We decided on using the stage at half. However, the Actors from the London Stage ruined that because they needed more playing area, which forced the theater to move the fullstage black back. Unable to remedy this, Murray and I decided we would attempt to fix this issue with some lighting tricks.

Lighting, unarguably, was the most imperative aspect of design. In this production, the lighting had multiple functions including, but not limited to, ending and transitioning between stories, establishing place, and establishing tone. Without lighting, the entire performance would feel monotonous and would be visually displeasing for an audience. For this project, I tapped Isabel Schwartzberg (Class ’19). I had taken the Lighting Design (THEA 325) class, but I knew someone with more knowledge would be the right way to go for polished lighting looks. Before we sat down at a light board, I told Isabel the stories and gave her vague ideas of how I wanted
the stage picture to look so when we finally got to programming, the process would run smoothly.

To begin with, a primary function of the lighting design involved establishing bookends and transitions between the stories. I knew from the jump that because the stories exist on such an extended timeline, moving from piece to piece would be difficult. During our work, Professor Crabb also identified this problem. He encouraged me to write transition snippets. While I did do this, I also knew that we could incorporate the use of blackouts/light fades to cue to the audience that story was over and we were going to segue to a different story/scene, much like in traditional theater. I explained this desire to Schwartzberg, who said fades to black would make things much simpler anyway. With confirmation simplicity was the way to go here, Schwartzberg and I decided we would heavily employ the use of blackouts/cross fades to signal to the audience one story is over and another is beginning.

Another function the lighting served was to provide the audience with an idea of what type of place I was in. Due to the fact the set was so minimal, it was hard to easily convince the audience I was in a specific place in the world. Schwartzberg and I decided one of the easiest ways to solve this issue was to isolate parts of the stage where I was currently at in the show, and attempt to mirror time of day. For example, in “Coming Out 3” I tell a story about driving down a dark road during winter. To establish the setting, I asked Schwartzberg to isolate the two center black boxes (which I had previously established as a car in “Bootycall Baby”) and to use blue light/cooler light to create artificial darkness. We used warmer reds when mimicking fire onstage during “House on Fire.” When telling “Coming Out 1, 2, 4, and 5” stories, I wanted these moments to feel isolated and almost extracted from the piece entirely. Hopefully, and I’ve seen
photos from the performances where I think I’ve achieved this, those “Coming Out” segments felt more intimate, personal, and more like a Ted Talk. I wanted the lighting to show, in those moments, we were removed from a single space and more of a transitionary period.

Ultimately, however, I wanted the lighting design to help cultivate tone for each specific story. When a story got more personal, I wanted less theatrical light so it felt more raw and less performative. If I was about to try and make the audience laugh, I wanted more light so the audience could see every little thing I did. For example, in the opening of “Freddy VS Jason,” Schwartzberg attempted to create a spookier vibe for the audience. Frankly, I do not think this cue worked and in future iterations of this project I would attempt something different for this moment, but the intention of a stark shift from “House on Fire” to “Freddy VS Jason” was there: I wanted to bring the audience to a new mental headspace and signal to them a tonal shift would be occurring soon.

Lighting was the most fundamental design aspect of this project and, unfortunately, it also presented the most challenging obstacles. To begin with, the lighting design was limited from the start because we were going to be using amended versions of the Many Deaths of Danny Rosales/URU light plots that the Actors for the London Stage needed. While not a huge issue, it dictated all focus areas and where actions and scenes for the project could take place. In an attempt to overcome this obstacle, I got ahold of the light plots as early as possible so Schwartzberg could look them over. While this seemed to resolve that issue, the light plot slightly changed again the week of my two performances, which meant lighting design thoughts had to be modified.
Another issue Schwartzberg and I had was our ability to access the stage. Completely my fault, I had anticipated finding a two hour period the week of the performances into the theater with Schwartzberg and Murray to get a head start on programming lights for the performances. Foolishly, I forgot about the Actors for the London Stage, who had full access to the stage all week. When confronted with this obstacle, I decided to most efficient way to talk with Schwartzberg about lighting design was to use the light plots Lead Technician Adam Roy provided us. A couple days before paper tech, I printed out Vectorwork Sheets of the focus areas on the Keck Stage. For each story I would shade in the focus areas that would be used and I would write roughly a paragraph about what focus areas were used when throughout the story. I would also describe blocking and how Murray and I wanted the stage picture to look for each lighting look. When I gave these to Schwartzberg, she said it lessened the stress on her shoulders because it gave her an idea of the amount of work each story would need in terms of light looks.

The last part of design was the sound design, which, for at least me, was the most difficult design aspect to tackle. For the other design aspects, I either had some proficiency or I knew someone who possessed the skill set necessary to help me out. At Occidental College, there was no one who was able to aid me with the sound design of this project. The only person who could remotely help me was Zoe Speer (‘20), but she was abroad in England for the semester. Speer offered her continued support, but she also emphasized the program I would be working with was one where she could answer questions, but not entirely teach me how to do it. Also, the added difficulty of the time difference between Speer and I complicated things. Professor Fitzmorris guided me to a program called QLab.
There is a very steep learning curve when it comes to using QLab. It’s all very technical and when formulating sound cues in the application one wrong button pushed and nothing in the entire cue line up would work. The first afternoon I used QLab I spent 30 minutes trying to stop all the cues from playing at once (turns out you just have to hit the escape key). In terms of time spent with QLab, the week leading up to the project’s technical rehearsal I spent roughly 30 hours learning the ins-and-outs of the program and formulating a list of over 100 sounds cues. That entire week while building sound cues for the project I maybe got 20 hours of sleep a night. My life became wake up at 8:00AM, go to class, go to Urinetown: The Musical rehearsals for four hours, sit down at my desk at 10:30PM and work on QLab until 4:00AM. When London and I decided on wanting a specific sound, we would search for it on Youtube. From there, I would download the Youtube file, convert it to an MP3 file, and upload it to QLab, where I would do all the necessary fussing with settings and building the cue.

Choosing the sounds Murray and I wanted to incorporate into the show was also difficult. We knew the sound design, in any capacity, would not be essential, but rather an embellishment that enhanced the overall tone of the show. We also realized sound in these performances should not be extravagant, but rather purely functional. I can boil the sounds we chose into three different categories: transition music, atmosphere/setting, or for a joke.

For the transition music portion of the sound design, I knew I wanted the music to directly tie to the specific moment in my life I was referring to. For example, the choice to use Dave Matthew’s “Crash Into Me” during the transition between “Coming Out 3” and “Water Heater” made logical sense: it was a component in the previous story that could also string the two scenes together. In other words, the transition music directly referred to the previous
emotional moment. I used this rule of thumb for transition music in most cases. Another example would be the use of Reba’s “I’m a Survivor” near the end of “Freddy VS Jason.” The lyrics in “I’m A Survivor” directly correlated with the tone of the story in that specific instant. The opening chords to that song sound hopeful to me and at that point in the story my mom is hopeful. Further, that song was one my mom always listened to growing up, so from a personal standpoint and truthfulness of the story, I knew utilizing that specific song would bode over well.

I also used sound design to cultivate an atmosphere/setting in the theater or to refer to a specific setting. When I felt like a shift in lighting could not adequately create a new space on stage, I would use sound design to indicate to the audience a shift in location. For example, in the story “Chandelier” I purposefully used a dental drill sound so the audience would immediately clue into where I was located in the story. Establishing atmosphere was a little bit more complex. Atmosphere sounds do not necessarily portray solely location, but also an emotional vibe. In terms of my understanding, I used atmosphere sounds as almost background noise and a way to fill space, a dog whistle the audience could hear but did not have to heavily focus on. An example of an atmospheric sound would be the car driving sounds during “Chakra Psychic Vivian.” Ideally, this sound wasn’t overwhelming and possibly filled the audience in on what was happening without me directly addressing it in the spoken material.

The third and final kind of sound cue I built was the joke sound cues, which at least half of which were cut after the dress rehearsal. These cues were mostly fun gags I enjoyed, but rarely did they land. Also, because I had them planned, they rarely worked out because I always flubbed the comedic timing. One specific sound cue we cut in the last hour before opening the show was a religious bit. I had a line where I said, “And I know when people bring religion into
something they mean business!” and a quick excerpt from *Urinetown: The Musicals*’s “Run, Freedom, Run” would play. While I thought this was funny (mostly because I was simultaneously doing a production of *Urinetown: The Musical*) everyone else felt it was too niche and we chopped it.

**VII. REHEARSALS**

Rehearsals were the backbone for this project. They were periods of time to toy with the material, find new discoveries about blocking and humor, and the most efficient ways I could adequately explore the show. I tended to have three different kinds of rehearsals (excluding technical rehearsals) in this process: sit-down, dorm room, and Keck style rehearsals.

Early in the this process, many of my rehearsals were essentially table reads: I would sit down with Murray, Professor Crabb, or a designer and tell them the stories. Typically, these types of rehearsals went longer because they lacked the intensity of a rehearsed performed story. I would use these sit-down rehearsals early in the process to continue writing and workshopping the pieces while simultaneously introducing the material to my body. In short, these sit-down rehearsals were a soft-landing for the more detail-oriented rehearsals and they typically ended with the collaborator I was working with giving me feedback and adjustments. With this in mind, these rehearsals also proved to slightly hinder the process. Because I was becoming so relaxed about telling these stories in this way, I struggled to properly transition away from this more casual setting. If I were to do a similar project in the future, I would avoid living in the sit-down process for too long and try to immediately get all the material on its feet.

The most common rehearsal style for this process was what I appropriately call the “dorm room rehearsal.” In these rehearsals, I would invite Murray over, give her a Mocha from the
Cooler, and we would typically spend 3 hours running stories, making adjustments, and attempting to parse out blocking ideas and other design concepts. These rehearsals are where the piece came to life, where Murry and I found the most humor and livelihood in my body, and where we finally started to have a show on our hands. However, obviously rehearsing in my dorm room presented some challenges down the road. First, the size of my dorm room, while a very large single, slowed down the process. One person filling a dorm room is simple, but one person filling Keck Theater, both physically and emotionally, was difficult and it was an issue we could only address on the Keck mainstage. To combat this issue, which we thankfully identified early on in the process, Murray instructed me to make things feel foolishly large in my dorm room so when we performed them on stage they would feel more natural and make less work for later. Further, Murray and I couldn’t completely address blocking until we were in Keck, so dorm rehearsals mostly meant standstill delivery of the stories with Murray interjecting with what she thought the blocking would be.

