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Rama-lama-lama-lama: How to Tell an Unforgettable Story

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Rama-lama-lama-lama: How to Tell an Unforgettable Story

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the Mississippi University of Women & the Accademia dell'Arte
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts in Physical Theatre

The Mississippi University for Women & Accademia dell'Arte

July 2016

ABSTRACT:

Most plays flop. Why is that? The greatest storytelling teachers have all commented on the importance of balancing structure and surprise. This thesis will explore the relationship between the two, naming and defining the various types of surprises, illustrating them with examples from theatre, literature and film and discussing how I integrated them into my solo show, *I Promise*.

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Introduction

I love the movie *Die Hard*. A New York cop's visit to reconcile with his estranged wife in L.A. is interrupted by a terrorist attack in her company's building. John McClane, the cop, becomes a one-man wrecking crew in order to save his wife and stop the terrorists. When the film came out in theatres in 1988 it grossed \$140 million worldwide against a \$28 million dollar budget – a smash success.¹ Because it was so profitable, movie producers have imitated its plot structure in countless other action movies. So why is *Die Hard* a classic that we've all seen, yet we can't recall the names of all those imitators, even though the structure is roughly the same? Surprises. Throughout *Die Hard* we are treated to unusual surprises, making it more memorable and touching than your average action movie. In order to succeed both popularly and critically, dramatic stories must be based on structures like Freytag's pyramid (rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), but even a well-structured story fails without the right surprises (tear-jerkers, revelations, perception shifts, screams, twists, and jokes).

Structure is dependent upon surprise and the reverse is also true: great surprises without a well-structured story will flop as well. A lot of comedies fall prey to the trap of continuous jokes without a well-structured story. George Bernard Shaw's lengthy play,

¹ “*Die Hard* Box Office.” Box Office Mojo.
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=diehard.htm>. Accessed June 2, 1988.

Getting Married, features some really hilarious dialogue, but the plot has very weak rising action. At tea on the morning of her wedding, a pastor's daughter casually debates with her wedding guests over whether she should really get married or not. Shaw loses the audience's interest in the first act.² Structure and surprise are mutually dependent. As writer Mike Grady puts it, "Too much regimentation and you'll bore your audience to sleep. Too much surprise and you'll numb them."³

Fortunately for would-be storytellers, there is a great deal of literature already available about how to tell a good dramatic story. I read a lot of that literature in preparation for my Grad Lab presentation at the MFA in Physical Theatre program at the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo, Italy. I chose to do a solo storytelling piece. Before I created my show, called *I Promise*, I looked at the works of great storytellers like Spalding Grey, Shakespeare, and Aaron Sorkin and I studied some of the most-respected teachers and philosophers of story creation: Aristotle, Freytag, Robert McKee, Lajos Egri, Blake Snyder, Christopher Vogler, and Michael Hauge. Now I will define the dramatic story elements at the writer's disposal, and then take a look at how structure, surprise, and their sub-elements all work together to make a great story.

² Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat*. Michael Wiese Production, 2005.

³ Grady, Michael. Conversation with the author. 2016.

Rama-lama-lama-lama

We go together like rama-lama-lama-lama-shoo-bop-doo-boo-bee-doo
Together forever like shoo-bop-shoo-wanna-wanna-shoopity-boop-dee-boo
Chang-chang-changity-chang-shoo-bop
That's the way it should be-eee. Wahoo-yeah!
--“We Go Together from *Grease* the musical by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey

Like the above song from *Grease*, the elements of structure and surprise “go together” and are inseparable in a successful story – there is the structure of the song: the melody and the rhythm; then there are the surprises: those funny lyrics (“rama-lama-lama-lama-shoo-bop-doo-boo-bee-doo”), the musical instruments used, the mood of the song, and the characterized voices of the singers. Because they have been married successfully, it is one of the most famous musical theatre tunes of all-time. Similarly, a great story must have both the masterful structure and the unique surprise elements that separate it from similar stories. Now I will define exactly what structure and surprise are.

