

GOING IT ALONE

What are the **HIGHS** and the **LOWS** of Solo Shows?

BY MARK BLANKENSHIP

As she works on her latest project, actor-playwright Stacie Chaiken is occasionally gripped by fear. “I don’t know yet if it’s going to be a solo play, but every morning I wake up and pray that it’s not,” she says. That may seem strange coming from someone who has had so much success with one-person shows. Chaiken, who is based in Los Angeles, has toured extensively with successful solo plays such as *Looking for Louie*, about her quest to uncover family secrets. Since 1999 she has taken it to locales from California to Israel; she even teaches a workshop at the Powerhouse Theatre in Santa Monica, Calif., called “What’s the Story?,” helping others turn their private histories into theatre. So why does Chaiken hope her next play demands multiple actors? “Because it’s lonely out there,” she says with a laugh.

Of course, Chaiken is only half serious, but her cry of loneliness helps explode one of the biggest myths about solo shows: They might be small, but they aren’t easy—either to write or perform. They are unique theatrical beasts, teeming with as many challenges as massive musicals or dense classics.

Scott Morfee certainly appreciates the sweat that solo work requires. As an independent commercial producer and as artistic director of New York’s Barrow Street Theatre, he has helped produce several one-handers, including Glen Berger’s acclaimed *Underneath the Lintel* and the current *No Child*, Nilaja Sun’s account of teaching inner-city youth.

Morfee blanches at the suggestion that solo plays are attractive to produce because they’re easy and inexpensive. “Truly excellent one-person plays are not easier to produce,” he says. “They still have a story to deliver. The same questions about design and direction still have to be answered.”

For actors, performing alone raises another question: How do you shape a performance without a scene partner? Jessica Lynn Johnson, who performed her one-person media satire, *Oblivious to Everyone*, in this year’s New York International Fringe Festival, has discovered that working solo means changing the way she crafts a role. “I’m someone who needs and loves to play off of other actors, and not having that means my imagination works overtime,” she says. So Johnson invents the other characters whose actions would normally guide her moment-to-moment work.

Audience Makes a Scene

From another perspective, however, solo performers have a daunting number of collaborators: the ones who buy tickets. Says Chaiken, “The audience is your scene partner



Johnson in *Oblivious to Everyone*

ROBBIE RENFROW



Glen Berger, Jessica Lynn Johnson, and Amir Darvish

PATTI OUDERKIRK

“Our sense of empathy is accessed more easily when you know the character you’re watching is also the person standing in front of you. It brings the audience closer to the action and the journey. It’s an act of courage to stand up and tell your story, and I know from what audiences have told me that that act of vulnerability is really powerful.”

—Scott Turner Schofield



Scott Turner Schofield

NADIA GOODMAN



Darvish in Mercury: The Afterlife and Times of a Rock God

“You can feel the audience’s attention right away, so you have to make sure you’re giving everything. But if you come on too strong, you run out of energy by the end of the show. Then you lose the audience anyway.”

—Amir Darvish

vide: “It was a terrifying prospect. I didn’t want to disappoint anybody. The greatest compliments came from people who said, ‘Wow, you brought Freddie back to life.’”

All the Glory

Compliments like that suggest why solo theatre is so often worth the terror of working alone. Though it requires rigorous focus and grants the audience exceptional power as a kind of scene partner, it also offers unique rewards. “With the one-man show, you know you’ve delivered,” Darvish says. “There’s a bit more gratification when the crowd likes what you do.” And when things go right, the actor can reap tangible rewards. Jefferson Mays rocketed to a 2004 Tony Award for best actor in a play for Doug Wright’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *I Am My Own Wife*, and last season Sarah Jones won a special Tony for her own *Bridge & Tunnel*.

Johnson sees the potential in using *Oblivious to Everyone* as a calling card: Playing a woman who embodies mass-media images, she has written a role for herself that lets her display a variety of accents, ages, and styles. “From a business perspective, it’s very smart for actors to find what their strengths are and give themselves a showcase,” she says. “You can get pigeonholed so easily, and if you want to show people what you’re capable of, you’ve got to do it yourself.”

That’s what playwright Berger did, though it wasn’t intentional. He began writing *Underneath the Lintel* in 2000 as a commission from the Yale Cabaret in New Haven, Conn. The theatre needed the script quickly, so Berger cast himself as a librarian whose life changes after receiving a book that’s more than 100 years overdue. Berger figured no one else could learn all the lines in time. He says, “Because I knew I would be doing it first, I wrote it to [serve]—well, I wouldn’t call them strengths, but the least obvious weaknesses that I have as an actor.”

Berger later served as the play’s understudy during its 14-month Off-Broadway run. He went on dozens of times, and it was in those shows he discovered another reward that solo plays offer writers performing their own work: “About the 40th time I did the show, I couldn’t believe I had made the actors do some of these ridiculous transitions.” Sometimes he did instant rewrites onstage; later he committed the strongest edits to print. “I realized that’s what I want to do with all my plays: perform them about 50 times—by myself, in front of people—so I can really understand how they work.”