The most fruitful rehearsal type in this process were the three times I could rehearse on the Keck Theater mainstage before the technical rehearsals/performances. Typically, the also involved inviting Professor Crabb to watch and give notes about the project. I valued these rehearsals the most because they allowed me to explore my own size of performance. These specific rehearsals gave me the opportunity to gauge and toy with delivery, intimacy, and style. I also could practice filling an entire room with just myself. Finally, the Keck stage rehearsals allowed me to come to terms with how large this project was for one person. The Keck rehearsals kept me on my feet and served as the reminder I shouldn’t get comfortable because I had a big task ahead me.
I had two main collaborators while rehearsing, the first being Professor Crabb. Before the dress rehearsal, Professor Crabb attended two 2 hour Keck stage rehearsals. During these rehearsals, we would stop and start and he would identify problem spots in the show. Professor Crabb would also identify areas in the piece where the writing could be stronger; he was constantly encouraging me to explore different structures and varying my storytelling tone. Even though he did give me detailed notes about smaller moments, in my opinion Professor Crabb doctored the overall vision of the show. Professor Crabb would give me big picture notes that felt like they took the piece to the next level.

The main collaborator I worked with for the entire process was London Murray. When I first set out on this project, I knew needed to have a deep sense of trust in the people I worked with. When I met with Professor Laural Meade before this project was approved, she highly recommended I find an alumni director/collaborator who would keep me on track and help me guide the piece. We generated a short list of people and I ultimately ended up tapping London Murray (‘18) to work alongside me on this journey. I knew once Professor Meade mentioned Murray, she was my top choice. I chose Murray because of my experience working with her in the past. Murray demonstrates professionalism and an eagerness to explore and develop material. Further, I admire Murray’s gentleness when it comes to personal relationships and her fearless leadership capabilities. I have seen Murray direct in the 2018 Women’s Festival and she has a knack for balancing wit, charm, and humor with deeply personal and complicated narratives. I also felt Murray’s connection to acting and her abilities to analyze content from both a directorial and actor standpoint would prove crucial while developing this piece. My instincts were correct while choosing Murray. If I had to describe Murray’s greatest strength, it’s her ability to praise
while simultaneously asking for more. More often than not, Murray would assign me homework, ranging from tasks such as roughly blocking a story or completely restructuring pieces. I found these deadlines imperative to my success. Further, Murray’s direction never felt condescending and she took great care to remember the deeply personal nature of the work.

Throughout this process, Murray has been my biggest cheerleader and a sturdy rock for me to lean on. Murray was with me in every aspect of the rehearsal process, which means she watched the piece develop with me and had her hands in every choice ultimately made. During rehearsals, she would stop and start as she saw fit. She would take notes and walk me through the problem areas and help me correct the issues. While Professor Crabb doctored the overall project, London handled the smaller details while also keeping the material grounded in the overall vision of the project.

Murray’s strength lied in her own abilities as a performer. When I explained my hesitance around feeling vulnerable on stage and the physical issues I encountered while telling stories I was not wholeheartedly comfortable with, Murray encouraged me to tell the stories while in constant motion. During this exercise, she said to not worry about content, to just talk about the pieces and go through them as naturally as possible all while making myself look as physically foolish as possible. While doing this exercise, she would also be in movement to make me feel more comfortable. We would jump around my room and, during these exercises, I would find ways to release unnecessary energy. These exercises gave me more willingness to use my body, regardless of the content of the story. Because I was more willing to use my body, my performance and engagement with the audience increased tenfold. Murray taught me to use my body as a tool to interact with the audience rather than a roadblock.
All in all, the rehearsals throughout this project cultivated the piece and helped with the writing, rewriting, and workshopping of the show.

**VIII. TECHNICAL REHEARSALS**

One of the more stressful portions of this project involved the one day of technical rehearsals we had to program lights, set levels for sound, and essentially put the entire show together.

I went into our first (and last) technical rehearsal for *Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda* with a clear schedule:

- **9:00AM**: Arrive in Keck Theater
- **9:15AM**: Set up sound board, introduce Murray to QLab.
- **9:30AM**: Start establishing levels for the piece.
- **10:30AM**: Schwartzberg arrives. A full listen through all the sound cues with Murray in the house calling for adjustments.
- **11:00AM**: Schwartzberg starts programming lights.
- **12:30PM**: Lights done programming. Lunch.
- **1:30PM**: Cue to cue (to the best of our abilities)
- **2:00PM**: Final Dress Rehearsal (with guest David Crabb)

In the first 25 minutes we were already behind schedule.

Our first obstacle came with getting into the booth. Once we crossed that bridge, we had to figure out how to turn on the sound board. Our go-to person for all of these questions was Megan Johnson ('19), who was deeply familiar with all facets of Keck Theater. Once we got going, I had underestimated how long it would take to familiarize Murray with QLab. Once she finally got the hang of it, we went through the initial adjustment of levels. By 11:00AM, we were ready to do a final check of all the sound cues with director Murray listening, but that also meant
we had to give Schwartzberg a brief crash course into how QLab worked. By 11:30AM, we were finally done with sound and were ready to move onto lighting.

I sat on stage while on the phone with Murray and Schwartzberg and we spent an hour and a half parsing through lighting looks. I have never been a fan of tech, mostly because I feel so helpless during it. While I wished I could go offstage and run the show a couple times, I was tied to the stage so we could make the whole thing look pretty. Further, while I know Schwartzberg was working at a lightning pace, I could not help but repeatedly think “please go faster! I have so many other things to do!”. By 1:00PM, we decided we would scrap the cue-to-cue we had initially scheduled and we would use the dress rehearsal to address any technical issues. We finished up the lighting design around 1:15PM.

When we reconvened for our dress rehearsal run after lunch, I was so nervous. What if the sound design flops? What if we missed a lighting cue? I remember vividly talking with Professor Crabb in the Keck Theater while placing glow tape all over the stage, a very clear indicator I was stalling. Finally, I knew we just had to start.

The final (and first) full run with tech went surprisingly well! I was overjoyed and I remember thinking “I have a show! Maybe this will work out!”. Professor Crabb congratulated me on a job well done and then immediately launched into notes. He brought my attention to some sound cues that needed to either be adjusted or eliminated entirely. We then started talking about the content and the structure of the show. Professor Crabb pointed out the piece was running an hour and fifteen minutes, which was teetering on the edge of needing an intermission. He also said he thought the stories “House on Fire” and “Chakra Psychic Vivian” were fun, but
not necessary for this storytelling show. He explained they did not hit the themes as heavily as the other stories in the show did.

I agreed with Professor Crabb, but then I was confronted with a very clear dilemma: do I make the cuts and adjustments and go into the performance blind? Or do I leave the stories and cues in and address that in future permutations of this project?

I did not cut the two stories Professor Crabb mentioned could easily be removed, but I did make sound adjustments. I felt it was too close to the show to make such a drastic change in the structure and content of the piece. In its current iteration, the piece lived comfortably in me. I had told those stories in that order for so long. While I knew I could cut them and more than likely perform the rest of the piece fabulously, I did not want to risk potentially jeopardizing my own flow with the material. Further, I understood the pieces could be cut, but I also trusted myself enough as a writer, performer, and artist to know that with some simple adjustments I could make the pieces fit more cohesively into the performance. So, during the dinner break, I thought of ways to deeply root “House on Fire” and “Chakra Psychic Vivian” into my storytelling show.

Overall, the technical rehearsal was very stressful, but very rewarding in the same vein. That entire day, I had to make decisions as an authority on the material and the project. I had to trust my intuition and my artistic gut feelings to formulate the strongest show to perform for my peers. Yes, at the end of the day I wished my schedule for the day would have worked out, but sometimes art can not be pigeon-holed into an easily followed agenda.

IX. PERFORMANCES
The performances were unlike anything I had ever experienced. I’ve done theater my entire life, and rarely does a crowd make me squirm. Yet, these performances were the most challenging events I have ever had to face.

I spent a majority of my time in the green room before both performances. I was light-headed and increasingly nervous. My heart was racing. I found myself doubting my capabilities as an artist. And, for whatever reason, I could not shake these feelings. I was petrified I would go on stage, in front of all my peers, and tell them a stories they did not even remotely care about. I got over these fears in a couple ways. Most realistically, I knew I had to go on stage and do it so I figured I might as well stop being nervous. Second, I sat in the wings and I listened to all my friends and peers in the audience and I started thinking about how much they all must care about me if they are willing to come up to Keck Theater on a Saturday night and potentially watch me completely fail. And, finally, I had Murray, who was running the sound board, cue up my favorite Christmas song. I sat in the wings and I listened to it. I thought about my family, some of whom have never left Illinois, most of which don’t have access to higher education. To the people in my family who always wanted to pursue art but never had the opportunity. I thought about how I wasn’t just sharing my experiences, but theirs as well. It was in this moment I realized this project wasn’t just about my mom and me, but rather my entire immediate family.

The first performance will go down as one of the best moments of my life. The energy in the theater uplifted me from the moment the lights came up on stage. People were so receptive to my stories. Simultaneously, it felt incredible to finally introduce them to who I was, to my history, and to how I got here. It was so incredibly special to share that with all of them. I had
one tiny flub in the story, where I accidentally missed named Jack Twist from *Brokeback Mountain* and replaced his name with a current Occidental College student, but I forged ahead and kept going.

After the first performance, I was hiding in the green room when Professor Meade came out from the theater. Frankly, I was a nervous mess on the verge of a meltdown. I owe a lot to Professor Meade in that moment, who provided support and two very fantastic hugs. She encouraged me to go out to the lobby and to greet everyone who wanted to give me “all their love.” I reluctantly went and I was met with a sea of people, all of whom seemed beyond excited to see me. I had many more fantastic hugs and an all around good time mingling.