Dramatic story structure is the author’s selection of which events are to be told in a story. The storyteller only includes information that is important for the audience to see or hear in order to be emotionally moved by the story. According to Lajos Egri, to be most effective, the author must choose a single premise, or theme, around which all the events are based. He or she then must choose to tell only the important events relevant to that core premise of the story.⁴ When properly done, the author’s selection of both premise

⁴ Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*. Touchstone, 1972. Revised Edition.

and chain of events (or “plot”) affects the audience’s emotions and keeps them emotionally involved in the story. When there is a correct structure, audience members continue to want to know what will happen next.

Structure weakens if an author either omits important parts of the plot, or if he/she includes too many tangential, non-crucial events. For example, if I were to tell you that I witnessed a murder this morning, and I started to tell you the story, but I first told you all the boring details of my morning: I woke up, brushed my teeth, took a shower, had breakfast and other unrelated events for 15 minutes before I got to the murder, you would probably walk away long before I reached the key part. You’d think, “I thought this was a story about a murder! Why is he going on about his pancakes? “You no longer care to know what happens next, because as the storyteller, I have not chosen to tell only the important events in order to keep you engaged in the story. Structure should be thought of as an efficiency of storytelling: nothing omitted and nothing wasted. Everything the audience sees is needed to tell the story. Just like when planning to build a building, structure must be done in advance, well before putting pen to page on the actual story.

The story structure is usually created as a list, diagram, or drawing. Nowadays, many professional writers use an “index card” system to incorporate all of the key elements of structure before they write a single word of the story.⁵ The structure contains all of the

⁵ McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Harper Audio, 2006. Audible Edition.

information needed for a synopsis, which is a simple description of the chain of story events that in and of itself, ought to be interesting to a listener. Michael Hauge says that if you can't tell a brief synopsis of your novel or screenplay to someone while you are in line at Starbucks and have them say, "Wow! I'd like to read/see that!" you haven't perfected the structure yet.⁶ Just like a beautiful house must have a sketch and blueprint before it is built, the great story must have a great structure first. Same as a house structure would consist of plans for the foundation, the edifice, the plumbing, the ventilation, etc. there are many specific elements to be planned in the structure of a story.

I will now define the following key elements of structure: premise, protagonist, plot (genre, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), symphonic array of characters, emotional scene movement, and protagonist choice between the greater of two goods or lesser of two evils (reversals).

Structure Elements

Premise: Lajos Egri asserts that every story must, like a thesis, have a singular premise at its core. The premise is like the DNA strand that creates the body of the work. All of the pieces of the story must relate back in some way to the premise in order to have a taut story. The premise usually states a quality or flaw that people have, and what effects the

⁶ Vogler, Christopher and Hauge, Michael. *The Hero's Two Journeys*. Writer's Audioshop, 2004. Audible Edition.

author believes might happen to a person who possesses that quality or flaw. For example, “Love conquers even death,” in *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo and Juliet possess love, and there love does indeed conquer death. Other times the premise is phrased, “(action)...leads to...(result)” for example: “Excessive ambition *leads to* its own destruction.” (*Macbeth*).⁷

Protagonist: The main character, or the principal character who travels through the plot of the story. Think of the plot as the line on Google Maps from point A to point B and the moving dot marking “your current location” is the protagonist. We follow his/her journey. The protagonist is the character with whom the audience identifies the most. This is also the character through whom we track a spiritual change or growth.⁸ Robert McKee says that for the audience to sympathize with a protagonist, within the first ten minutes of meeting him or her, he or she must be the victim of some wrongdoing, be really good at something, be a good person, or be really funny.⁹ In the opening sequence of many classic films from the early 20th century there is often a moment where the protagonist saves a cat stuck in a tree or does something equally heroic. Noting this, famed screenwriter Blake Snyder named his screenwriting manual, “Save the Cat.”¹⁰

⁷ Egri, L.

⁸ Snyder, B.

⁹ McKee, R.

¹⁰ Snyder, B.