Few writers can know their plays as intimately as those who step inside them night after night—particularly when there’s only one character. Just as it gives the audience a closer relationship to the actor, a solo show gives the actor a closer relationship to the play.

Up-Close and Personal

As close as they come to their material, however, writer-performers like Berger and Johnson are still playing fictional characters. When a solo show features an actor telling his or her life story, the immediacy that can be achieved is almost unparalleled.

Just ask Scott Turner Schofield, an Atlanta-based actor who tours the country with two autobiographical shows about growing up transgender in the South. Schofield believes that by turning his own story into art, he can break

through many of theatre’s barricades. “Our sense of empathy is accessed more easily when you know the character you’re watching is also the person standing in front of you,” he says. “It brings the audience closer to the action and the journey. It’s an act of courage to stand up and tell your story, and I know from what audiences have told me that that act of vulnerability is really powerful.”

Schofield’s work thrives on frank intensity. In *Debutante Balls*, he recalls his encounters—humorous and harrowing—with cotillion culture when he was still living as a woman. Some might dismiss this work as self-indulgent, but Schofield feels that the solo autobiographical format is the most logical one for his artistic and political goals. “It’s not about confession,” he says. “My work is about my transgender identity, but it’s also about everyone’s gender identity. I’ve had frat boys tell me they’ve found their place in my story.”

Connecting with an audience so different from him also gives Schofield a thrill: “People could say this is an ego trip, but what I really get is a sense of acceptance and empowerment. When there’s so little representation [of transgender individuals] anywhere, I stand up and represent myself. When I’m performing, you have to enter my world, and you can no longer deny that it exists.”

Though *Looking for Louie* isn’t as overtly political as Schofield’s work, Chaiken says she has felt the same unity with audiences. “What I heard was that people were connecting to my very specific immigrant story through their own experience,” she says. Yet this personal relationship to the material raises another question: When is it time for a writer-performer to let his or her creation go? Chaiken recalls that at first she felt too close to the material in *Louie* to let others participate in its creation and performance. But when she allowed director Stephanie Shroyer to join the project, her contribution was invaluable. “She had insight on the story that I could not have as the writer and creator,” says Chaiken. “That added a dimension and a soul that I could have never seen on my own.”

Ironically, every writer-performer interviewed mentioned the value of collaboration, whether with designers, directors, or dramaturges. For months, Johnson says, she did almost all the work on *Oblivious to Everyone*, but when it was accepted by the Fringe Festival, she teamed up with a director, Chris Sorenson, for the first time. “It’s my baby and it’s hard to hand it over to anyone, but I totally trust Chris,” she says.

The development of a solo piece requires this navigation between the personal stakes felt by the show’s creator and the need for assistance. Chaiken even concedes, “I think [*Looking for Louie*] is a show that other people can do. It doesn’t need me. It just needs a great actress.”

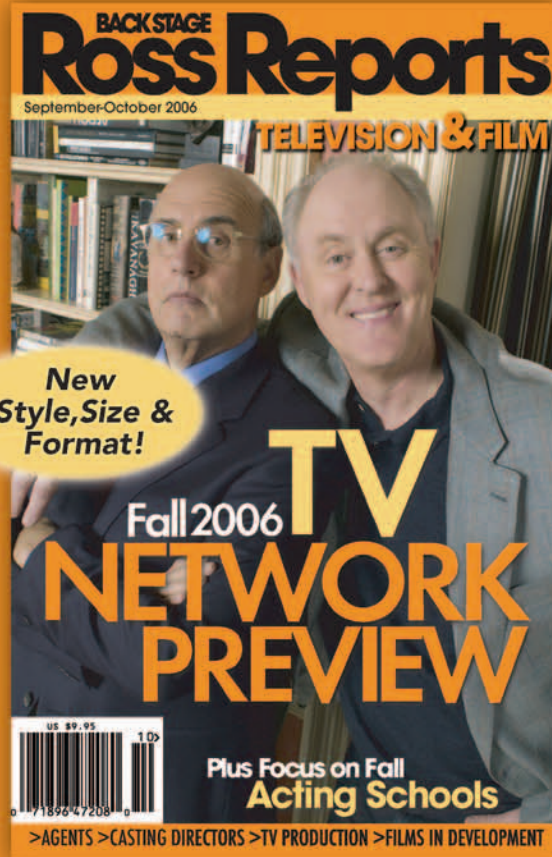
Nor does Chaiken necessarily need *Louie*. She enjoys stepping back into traditional plays and bringing the tools that solo work has given her: “Because I struggled so hard on the story, those muscles were really toned. When I came back [to traditional theatre], I knew exactly what the story was and how to serve it.” Adds Darvish, “Working on [*Mercury*] has taught me a lot about not holding back, about letting go.” That approach now informs all his work, he says.

Perhaps one of solo theatre’s greatest advantages is the insight it offers on performing in general: Standing alone, gauging an audience, an actor is challenged to find new ways to listen. Writing one’s own show can give performers a new measure of their gifts. And placing their creation in the hands of a director requires a deeper level of trust than most actors are used to. Solo shows may be lonely affairs, but they offer a direct link to the many communities that together create for the stage.



Stacie Chaiken in Looking for Louie

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