The next day’s performance as a matinee. I was exhausted from the previous day. The show had a very different energy and I had more mistakes during this show, but it went very well and I also view it as a success.

People received the show incredibly well and I’m so thankful for the positive reception. So many people have approached me since the performances and told me how much they identified with the stories, how they saw their own experiences in my stories. However, these performances did inform me about a couple aspects pertaining to the life of the piece. Primarily, I needed to find a new story to replace “House on Fire” because while it served its purpose for these two performances, I, like Professor Crabb, do not think it fits entirely in the story set. Further, Professor Crabb was also right about the existence of “Chakra Psychic Vivian.” It’s a very enjoyable story, but, in my opinion, it comes far too late in the piece to get the payoff I expected it to when I tie it to my conclusion. All in all, though, both of these performances were equal parts horrifying and beyond rewarding.
XI. CONCLUSION

I have thought a lot about where I envision this project going in the future. Do I try and take it to festivals? Do I start seeking out venues to keep performing it? I am still uncertain about what the next steps are.

After the two performances, I had a meeting with Occidental College Theater Department Chair Susan Gratch. Professor Gratch mentioned there may be a way to do another performance of the piece during senior week if I was willing to do it. While a stellar opportunity, I declined. I need time to let this piece ruminate and grow in my head before I share it with more people. I personally do not know when, or even if, I will be ever ready to share these stories in this manner again, but I knew senior week would be a bit too soon. Next, my family has never been to Occidental College or Los Angeles in general and the last thing I want to do is make them sit through rehearsals about stories that pertain to them as well. Finally, I don’t want to speak to my mom’s experience as a person quite yet. I wholeheartedly believe I never paint my mom in a negative light throughout the duration of the show and I know my love for her is evident, but I don’t want her to feel the way she raised me was inadequate. My primary concern in this decision is making her trip to see her son graduate as enjoyable as possible. With that being said, one day I will tell my mom these stories in a similar way I told them on the Keck Stage. I’m not ashamed of how I told them and I would love for my mom to hear them, but now is not the time.

Throughout the course of this entire senior comprehensive project, I have grappled with the following questions: Why should people care about the gay impoverished kid from Illinois? What gives me the authority to stand on stage and tell my story when I’m 22 years old? Why do I feel I have the right and the skillset to do this project? And, to be frank, I do not know if I can
adequately address those questions. All I know is that the show simultaneously worked very well and pushed me to new extremes as an artist.

As the distance between the final performance and the present grows larger, I continuously think about the sheer magnitude of what I did. I somehow managed to write, produce, design, and perform a solo show and maintain audience engagement for an hour and twenty minutes. I had so much help, but a large majority of the work I did myself. Even further, I have been thinking about how I did this entire project while also rehearsing for Urinetown: The Musical for 20 hours a week and directing scenes for the Directing (THEA 410) class. I have had the most challenging, yet most rewarding, three months of my life fully immersed in theater. I have been acting, singing, dancing, directing, writing, and designing all in one fell swoop. This project has left me in the pits of despair and had taught me everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. But it also taught me I have the skills necessary to solve these issues and come out on top.

This project has also taught me to advocate myself and my abilities as an artist. I understand I had mostly support this entire process, but at times I felt like people were waiting for me to fail. Every meeting I had with the Theater faculty included a quick “Make sure you’re still journaling your experience playing Cladwell in Urinetown!” or “Are you sure you want this show to be this long?”. I know they all believed in me, but I could see the safety nets and the concerns the entire time I was working on this project. This fear I would crumble motivated me throughout the process and made me want to prove the doubters (I say this with love) wrong. I harbor no ill-will because looking back I myself am thoroughly shocked I pulled this off.
Not to toot my own horn, but I think I managed to create a senior project that feels as all-encompassing as my liberal arts theater education has been. Had someone walked up to me four years ago when I first walked into Keck Theater and told me I would write, perform, and produce a solo storytelling show for my Senior Comprehensive project, I would have laughed in their face. I would have never thought I had the ability to do all of those things, let alone do them well enough to consider it a culminating project. However, I have changed so much as a person and I am not the same individual who I was four years ago. This project has taught me that it’s okay to have doubts about your abilities as a performer, but to always let those doubts fuel your drive to succeed.

This project has prepared me for the next steps after graduation. Much like the future of this project, I do not know what the next steps are. I could do another solo show or become a receptionist at a dental office. Yet, I know I have the abilities and the drive necessary to successfully pursue a job as a theater practitioner in any degree I see fit.
APPENDICES

Working Class: The Unofficial Gay Agenda SCRIPT (APPENDIX A)

Bootycall Baby

A couple weeks before I went off to college, my mom was driving me to work on a Saturday afternoon. We were pulling up to a spotlight when she turned to me, stared at me intensely for a moment, and then leaned forward to turn down the music.

“You know you were a mistake, right?”

Now, I’m accustomed to my mom’s random outbursts. In fact, they were something I enjoyed about her. Whenever she has them, I usually attempt to entertain them, see where the road would take me.

“I sorta figured I was mistake considering you had three different children before you were 21, Mom.”

Now I had always known I was a mistake. There was no way my mom intentionally had my older brother Anthony, my older sister Destiny, and then me before she could legally drink. It was something me and my siblings casually mock her for.

“Well, let’s just say your father and I were not together for the longevity of it. We simply satisfied each other’s needs and went about our lives. Until you happened. Apparently we satisfied each other’s needs too well.”

After she said this, I could feel the next statement coming.

“Richard, you’re a bootycall baby. You were a mistake mistake. Like, ‘I had an appointment to abort you’ mistake.”

Now this was new information. Obviously I had to ask her to expand upon this.

“Well, once I found out I was pregnant with you, I told your father, who demanded I get rid of it. I told him I would only get rid of you if he came with me to the appointment. We scheduled the first appointment and he didn’t show up. I didn’t have the money to pay for it, so I left and then we scheduled another. He didn’t show up to that one either. I was mad, Richard. Very mad! So I went home and I called up his landline and I left a message saying ‘Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, you’re a dumbass. I’m having this kid now and you’re just gonna have to deal with it. I’m going to love him so much and he’s going to be so fantastic and you’re just going to have to deal with it. He’s going to be my little mistake.’ So I had you and now you’re going off to college. I must’ve done something right!”

After she said this, we laughed together for a moment before she turned up the music and she drove me the rest of the way to work.

House On Fire

My mom tolerated a lot while we were growing up. She did the mountain of dishes. She made the meals. She changed my younger siblings diapers a majority of the time. But the one
thing she absolutely despised doing was the laundry and that’s because she could never do it quickly enough. With me, my two siblings, her, her long-term boyfriend Junior, and my recently born younger sister Haley, we created a ton of dirty clothing. To add fuel to the fire, my mom opted to use cloth diapers with my baby sister, so our already large piles of laundry increased significantly, this time with diarrhea stained reusable diaper.

One day when I was 7, my mom came home, saw the laundry she had to do and she snapped. She called everyone to the living room and sat us down. She had her dry-erase board, so I knew she meant business. I saw my name, Anthony’s, Destiny’s, and Junior’s written across the top in an extended T-Chart form. And she told us we were going to have a good-hearted competition: whoever has the most laundry by the end of the week would become head of laundry in our household.

I was so game. I had grown up watching Survivor, Big Brother, America’s Next Top Model (that’s a little gay, huh?) and I was ready to live my competitive reality show dream. But, like all of those shows, some scheming was involved. That week my brother outsmarted me and wore all of my clothes, so at the end of the week his pile was very small and my pile was rather large. And with laundry basket in hand, I descended the steps to my basement to start my new job as laundry boy.

Now, the new position had some perks. My mom told me that before I put any of the clothes in the washer, I had to make sure the pockets were empty. Anything found in these pockets would become mine. Coins, dollar bills (I couldn’t keep anything over a $5 note), and random scraps of paper all soon belonged to me. As a poor kid, there is nothing more satisfying than pick-pocketing your foolish family to fund your trips to the corner liquor store.

However, there was a time I pick-pocketed and found something with more significance than a mere dollar or a receipt. I found a dark, grey lighter. I knew immediately I should turn it over, forfeit it to my mom, but I didn’t. I was downstairs, fumbling with the lighter because it was childproof and I was an idiot, when my older brother Anthony came downstairs. He saw me standing there with the lighter, struggling.

“You want me to teach you how to use that?” he asked.

Now, at this point in my life I idolized my older brother. He was so cool and he would let me tag along when he and his older friends did things. So, of course, I accepted the help and I handed him the lighter.

Our basement at the time was segmented into four parts: the laundry area, the play area, the billiards area, and the area where my mom kept all of our automotive materials and power tools. Anthony walked over to the automotive section and found some duct-tape. He walked back over to me, turned on the sink located near the washing machine. He then sparked the lighter to life and burnt the duct-tape. It burned for a moment, we watched, and then he ran it under the flowing water and through it away.

That was it. We just burnt duct-tape in our basement. Nothing special happened. Occasionally the duct-tape would burn a really cool green color, but other than that it was just a
small fire. Yet I started doing it all the time. I tell my mom I’m going downstairs to do the laundry or play with my toys, but really I would take duct-tape and burn it over the sink. Some people are addicted to drugs, I was addicted to burning duct-tape in my basement by myself. I did this for a while.

On my brother’s birthday, June 12, I went downstairs after eating birthday cake to “do laundry”. I went over to the automotive section, got my lighter and duct-tape, and assumed the position over the sink. I light up and boy did I watch the duct-tape go up in flames.

I heard from behind me someone coming down the stairs and I quickly panicked. I blew out the flame and I turned around and tossed the duct-tape in the trash can. My mom had been coming downstairs to grab bread from our large freezer downstairs for her lunch the next day. She grabbed it and went right back upstairs. I let out a sigh of relief and decided to just do the laundry.