One of my favorite storytellers is Spalding Grey. In his solo show, *Grey's Anatomy*, he tells a story about the time his vision started going blurry in his right eye and he went to all kinds of doctors, eastern and western, to find a cure. Beyond the fact that he is the principal character who pushes the action forward in every single scene of the story, he fulfills the requirements of McKee's protagonist because at the outset an injustice has been done to him in the form of this eye disease, thus gaining our sympathy. We also track many of his inner changes throughout the journey as he explains his emotions and thoughts at the various stages of the treatment.

Genre: Genre gives a set of rules for each type of story. Genre has existed since the ancient Greeks who identified three genres: comedy, tragedy, and epic poetry. The philosophers sought to give guidelines for writers for each genre, like which emotions ought to be aroused or how the story should to be constructed. For example, Aristotle said that tragedy must have "...incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions."¹¹ In the 20th century, writers have identified more nuanced genres. Jacques Lecoq claimed that there are four genres: comedy, drama, clown, and melodrama.¹² Blake Snyder identified 10 basic story types. His unique titles for each genre all fall under the four categories of Lecoq: drama (dude with a problem, golden fleece, superhero, institutionalized, rites of passage), comedy (buddy love, out of the bottle—usually a story with a magic potion); melodrama (monster in the house,

¹¹ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Centaur Classics, 2016. Kindle Edition.

¹² Lecoq, Jacques. *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013.

whydunit), and clown (fool triumphant). It is interesting to note that these genres can apply to works from hundreds of years ago. Let's look at a few examples from Shakespeare and identify the genre for each.

Macbeth is a "monster in the house" drama. Snyder says that in monster in the house, "there must be sin committed – usually greed (monetary or carnal) - prompting the creation of a supernatural monster that comes like an avenging angel to kill those who have committed that sin and spare those who realize what that sin is."¹³ Macbeth kills Duncan out of greed, and spends the rest of the film running and hiding from those who would avenge the wrong.

Romeo and Juliet is a story about a young couple trying to escape the oppressive system in which they live, therefore it is an "institutionalized" drama. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" signifies the problem, as Juliet laments why her family would kill her Romeo just because his name is Montague. The institution is the main obstacle to the protagonist.

Hamlet is a "guy with a problem" drama. The main issue is how to avenge his father's death. There is a big, bad, evil enemy that Hamlet must dig deep within himself to overcome. He contemplates this point in his speech, "Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or take arms against a sea of trouble

¹³ Snyder, B.

and by opposing, end them.”

Plot: The sequence of events that the story follows: exposition and rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Almost all plots also contain subplots. Subplots are like the plot but run parallel to the main action of the story and are less prominent. For example, in *Die Hard*, the main plot is stopping the terrorists and the subplot is making amends with the wife. Subplots serve to reinforce the character traits of the protagonist and provide more proof for the premise. When we see John McClane hugging his previously-estranged wife at the end of the *Die Hard* we see the fruits which come to those who sacrifice their own selfishness for a loved one.

Exposition and Rising action: Exposition is the setting up of the world of the story and introducing the characters and their relevant history, or backstory. Rising action is the continuous increase in tension and forces against the protagonist as the story grows to the climax.

A very clear example of exposition and rising action would be in Sophocles' *Antigone*.

At the outset, we find out that Polyneices fought against King Creon's forces in the recently ended war. Creon's decree is that if anyone buries the body of Polyneices they will be put to death. His niece, Antigone, the brother of the deceased, buries the body. Creon finds out she did it. Both enlist allies in the confrontation. He flexes his power

and puts her in jail. The others convince him he was wrong, and he relents, but it's too late, at the climactic moment, she has killed herself.

Climax: The scene in which the protagonist faces the ultimate challenge of the story.

Think of it as the “make or break” point of the story: either a decisive victory or a decisive defeat for the protagonist. Usually in a film the music swells at this point, and as in my example below, in an opera, the music is at its most powerful and beautiful.