While pulling out the laundry from the dryer I started to hear a flickering noise behind me. I turned around and there was a small trash-fire forming in the garbage can. I started to panic. I didn’t know what to do, but something in my brain kept saying, “Smother it! Smother the fire! Do it!”. I sprinted across the basement to the automotive section and started searching for something large enough to cover the fire. I finally found this pleasantly scented industrial-sized garbage bag. I ran back over and I threw it over the fire.

Now, I have never claimed at any point in my life to be a science guy except for the brief period of time where I was a neuroscience minor, BUT as you can imagine, the fire melted the trash bag. Not only that, the chemicals made the fire bigger, which made me start panicking even more, but this time I was panicking over a larger fire that was a very pretty pink color because of the newly added chemicals. Plus there was large amounts of smoke now pouring from this trash can.

I did not know what to do. My only experience with fire was the “Only you can prevent forest fires” lessons in school and burning duct-tape in my basement. I was racking my 7 year old brain, trying to figure out something to do, when something in me said something. Maybe it was a higher power, my spirit guides, or my common sense, but something in my head said, “Flip the garbage can!”. So like the little olympian I wasn’t, I flipped the garbage can. I stood there and I listened to the fire underneath the can slowly simmer out. I calmed down, but not for long.

I heard my mom from upstairs yell “WHY THE FUCK IS THERE SMOKE?” and she came running downstairs. Through my sobs, I was trying to explain to my mom what spontaneous combustion was, but, let me tell you, she was not having it. She sent me upstairs to my room while she inspected the carnage.

In my room growing up, there was a vent directly connected to the basement and in this moment I could hear my mom bitching up a storm downstairs while. I was pacing in my room and in between bouts of sobbing I couldn’t help but think “Wow, this is what the girls on ANTM
feel like when they are waiting in the green room waiting to find out if they are being sent home.”

My mom eventually called me downstairs. When I got to her, she was in full-power stance, broom in hand, and she let me have it.

“You know what was in that garbage can, Richard? AH! Don’t respond, because I’m going to tell you. Where do you put the lint from the dryer, Richard? Yeah, into that garbage can. You want to know what else was in that garbage can? OIL! Junior changed the oil on our cars the other day and there was only in that garbage can. THAT GARBAGE CAN WAS ESSENTIALLY A BOMB! And when I lifted that bomb up, ashes and flames started flying up which could start our house on fire. I still smell something burning, so that means our house is on fire. I-- I can’t even look at you. Go back upstairs.”

And I went back upstairs and that night I laid in bed. I was up for hours, listening to my mom fuss about downstairs. I finally fell asleep and I woke up the next morning. I looked out my window and I saw my mom’s car was still there, which meant she hadn’t gone to work that day because she always left around 4AM for her job. And because she missed work that day, I knew we would come up short on the bills that month.

Before walking out of my room, I laid in bed for a bit and all I could think was, “I made such a huge mistake.”

**Freddy VS Jason**

Friday Night Family Movie Night.

Growing up, my family did not have a ton of money, so an easy way to entertain everyone was to rent a movie and watch it as a family on Friday night. We would also order pizza and it was this whole thing.

This particular Friday night, my mom’s boyfriend had chosen the cinematic masterpiece that should have never been made: Freddy Vs Jason. We were sitting in the back room and we were on the menu of the DVD. I don’t know how many of you are accustomed to DVDs, but when you don’t leave the menu, it just continually loops, and the Freddy Vs Jason menu loop was just hot guys and Kelly Rowland screaming endlessly.

My brother was in the kitchen popping popcorn and my mom was in her room putting my newborn baby sister Haley to bed when we heard a bang come from the front of the house.

“Hey mom!”

“What?”

“There are some men in our house.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and they are pointing really big guns at me.”

I heard guns from the back living room and that immediately peaked my interest, so I got up and I looked around the corner. I saw my brother, and in our front living room I saw 6 man with massive guns pointed at my 9 year old brother. I was confused in this moment because my
mom had told me that police officers were just like my power rangers and they helped people. But I had never seen a power ranger point a gun at a little boy before.

My mom’s boyfriend shoved me back onto the couch. I watched as he went to walk through the dining room, but before he could get through the police officers tackled him. They started handcuffing him, reading his Miranda rights. In the blur of what was going on, I could hear them talking about drugs and a warrant to search the entire house.

My mom came walking out of her room and she hustled Anthony over to the couch with my sister and I. She was asking the police what was going on and before I knew it they were arresting her as well. Something about taking her in for questioning because she had known her boyfriend was dealing drugs. My mom refused to be taken anywhere until she called a family member to come grab me and my siblings.

My cousin lived a couple blocks away and came to retrieve us. When she got there, she instructed us to pack overnight bags. We did as we were told. Before we left, I turned to my cousin and asked if I could bring my some power rangers. She agreed, obviously she wasn’t going to tell me no considering my house was under a drug raid. I went over to the bin in my room where I kept my power rangers, but before I could shove some in my bag, a large man with circular glasses stepped over to me.

“Before he takes anything, the dog has got to sniff them.”
But these were my favorite toys. What could be wrong with my favorite toys?
“We just need to check them, buddy.”
And one by one, I held my toys up to this dog. If the dog did nothing, I could put the toy in my bag.

When I finally had chosen my favorite power rangers, my cousin led me out of my room, but as I was leaving I saw the man with the circular glasses take my bin of power rangers, flip it over, and let the dog sniff through them.

We went to my cousins, where we finished Friday Night Family Movie Night. When we woke up the next morning, she sat us down in the kitchen.

“So your mom is back home. When we go home, I just wanted to tell you guys it’s not going to look like your house. It’s going to be really messy. Our job is to clean while your mom goes and gets Junior, okay?”

And we went home. When we first walked in, we were greeted with an absolute disaster in our front living room. The TV was on the couch and all of our DVDs were out of their cases. My mom’s little knick knacks were all over the floor. The rest of the house was in a similar state of chaos. My mom rushed over to me and my siblings and gave us all the biggest hugs. After that, she gave us the task of putting DVDs back in their respective cases.

I overheard my mom and my cousin talking. Something about how getting Junior out of jail would cost $3,000. My cousin kept saying “Marsha, you don’t have the money.” and my mom kept talking about a loan she could take out.
Later that day, my mom went and retrieved her boyfriend. She turned on the country music station and we spent the entire day ignoring. We laughed. We ordered more pizza. And we cleaned the house as a family. Slowly but surely our house became what we had always known it as. And we did not spend a single moment addressing what had happened the previous night.

After my mom put us to bed that night, I laid in bed thinking about the events that had transpired. About how we had ignored. And I thought a lot about how police officers were nothing like the power rangers.

**Coming Out 1**

As you can imagine, Friday Night Family Movie nights became a thing of the past after my house got raided by the police. They lost their novelty. Actually, my mom needed to work overtime at her job to pay off her $3,000 loan that she had taken out with my Uncle to bail Junior out of jail. That meant on Friday nights she was in bed at 8PM so she could leave for work at 4PM.

That also meant me and my siblings were left to our own devices on Friday nights. On this particular Friday, my older brother and sister were staying over at friends’ houses, which meant I was riding solo that evening. I decided this night I would watch a movie by myself.

The one thing my mom will never sacrifice no matter how broke we were was her premium cable package. She has to have HBO, Cinemax, Stars, and Showtime. On this particular night, I had already scrolled through the 300s (children’s channels), 400s (HGTV, BRAVO, OXYGEN, LIFETIME), the 500s (Jersey Shore wasn’t on so I didn’t care) and I eventually hit the 700s (premium channels). HBO didn’t have anything. Showtime was showing some kids movie. I landed on Cinemax. When I landed on this channel, there was a title card for the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. I read the description: “Two people fight for love at all costs”.

That sounded fascinating. So I watched it. And then the infamous mountain scene came. The one after the bean dinner.

Let me say, I was in fact gay for Gyllenhaal. But, more importantly, this movie revealed something about who I was: I liked boys! It also gave me some rules I needed to live by:

1) You can only love another man if you’re on a mountain herding sheep together.
2) If someone were to find out you were gay, you’d be beaten to death with a tire iron. Like Jake Gyllenhaal.

These rules would eventually become known jokingly as the “Unofficial Gay Agenda”.

**Merry Christmas, I Need A Dollar**

And I abided by these rules for a couple years. I was constantly scared someone in my family would find out my secret, so I tried to “masc” it up a bit. It wasn’t until 8th grade I finally was brave enough to do theater, something my brother told me “only gay guys do theater”. I was
cast as the Cheshire Cat in my school’s production of Alice in Wonderland JR. and I found out I got the part a couple days after my 14th birthday. I went dreaming about wow-ing my classmates with how good of an actor I was.

The next day I was in the kitchen making myself breakfast when my brother cornered me. “We gotta talk about something.”

And I was scared horrified he was going to ask me if I was gay. But instead he turned to me and I could see he was upset about something.

He told me, “Last night the police raided our house again. They arrested Junior. He’s not coming back. Mom is at the police station figuring everything out.”

And just like that, my excitement for playing the Cheshire Cat washed away.

The second raid isn’t really important. But Junior going to jail meant we lost half of our family’s income. We were already tight on cash before, so this was a huge hit financially for my family.

My mom sorta spiraled after her boyfriend went to prison. I realize now she became severely depressed and she stopped going to work for a bit. Eventually she lost her job, meaning we lost all sources of income for our family. My mom applied for unemployment, but that isn’t nearly enough for a woman with 5 kids, bills, and a mortgage. So money became tight fast.

I find it hard to explain to people how broke my family was growing up. I can boil down my working class upbringing to one simple word: spaghetti. Yes, I know everyone had spaghetti growing up, but in my household we had spaghetti up to five times a week. Spaghetti is a simple meal where you can mass produce it. The spaghetti in my house was whatever sale noodle my mom could find and the large $1 jar of Prego pasta sauce. No meat. On Fridays we would have spaghetti for dinner and then the leftovers would be lunch the next day. If we were lucky we would have off-brand macaroni and cheese with ground beef in it. I now hate spaghetti.

About a year after the second house raid, money started getting really tight. I was a choir kid from K-12. I’m sorry to reveal my checkered past. A big part of choir in my district was the All District Choral Festival, where every choir in the district came together to sing for each other. Part of this day is a giant pizza party with games, pizza, and pop. Yes, we call it pop in the Midwest, get used to it. In order to go to this pizza party, you had to give your choir director a $1.

Now, this wasn’t my first rodeo. In fact, this was my 9th year attending the pizza party, so it was my 9th rodeo. I walked into my mom’s room Monday morning the week of the festival. She was home because she was in between temp jobs at the time. I shook her awake and I asked my question.

“Hey mom. Can I have a dollar for the pizza party Friday?”

“I don’t have a dollar in cash right now, but I’m going shopping later this week and I’ll get cash then,” she replied before going back to sleep.

I asked my mom each of the following mornings for the dollar and each day she got more frustrated and curt in her responses, but she never felt frustrated with me. Finally, Friday
morning came and I walked into my mom’s room in my wrinkled navy blue choir polo that I probably hadn’t washed.

“Hey mom. The choir festival is today. Can I have that dollar for the pizza party?

My mom rolled out of bed, turned on the light, and grabbed her purse. She started rifling through it. She pulled out her change purse, which only had a couple coins in it; she pulled out her wallet, which had no cash. She continued to pull things out of her purse, hunting for a dollar. She finally pulled out another coin purse, and she opened it and there was a single, wrinkled dollar. She smoothed it out on the bed. She handed it to me, but she wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

I thanked her, and as I was leaving I heard her packing up her purse. I also heard her mutter something to herself.

“Wow, you can’t even have a dollar in your purse, huh?”

I didn’t think much about that statement then because I was too excited about pizza, but that moment has stayed with me. In my adult life, I have so many dollars. I keep a couple spare dollars in my wallet. I could Venmo anyone in this audience a dollar. I keep at least $10 worth of change in my desk back in my dorm. But, in this moment, my mom only had one dollar and she chose to give it to me so I could enjoy myself.

Our financial situation did not get much better after that. Christmas approached and growing up, I had never really liked Christmas. It was loud and everyone was too happy. Also, while I got a good deal of presents, they were never as extravagant as my peers’ would get. Christmas was just another time where I was constantly reminded I was a weird poor kid.

A week leading up to Christmas my mom sat me and my two older siblings down in her room. She closed the door and she turned to us.

“I don’t know how to say this, but you three know money is super tight right now. I don’t have a ton of cash for presents this year. I hate to ask, but would you three mind if I used all the Christmas fund to get Haley and John more presents this year?”

Obviously we all agreed. I thought in the moment “Christmas isn’t for me anymore. It’s for my little brother and sister”. I had had my Christmases growing up, and the magic had worn off.

The week leading up to Christmas, my older siblings and I took turns going shopping with my mom to buy presents for Haley and John. On Christmas Eve, my mom put my younger siblings to bed and she called Anthony, Destiny, and I into her room. She turned on How the Grinch Stole Christmas and we spent the night laughing, eating candy, and wrapping presents for Haley and John. At midnight, we snuck out to our tree and we strategically organized the presents under the tree so there would appear to be more gifts than there actually was.

The next morning, Haley came running into my room screaming, “Santa actually came! He actually came!” and she forced me out of bed.

That Christmas I sat at the foot of my couch and did not open a single gift, but instead watched as my two siblings opened their gifts. Cheesy, I would venture to say my heart grew
three sizes that year just like the Grinch himself. I sat at the foot of my couch and I thought, “So this is what Christmas is all about.”
And that’s how I fell in love with Christmas.

Coming Out 2

Money remained tight, but there was one thing that my mom would never give up: her premium cable packages.
I didn’t go out with my friends a lot in high school because we couldn’t afford it, so a lot of my Friday nights were spent watching movies with my mom in her room. One night we were flipping through the premium channels and we landed on the one and only *Brokeback Mountain*. I was well acquainted with *Brokeback Mountain* and my mom did not change the channel.
We watched the first half of the film, and it was leading up to the infamous mountain scene. Jack had just called Ennis into the tent. It was just about to happen when…
My mom changed the channel! My closeted gay self whipped around so fast and I said “WHY DID YOU CHANGE IT?”. How my mom didn’t realize I was gay in that moment I will never know.
“Well, I don’t need to see that.”
“See what? Two men have sex? Why not?”
“Well, I love gay people, but I grew up Catholic. I don’t agree with what they are about to do,” my mom explained.
I was roughly 15 at the time, so I knew when people brought religion into something that meant they weren’t budging. But this also meant I had another rule to add to the Unofficial Gay Agenda. Let’s recap:

1) You can only ever love another man if you’re up on a mountain herding sheep.
2) If anyone ever finds out you love another man, they will kill you with a tire iron.
3) If your mom finds out you’re gay, she won’t love you anymore.

I saved this new rule to my rulebook. No one could find out I was gay.

Chandelier

With this new rule, I became hyper-aware of the things I did. In an effort to avoid my mom and family discovering I wasn’t gay, I avoided a couple things I had a secret deep infatuation with. America’s Next Top Model. Magic Mike. And, most specifically, color guard. I have never been much of a dancer, but I had always been so fascinated by the girls and the openly gay guys who could so openly express their desire to twirl flags and dance.

While I my heart said color guard, my brain said Marching Band, which is what I did. But, unfortunately I’m not a gymnast, so I can’t play an instrument and walk at the same time. I also couldn’t play the instrument. I played the cymbals and they were always wrong.
One night after marching band rehearsal, my friend Sabrina came walking up to me. Sabrina was one of the color guard captains. She was an expert on the flag and ran the clinics that our school hosted.

“Hey! Tomorrow is parent teacher conferences. Did you want to come spend the night? My mom said we could order pizza and watch movies.”

Immediately when Sabrina said this, my brain kicked into high gear and I knew I was spending the night at Sabrina’s house. If I went to her house, I could play with her color guard flags. I could make her teach me how to use them.

Sabrina’s mom picked us up from rehearsal and we went immediately to Sabrina’s house. Sabrina was grabbing her flag bag from the trunk when I asked her if she could show me a thing or two.

“Of course!”

So Sabrina took me to her backyard. It was dark and windy because it was late October. It was also pretty dark. The only source of light we had were the sparse lighting from the street and Sabrina’s back porchlight.

Sabrina laid out contents of her flag bag. First we had the aluminum weighted flag with the stunning metallic purple fabric. Next to that was an ugly PVC pipe flag covered in electrically tape. Boring. After that was a wooden rifle, then a weighted fencing sword, and finally a bizarre looking chunk of plastic that looked like it belonged in an anime.

Immediately, I tried to grab the beautiful metal weighted flag, but Sabrina promptly stopped me.

“You’re not ready for that one yet,” as she pointed at the raggedy PVC pipe flag.

Sabrina walked over to her speaker, plugged in her phone, and she started playing some royalty free dance competition music. She taught me how to twirl the flag, but that’s not what I wanted to do. I wanted to toss the flag like the rest of the gay boys.

Finally, she told me I was ready to learn a simple toss. She showed me a move where she twisted the flag above her head and tossed it, resulting in a neat helicopter effect. However, the wind kept taking the flag weighted metal flag away.

Sabrina’s mom called her in to order the pizzas, and as soon as Sabrina was in her house I saw my chance. I swiftly ran to the speaker, unplugged her phone, and plugged in my phone. If I was going to have my big gay flag moment I was going to do it with the song of my choosing. I went to Youtube and I found the song of our generation.

You’d all be lying if you said that you haven’t had a Chandelier by Sia moment. You would be lying.

I walked over to where Sabrina left the immaculate weighted metal flag. I picked it up and I felt like that moment in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone where the wand chose Harry. It felt right.

I started twirling the flag. It got to the iconic “1… 2… 3…”. On the big note at the top of the chorus, I would toss the flag.
But when I tossed it on the big note, the wind swept it all the way behind me. I scampered to pick it up and I tried again. Again, the wind swept the flag away.

Now, I may have gotten a 1 on the AP Physics B exam, but I knew enough to know how forces work. If the wind was taking my flag away, I simply had to throw the flag forward to compensate for the force of the wind. Science gay. So I restarted the song. I started twirling. And at the big note at the top of the chorus, I toss the flag forward toward Sabrina’s house. When I did this, I look directly into the light, so I was unable to see the flag anymore.

Next thing I know, the flag hits me square in the mouth. I feel my teeth sheet. I lean forward and I spit out my teeth. I lean down to look for my shattered teeth. I use my tongue to inspect the damage and I feel at least 4 teeth entirely destroyed. Do you know those mints that are just compressed sugar? They crumble in your mouth after a bit? That’s how I would describe my teeth crumbling in my mouth.

I obviously went running inside to check out what I had done. As I was running inside, all I could hear was Sia singing the phrase “Holding on for dear life” and honestly, same, Sia. When I walked passed Sabrina and her mom I heard them arguing about whether or not pineapple belongs on pizza and it does so I skirted into the bathroom. I braced myself with the sink and I leaned over and opened my mouth.

My mouth looked like a fucking zipper. I stare at myself and I notice 4 teeth are almost half gone and one of them is dangling by a nerve. She was, in fact, hanging on for dear life. I gave myself a moment to shed a tear before walking out into Sabrina’s kitchen. I told Sabrina I had an issue.

“What’s up?”
And I tried to say “I fucked up for real.” but in order to make the “F” sound, you have to hold air behind your teeth, which is something I couldn’t do.

“Why do you sound like that?”
I took my hand off my mouth and I showed them what I had done. Sabrina and her mom’s mouth dropped.

After this, Sabrina’s mom went to CVS while I texted my mom. I told her I needed a dentist appointment for the next day. I told her a filling had fallen out. She told me she would get me one. Sabrina’s mom came back from CVS with one of those filling replacement kits. The ones you use when a filling falls out until you can get to a dentist. Sabrina molded me some new teeth, which just felt like clay in my mouth, but we still had the problem of the dangling tooth. I took some of the filling mixture and I balled it up and I placed it between the dangling part of the tooth and the base of the tooth that was still intact and I pressed until it had dried. Yes, it hurt a lot.

That night, we still ordered pizza, which I couldn’t eat, and watched movies. I was so mortified that I had done this to myself.

We had a rehearsal for the school play the next day. And you want to know what I had to listen to for a couple hours? Freak Flag Fly from Shrek: The Musical.
I went to the dentist that afternoon. I have always hated my dentist. She was a mean, vicious woman who I could not stand. She didn’t like me either. I sat in her dentist chair, she reclined me back, and she turned on her little fluorescent light. I opened my mouth, she stared at it for moment before turning her light off and bringing me back up. She took my hands and said.

“Honey, you fucked up.”

She then proceeded to perform two emergency root canals. She also ripped out my tooth that was dangling by a nerve. At the end of the process, she came over with a bill.

I panicked and I said, “Doesn’t my state insurance cover that?” because that's the one benefit I’ve always had is that the state pays my medical bills.

“The state covers the necessary procedures, like the root canals and that kind of stuff. They will not, however, cover the cost of cosmetic procedures, which is what you’ll need to fix your smile line.” She handed me my bill and walked away.

This bill said $5,000 fucking dollars to make my mouth look normal. In the spirit of full disclosure, I did not have $5,000 to fix this mess. My dentist sent me home without a tooth that day because she had to wait until the following week to make me a new one.

When I got home, my mom was in the back living room. She was watching General Hospital when I sat down on the couch near her.

“How was the dentist?”

“Good.”

“Did they fix the filling?”

“Yeah, it’s fine now,” and as soon as I said it was “FINE” I knew I fucked up. I still couldn’t say the “F” sound, so I sounded dumb.

“Why did you sound like that?”

I didn’t answer.

“Richard, show me your mouth. Right now.”

I turned and opened my mouth, and my mom’s jaw dropped. She stared at me for moment before I saw anger fill her eyes.

“You ruined what I made.” Leave it to my mom to make this about herself. I handed her to $5,000 bill and she handed it immediately back.

“Absolutely not. Nope. Your mistake, you fix it. You’re a big boy now. You fucked up. I’m not dealing with that.” After that, she turned back to the TV and I could tell she was pissed beyond belief.

And she was right. It was my mistake, so I should fix it.

I still haven’t gotten the cosmetic work done, so if anyone has $5,000 to spare, my Venmo is in the program.

Coming Out 3

After knocking out my teeth, I had to start picking up more shifts at work to pay for my dental bills. This meant I was at work later than I had been before.
Typically, my mom would pick me up from work on Friday nights. However, she worked two jobs at the time. She would work her normal 4AM - 3PM job during the week and then on Friday and Saturday nights she would work at the park district from midnight to 5AM. Because of this, she would sometimes forget to pick me up.

On this particular night, that’s exactly what happened. I called some friends to see if they could make the 20 minute trek to the indoor kids waterpark resort I worked at. Finally, my family friend Savannah agreed to come and get me. Savannah is the type of person who took a year off between high school and college to “save up money for school” but just never ended up going back. She frequents our town’s busiest bar on Friday and Saturday nights. She’s worked at Chili’s for 3 years. I’m sure that indicates what type of person she is.

One of the stipulations for Savannah doing you a favor is that would have to hang out with her after. So she came and picked me up and we drove around for a bit. She was doing the typical “emotional unloading” about a guy she had been talking to at the time by the name of Adam. Adam was great but sometimes he was a little mean and he wasn’t the best in bed. Adam was also afraid of commitment. I did my typical “You deserve better” speech to try and appear supportive. Eventually, she seemed appeased before she turned to me.

“So how’s your love life?”

At this point I had stopped denying the rumors that I was gay. People had just stopped asking. So I gave Savannah the typical canned “Oh, I’m just too busy with school, theater, and work to have a relationship and no one interests me at school,” which is just gay language for “I’m in the closet”. Normally this satisfied people.

We sat in silence for a moment. Dave Matthew’s “Crash Into Me” was playing, and I laughed at this because the only people who like Dave Matthews are people who are trapped in their hometown or people born before 1990. I was looking at the front window and I noticed it had started to snow. Snow is beautiful when it’s passing through light. Eventually Savannah leaned forward, turned down the Dave Matthews (thank god).

“Richard, are you gay?”

And immediately I shrunk back into my shell like I was 9 years old again. The rules came flashing through my head. Mountain herding sheep. Tire iron. Mom not loving you anymore. And I got scared.

We were driving down a long, dark road. To my right were cornfields, but to the left were trees and tucked away in these trees were homes. I could see the lights in these houses and I thought “What I would do to be in one of those houses instead of in this car right now.”

It took my a little too long to realize that because I had sat in silence for so long, I had outed myself. There was no coming back from it. I immediately turned to Savannah.

“Please don’t tell mom I don’t want--”

“Richard, calm down. Everyone knows already. No one cares”
She said this and let it sit in the air for a moment. We sat in silence, processing the information. Out of nowhere, Savannah turned on her turning signal and we were pulling over onto the right lane shoulder.

“Don’t pull over. Just keep driving.” I begged. I had already come out with a Dave Matthews song underscoring the event, I didn’t need to make myself a bigger gay teen cliche.

But after a couple minutes, we started talking. I shared stories about all the times I had feelings for a straight boy (will I ever learn?), my gay guilty pleasures, and celebrities I found attractive. Savannah told me she had always wanted a gay best friend. Problematic, but I did not correct her.

I started to share. And it felt fantastic. I had tasted this spark of freedom. I wanted everyone to know I was gay so I could live a life outside of my working class closet.

Water Heater

About halfway through my Senior Year of high school, things were really looking up for my family. My older brother and sister had moved out so in my immediate household was just my mom, my two younger siblings, and me. I had a serving job, so I was relatively financially separate from my mom and when I was able to I helped her out with the bills. My mom also had a full-time, well-paying job, so we were able to start playing catch-up on the bill that had piled up. While we were doing better, money was still tight. If anything went wrong, things could fall apart.

One morning, disaster struck. My mom was taking a shower when I heard her yell “God damn it.” She came storming passed the kitchen in a towel and went downstairs. I heard her swearing up a storm before she came up and looked at me.

“The water heater broke.”

Now, my mom had gotten incredible at just fixing things. I just expected her to figure this out. I came home that night and I asked my mom if she had fixed the water heater.

“I’m not a mechanic, Richard. I can’t just fix the water heater.” I told her I needed to shower.

My mom got out of bed and went to the kitchen. She stood there, thinking and looking around like she was Sherlock Holmes inspecting for some clues. After a moment, her eyes fell on the cabinet where we keep our large pots and pans. I saw the light bulb go off in her head. She called my younger siblings to the kitchen and she pulled out our large green pot we use for potato soup on St. Patrick’s Day and a large blueish grey pot we have. Me and my siblings lined up like soldiers at attention.

“Until we get the water heater fixed, we are going to be boiling our water for baths!” And then she taught my younger brother and sister how to boil water and carry it to the bathtub. She emphasized lifting with your legs, not with your back. She also emphasized using pot holders as to not burn ourselves. Once she got both pots of boiling water to the bathtub, she filled the bathtub with cold water, creating a lukewarm mix she expected us to bath in.
Once she finished her demonstration and sent my brother and sister off to bed, I turned to her and I told her this was this most working class, broke thing I had ever seen. She laughed.

“Oh, Richard. We aren’t even working class. We’re just working.”

We bathed like that for about a month. At first it was sorta exciting. It felt like science and I was living my best science gay life. Unfortunately, the novelty wore off rapidly and I missed the simplicity of just turning on the shower and cleaning myself.

I obviously did not tell anyone about the water heater situation at school. Embarrassing! But eventually I told my friend Maleigha.

I was sitting in AP Spanish one day, not paying attention because I knew I wasn’t going to pass the AP test anyway, when I received a text on my phone. It was from Maleigha’s mom. It read:

“Hey! Maleigha told me about the water heater situation at your house. So weird! If you’d like, we could buy you a new water heater. We love helping people out!”

I read this text, and immediately I heard my mom’s voice in my head. “We are not charity cases! We don’t ask for help! We do the damn thing ourselves!” My mom had taught me pride and to get through issues by myself. I started typing a text respectfully declining the water heater.

When I was about to hit send, I heard a different voice in my head. My voice. The voice of Richard who really enjoyed a hot shower. “Take the water heater. Boiling water for a shower is super weird! It’s okay to ask for help!”. I had the devil and the angel on my shoulder, but eventually my mom’s voice won out and I sent the text declining the offer for help and went back to ignoring my spanish teacher.

Not even a minute later, Maleigha’s mom sent me another text. This one read:

“Richard! Please let us help. We have a budget to help poor people! We want to help you! We even have a water heater guy who knows how to install it for you!”

This had to be a sign from a higher power. Something in the universe wanted me to take this water heater. I was being given a second chance to accept the help. So I typed out a message agreeing but only on a three stipulations: my mom can never find out where it came from, my mom is not there when it’s installed, and I pay her back every cent for the water heater.

Maleigha’s mom agreed and we started planning a day for the water heater to be delivered and installed. The guy would come around 2:00PM, and I would be there to meet him. He would install the water heater before my mom got home at 3:30PM. She would never know who sent it and I would pretend it was there when I got home.

Of course, nothing can ever work out properly. The water heater guy, Kenny, had the world’s worst time management skills and he came at 3:20PM. He was also so strange. My mom is a punctual woman and showed up at 3:30PM to a creepy man lugging a giant water heater into our house. She demanded to know where it had come from and Kenny creepily kept telling her
“It’s a gift from Santa!” even though it was February. He brought the appliance downstairs and he set it up, the entire time my mom stress watching him from 5 feet away.

Kenny finished up and left. My mom was staring at the water heater and the receipt that came attached to it. She turned to me and said “Well, we can’t keep this. I’m not a charity case.” and I had to turn to her and calm her down.

“Take the help, mom. Someone just wanted to do something nice. No shame in someone helping you.”

And she tried to interrupt me, but I told her to go upstairs and take a shower and think about it for a bit.

My mom took an hour long shower that day. She sang. I could tell she was enjoying herself. Once she was done, she came out in her towel, turned to me in the living and said, “We’re keeping the water heater.” Then she went to her room for the rest of the night.

I myself took a shower that night. I was happy. Proud of myself for accepting the help. I was also thinking about how expensive water heaters were, and I was frustrated Maleigha’s mom had bought the most expensive one. It was like when you go out to eat with your friend’s family and you buy the most expensive thing knowing your friend’s parents were going to pay for it. I did end up paying for the water heater over the next couple months. I was happy with myself I had went against my mother’s voice and the pride she had ingrained in my and had asked for help.

**Coming Out 4**

I graduated high school, much to all of your shock. And in the last couple months I slowly came out to all my best friends. I told my best friend Erin at work one day while rolling silverware. I told my friend Maddison while sitting in her driving at midnight one night (ugh, gay teen cliche!). I even started getting a little ballsy and I made a game out of it. One night me and two friends were playing this game called “Confessions” where the only point of the game is to see who had the biggest confession. When I came out during this game, I won. I was a winner.

I got into Occidental. Go Tigers. And one of the prerequisites for attending Oxy is that you’re either a 4 on the kinsey scale or you’re deeply questioning. You have to be at least 20% gay to come to school here. So when I got to Oxy, I didn’t hide the fact I was gay. I was a flaming homosexual and my life as such could start. Eventually, everyone in my life knew.

Everyone except one crucial person: my mom. While the first two rules of the Unofficial Gay Agenda were no longer pertinent, rule #3 (Your mom won’t love you anymore) still scared me to my core.

Thanksgiving Break my Sophomore year I was sitting in my room scrolling through Twitter, my social media of choice. Follow me @RichardHVia. I came across this thread called “The Best Ways to Come Out To Your Family This Holiday Season”. After reading the thread, I decided this was the year and I would come out to my mom during my favorite season: Christmas.
Something my mom and I do every year is we bake together during Christmas. She does the difficult stuff like pies and has a single beer and I handle the pre-made dough cookies and have a whole bottle of wine. My mom likes to make me think that I’m doing something important though, so she lets me put the cookie dough into our Kitchen Aid and mix it around.

I was standing at the kitchen aid when my mom went to the oven to check on her pies. I was already well into my whole bottle of wine when she opened the dryer and turned to me and asked, “Richard, do you think these pies are ready to come out yet?”

I had waited for this moment. I turned away from my Walmart Brand premade chocolate chip cookie dough, bottle of Barefoot Chardonnay in hand, and I said, “No, but I am.”

My mom turned to me, looked at me for a second, laughed, and then said “Maybe they do need a couple more minutes.”

I whipped back to my Kitchen Aid so fast. My mom had thought I was joking. I finished my bottle of wine in shame and went back to the minimal, mindless task of balling up the premade cookie dough.

I had accepted defeat by the time I got to back to Oxy that spring. I ended up being cast in A Little Night Music. Go controversy! And I was talking with my mom on the phone while walking up the hill to Keck one night. The conversation eventually ended up at my love life.

“Any romantic prospects, Richard?” and I had to explain to my mom I was still painfully single. After saying that, she attempted to comfort me by saying “Don’t worry. They’re just intimidated by you!”

And I stopped. There was a word in there that she had never used in this context before. She used to only ever refer to my romantic prospects using “she/her/hers”. She had used the word “they” which was very out of character for my mom. So I replied.

“Yeah, maybe they are.”

And from that moment on, my mom referred to my romantic interests in a gender neutral way. I know it’s because she knows I’m not straight. I’ll let her take her baby steps. She had made a conscious effort and I was very proud of her.

That night I sang some Stephen Sondheim and I started to think maybe the third rule wasn’t all that true.

Chakra Psychic Vivian

About a month before I left Illinois for my Junior year of college I was sitting in a McDonald’s with my friend Maddison. She was telling me about this psychic she had gone to see a couple days before. This psychic had told Maddison all about her spirit guides (she had 9), how many times she would fall in love (3 heartbreaks with the 4 being the her true love), and that she was going to be relatively successful in her career choice.

I’ve always liked psychics, but after Maddison told me the price, I immediately pushed the idea out of my mind. She kept urging me to pay her a visit but I wasn’t in the mood to go and have someone else tell me my entire life has been a mess thus far and that my future is subpar.
Finally, Maddison leaned over the table and said, “Richard, you have been telling me all summer that you feel stuck and that you don’t know what you want to do post-grad. Maybe she can help you!” Which did the trick. I don’t think I needed much convincing otherwise.

Maddison sent me a website link and I opened it to an ancient webpage. I’m talking clipart and weird background music. It looked straight out of 2002. But across the top of the page read a banner, which said, “Chakra Psychic Vivian” and in a smaller text underneath, “She’ll tell you how she sees it!” And when I read those words I knew I was going to give her a call. I love a woman with authority. I scrolled down and I gave the number listed a call. I don’t really know what I was expecting, really, but I do know I wasn’t expecting a very deep voice to pick up the phone.

“Hello?” the deep voice said.

“Uh, hi! I’m wondering if I could speak with Chakra Psychic Vivian?” timid Richard said.

“Oh, a believer, huh? Sure, hold for a moment,” the deep voice said while vaguely chuckling. However, the deep voice did not put me on hold. Instead, he set the phone down and I could hear shuffling and muffled conversation. After a moment, someone finally answered.

“Hello this is Chakra Psychic Vivian. I tell you how I see it.”

“Hi! I was wondering if I could come in for a reading?”

“Of course, when?” Chakra Psychic Vivian said in her airy, whispy voice.

“Ummm, I was hoping tonight?”

“Tonight? Friday around 8PM?”

“Of course, if you can’t I can totally come in another time. I’m sorry for bothering you--”

“NO! We were destined to meet tonight. Come here at 8:30PM. I will do a reading!” And with that she hung up. I turned to Maddison, who had a shit-eating grin and leapt from the table with her car keys.

Chakra Psychic Vivian’s house was two towns over, which is about a 20 minute drive. We took Maddison’s car and on the way we stopped at the PNC bank because Chakra Psychic Vivian only took cash. It was an under the table job.

I was standing in the blue and orange glow of the PNC bank ATM when I had this overwhelming surge of regret. I turned to Maddison, who was in the driver’s seat of her car, with $100 in hand.

“Maddison, I feel like the world’s biggest idiot. I should not be doing this. It’s a giant waste of money. I’m so stupid.”

Maddison turned to me, full passion in her eyes, “Richard, you’re not stupid. You’re just misguided. You should go! Also, you already made the appointment with her so you have to go.” And with that she started her car and I climbed back in.

We started our journey two towns over. We listened to music and jammed for most of the drive. We were driving down this dark road when the GPS pinged and said take a left and we went down this short gravelly road, our only guide was Maddison’s headlights. We saw a sign a
little bit into the road, which read “PSYCHIC CHAKRA VIVIAN AHEAD”. We eventually reached this home and Maddison parked and turned off her car, reclining her seat back to relax. I got out of the car. I attempted to turn around, but she locked her car door when I did.

I walked up to Chakra Psychic Vivian’s door and I noticed she had 5 chakra balls down the center of it as a doctor. I trusted Chakra Psychic Vivian even more because I respect a woman with branding. I knocked.

When the door finally opened, I was face to face with this short woman with slick hair and flowy garments. Before I could speak, she held up a finger, stopping me.

“Do not say anything. You must follow me,” she said in her wispy, airy voice. She turned and walked away, and I followed.

We rounded the corner and we were in her kitchen and I was faced with a sea of people, all drinking and dancing to music. Chakra Psychic Vivian was having some sort of family house party and as we are walking through the kitchen I’m being offered Coronas and tequila shots, all of which I cannot accept because Chakra Psychic Vivian had effectively silenced me. Eventually we reached this back room and CPV ushered me in. She closed one of those horrendous paper fold doors that have no way of closing gracefully. She pointed to a chair and I sat down.

I started surveying the room almost immediately. I look over to this desk she had, noticing some tarot cards. All over the walls were chakra orbs and different ways chakra orbs align. There was a Buddha, which felt out of place. Finally, I looked over to the corner and saw a water heater. I did in fact feel triggered. Chakra Psychic Vivian sat down opposite me and she started to speak.

“My name is Chakra Psychic Vivian. Thank you for coming tonight. I have three packages. My first package is my most simple package, where I read your palm and you get one basic question. My second package I read your tarot and your palm, and that package includes 3 basic questions. My third package, my premium package, I talk directly to your spirit guides. This package includes unlimited questions and I give you my email for any future questions. Hold up the fingers for which package you would like to receive.”

I timidly held up 3 fingers.

“Perfect. I’m going to look down and when I say go, you will say your full name and your date of birth.”

She put her head down and we sat in silence for a moment. Finally, she said go.

“My name is Richard Henry Via. I was born on October 7, 1996.”

And just like that Chakra Psychic Vivian’s head snapped up, but she was never looking into my eyes. Rather, Chakra Psychic Vivian would look over my shoulder. It was a very uncomfortable position to be in.

Immediately, CPV said I had two spirit guides, which I quickly named salt and pepper. She told me all of this very basic information, saying I had a rough childhood, that I had to grow up too fast, but how I still did the best with what I had. She talked a lot about my relationship
with my mom and how there was unconditional support and love in our bond. CPV could also tell I loved my family dearly.

Chakra Psychic Vivian then went on to describe my present. She talked a lot about needing to make choices and decide what I wanted to do. CPV said this would be challenging, but an opportunity would present itself that I couldn’t say no to, that I needed to remain open to suggestions and options. She also said I needed to focus on having more fun, rather than worrying about things all the time.

Chakra Psychic Vivian started talking about my future. She explained I would be very financially stable in the future (thank god! Am I right?) and that my career would involve me travelling a lot across the country and the world. She said I would really enjoy my career and that I would discover exactly what it was soon enough. Chakra Psychic Vivian also told me I would only fall in love once and I would meet the guy within the next two years of my life (time is ticking, Vivi!). She explained she wouldn’t give me any indicators of who that was because it could potentially ruin me finding that person. She also told me I would lead a very long healthy life.

After this, Chakra Psychic Vivian went quiet for a moment. Finally, her gaze went from over my shoulder and, for the first time since the top of the reading, to my eyes.

“I’m sorry, but your spirit guides have put up a wall. It’s like I’m getting TV static,” she said. I was absolutely mortified. My instinct was to quickly attempt to apologize.

“Uh, I’m so sorry they are being so rude I will--”

“No, it’s fine. They are telling me something now,” Chakra Psychic Vivian said. She stared intently over my shoulder before looking into my eyes again. She reached over and grabbed my hands.

“I don’t really know how to say this sweetie, but you spirit guides want you to know one thing.”

I could tell Chakra Psychic Vivian was a little tense in this moment. She leaned over and tenderly grabbed my hands.

“Sweetie, your spirit guides wants you to know you are extra-susceptible to demons.”

Now, as you can imagine I had never been told this snippet of information before and I didn’t necessarily know how to react, so I just sat there and stared at her before blurring out, “Oh!” It was around this time I was starting to feel high from the lavender vanilla incense in the room and I could vaguely hear “Despacito” playing at her family party on the other side of the paper screen door. Everything in the room felt very heavy.

“Let me explain, sweetie. Your spirit guides are telling me your soul is split into two different parts. There is a young man who’s so ambitious. This part of your soul is ready to tackle the world and do whatever he can set his mind to. But there is another part of your soul. This part of your soul is an old man who’s bitter that he had to grow up too soon. He feels the weight of the world on his shoulders. He’s cranky and jaded. He’s holding you back. This old man fragment of your soul is what makes you extra-susceptible to demons.”
I thanked her because I didn’t know what else to do when someone told you that you were extra-susceptible to demons. Chakra Psychic Vivian and I sat in silence for a moment. I knew the reading was over but I didn’t really know how to end it.

“I only take cash…” Chakra Psychic Vivian said.

I handed her her money. I got up to go. I was a little irritated because I felt like the reading was a scam because nothing felt individual and it all felt generic. I was crossing pass Chakra Psychic Vivian when she stopped me. She had her had on my waist. She was looking forward and I looked down at her. She didn’t make eye contact again.

“The pink Barbie Ouija board you keep in the backseat of your car. You can’t keep that there anymore. Next time you use it a demon will enter your body.”

I politely thanked her. I walked out to Maddison’s car. I told Maddison all about my reading. And when I told Maddison about the ouija board comment, we both sat in awe for a moment.

We had drove Maddison’s car over to Chakra Psychic Vivian’s. Chakra Psychic Vivian’s was two towns over. My car was in my driveway. I had never met this woman before in my entire life.

That night, as Maddison and I drove all the way home, I couldn’t stop thinking about how if she knew about the Ouija board, that meant everything else was probably true as well. I started to think about the two parts of my soul, specifically the old man. How could I stop him from holding me back?

**Coming Out 5**

Last year I was on duty, which meant I could not leave my room. I decided to watch a movie. I was browsing Hulu when I clicked the “Recommended For You” tab. The very first movie Hulu recommended was my tried and true from my childhood: *Brokeback Mountain*. I decided to watch the movie because I hadn’t in years. It would be a delightful trip down memory lane!

I didn’t even make it to the infamous mountain scene before I had to close my laptop. That movie is boring as shit, dude. And while I still think Jake Gyllenhaal is hot (have you seen him?), I don’t need to watch a depressing movie to see him. Also, the fact they wore cowboy hats felt offensive to me. And both of the lead actors were straight. And I just felt so bad for Anne Hathaway the whole time.

I laid in bed thinking “Wow. That’s the type of media I consumed as a kid? That was my representation of queerness?” which got me thinking about the three rules I had lived by for a portion of my life:

1) You can only ever love another man if you’re up on a mountain herding sheep.

(This couldn’t be true because believe me I’ve personally never had relations with a man on a mountain.)
2) If anyone ever finds out you love another man, they will kill you with a tire iron.
   (To be quite honest, I don’t think I’ve ever even seen a tire iron. Also, so many so many people know I’m gay.)
3) If your mom finds out you’re gay, she won’t love you anymore.
   (I’m positive my mom knows I’m not straight. I don’t need to come out to her.
   And at the end of every phone call she tells me she loves me.)

I laid in bed and I looked at my ceiling. I kept thinking about how I never had a proper, authentic representation of my narrative in the media growing up. How I never saw someone like me (gay, working class, constantly making mistakes) before. How I wish I had.

Conclusion

I moved over to my desk. I pulled out my journal because Oxy has taught me journal is imperative for our holistic development to journal. I opened to a fresh page and I wrote the words “My Whole Ass Memoir?” across the top. And I started listing stories I wanted to share with people, stories I felt were worth listening to. Stories I wished I had heard growing up. Some of which you heard tonight.

Throughout my life, I have viewed being gay, being working class, and constantly making mistakes as such a detriment to who I am. I had always thought if I weren’t those three things and everything else was the same, I would be golden. But truth be told, I wouldn’t be me today if it weren’t for those attributes. Those three factors weren’t hindrances, but rather my strongest assets. I am me because my mom made mistakes. I am me because I am working class. Because I’m gay. And because I, too, make really stupid mistakes. I am a product of my history, as are all of you.

While working on this project, I feel like I have finally released the cranky old man part of my soul Chakra Psychic Vivian told me was holding me back. The part of me that had to grow up a lot faster than my peers. The part of me that felt I could never be enough. I am actively attempting embrace the vibrant, ambitious 22 year old.

Sharing stories is hard. Vulnerability is hard. But I encourage each and every one of you to share your stories. Everyone has something pertinent to contribute to the world. If you have the ability to, tell your stories. There is enough room in the universe for you to take up a little more space.

Thank you.
PROGRAM (APPENDIX B)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Richard Via
Richard Via
Richard’s Mom
Richard’s various siblings
Kenny the Water Heater Guy
Richard Via
Sabi. Flag Expert
Richard Via
Chakra Psychic Vivian
Richard Via

Time: 1996 - Today
Place: Literally so many places...

There will be no intermission so saddle up.

This production will mildly amuse the viewer.

This play was developed for Richard Via’s Senior Comprehensive Project.

It’s me, Richard. I know you’re probably thinking “Wow! Richard’s putting on show! So cool! I love Richard. He’s so great, handsome, and funny. I bet he’s going to…” or something along those lines. I totally understand! I’m excited, too. But I wanted to put a disclaimer here real quick so we’re all on the same page.

First and foremost, while most of this material is autobiographical, I cannot guarantee that every fact is remembered clearly. While my memory is one of my strongest attributes, I am by no means perfect in that regard. Further, I have altered and removed some tidbits of information throughout the piece, some for privacy reasons, others to simplify the stories and make them more entertaining for an audience.

Next, I wanted to remind you all that while London and I have put a ton of work into this production, it’s still a developing piece. There will be technical errors and other potential mishaps. Oh well. That’s live theater for ya. I’m sure we will have a good time, regardless any fumbles.

Finally, come support your peers and see David Crabb’s devised studio show and Urinetown: The Musical later this semester. Also, I know Elliot Davis, Devan Isom, and Megan McKeever are putting up some rad shows of their own, so go support their projects when they go up.

This production was made possible in part by support from the Omar’s Cookie Jar and Richard H. Via’s Bank Account.

URINETOWN, THE MUSICAL

Music & Lyrics by Mark Hollman
Book & Lyrics by Greg Kotis

Directed by Laural Meade
Musical Direction by Désirée La Vertu

Opening April 12, 2019
Tickets go on sale in February
oxy.edu/theater
theater@oxy.edu | (323) 259-2922

Special thanks to

London Murray, for being incredible and such a rock in this process. David Crabb, for letting me take his ear off and being an overflowing source of guidance and support. Susan Gratch, for her patience listening to me ramble for the past three months and her willingness to let me take a stab at such a large project. Dahlia Theriault, for bringing my vision for the poster to life and helping me with her insane graphic design abilities. Isabel Schwartzberg, for lighting the stage so people can see me. Zoe Speer, for (1) her help with QLab and (2) for helping me while she’s abroad. Megan Johnson, for running the performances and making sure things go smoothly. Occidental College Glee Club, for letting me use their voices. Rachel Goodman, she didn’t do much. I just love her. My mom, for encouraging me to do whatever I wanted in college because “It’s your education.” And to all my friends and family for listening to me complain for hours on end.

Richard’s Veronica: @Richard-Via (this is a joke don’t venmo me please!)
SAMPLES OF LIGHT PLOT (APPENDIX C)

Blackout as a transition to my spot. This is the spot where we want to simulate a TV menu loop. It is underscored by some music. I would prefer the entire stage be used in the weird menu loop lighting, but we can only get it by ear. After that, I'm at the "crush" for focus. I want V, U, Q, P for the majority of this story. I want to focus area Q for the "power Rangers" check bit, to Wick for the time spent at Thermopolis, and then back to "V, U, Q, P" for the clean-up portion of the story. Please to blackout.
This one is messy. Sorry! I also unwaterproofed the drawing, but here is what I think it is: 1. Start in focus area S. I want the same time. There is some talk of machine bands! Cool! Then I transition to focus area E to talk about the peaks, but this is when I only have the street lights and the foreground, left. I just say we need focus areas S, E, and Q. Then I'm on the clock, which is focus area W. Then I cross into spec's box to focus area P. Then I cross back to center to talk from here. Then I cross to focus area I for the rundown. Then I transition back to the clock to focus areas I, U, V, W. Finally, the story ends. I don't know how to transition here? Kudos to focus area U, V, W? Now IDEAS?

"MEERELY CHRISTMAS, I NEED A DOLLAR!"

This story transitions directly from "coming out #1". I sit on the edge of the stage, just simple lighting, with some focus Reds. How do we line look nice, please. When I finally move to the V, U, W, P focus areas for the Christmas morning part, that's when I think some sort of Christmas light is if possible) should appear. At the end of this one, the music should swell and the lights should slowly fade out.