The climax of Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, is very easy to spot: if the princess can guess the stranger's name before dawn, he dies, if not, she marries him. The climax naturally comes in the moments right before dawn. Of course there is a great “twist” surprise of *Turandot* is that both the audience and the protagonist believe that dawn has come and the stranger has won, but in reality, Princess Turandot has created a fake dawn to trick him into revealing his name just before sunrise. When she opens the curtains to reveals the true dawn, the stranger is shocked and horrified that he has been duped.

Falling Action and Resolution: After the climax, the falling action is where loose ends of the story and subplots begin to resolve themselves. In the resolution, all storylines are brought to a conclusion, at least in terms of the character arc of the protagonist in this chapter of his/her life. The falling action and resolution can be often quite short in comparison to the rising action.

In the falling action of *Turandot*, the princess calls forward the stranger, and we believe she will have him killed, but at the last moment, not only does she spare his life, she agrees to marry him.

Symphonic array of characters: This is the way that the characters and their points of view are arranged in relation to the protagonist, either supporting her or challenging her. The points of view of each character also support or challenging the premise. For example, with the premise “Ambition leads to its own destruction,” there is Macbeth consumed by his ambition, there is Macduff who fights for justice, there is Fleance who is the innocent bystander slain by ambition, and there is Lady Macbeth who is an enabler for her husband’s greedy desire.¹⁴

In the film *Die Hard*, the characters are based on the premise, “Making a sacrifice for love, although difficult, can be a great gift to one’s self.” We have John, the one making a sacrifice for love; we have his wife Holly, who is realizing just how much John would sacrifice for her and who is feeling guilt; we have Hans, the villain, who loves money, and will risk being a fugitive for the rest of his life to get it; we have the brother, Karl, who loved his brother whom John killed and now wants revenge; and we have Ellis, the guy who loves to be the center of attention and risks his life foolishly.

¹⁴ Egri, L.

Emotional scene movement: Both Snyder and McKee say that scenes must “move” emotionally. So if a scene starts on a positive, it must end on a negative. For example, if a character says at the beginning of the scene, “What a beautiful day, nothing could possibly go wrong!” by the end of the scene, you can bet that something, if not everything, has gone wrong. If there is no emotional movement, the scene has no purpose.¹⁵

In Aaron Sorkin’s play, *A Few Good Men*, there is a courtroom scene where the villain, Col. Jessup takes the stand. He is a highly decorated officer and has the respect of the whole courtroom. By the end of the scene defense counsel Lt. Cafee has extracted a confession from Col. Jessup and when the guards arrest the Colonel, Jessup is screaming at the judge like a child having a tantrum – he has lost everyone’s respect.

Profound choice by Protagonist: In Freytag’s pyramid of tragedy, he talked about the reversal: where the protagonists fortunes take a turn for the worst, and it is usually his/her trait that we admire which is his downfall. Characters, in order to touch us, have to make tough choices.¹⁶ McKee says that where most stories fail is that they become simply a clear battle between good and evil, whereas, what makes a story transcend the mundane is when a hero has to make a choice that has some unavoidable negative consequence.

¹⁵ McKee, R.

¹⁶ Freytag, Gustav. *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: an exposition of dramatic composition and art. An authorized translation from the 6th German.* Translation by Elias J. MacEwan. Amazon, 2014. Kindle Edition.

For example in Spielberg's Holocaust-era drama *Schindler's List*, Schindler, a wealthy and trusted German businessman, decides to continuously risk his life in order to save the Jews who work in his factory. As a German and respected member of the Nazi party, he could have lived comfortably had he continued business as usual, but he saw a greater good in saving those innocent people.

In *Hamlet*, the Dane must choose to renounce his love, Ophelia, in order to achieve the greater end of avenging his father's death. He chooses what, to him, is the greater of two goods.

Surprise Elements

So now that we've got a few definitions for the elements of structure, let's look at surprise. I like to look at surprise as "short-term structure." That is to say, if structure is meant to hold the audience's attention over the long-term of the whole story, surprise is meant to *grab* the audience's attention over the short-term. The way structure hooks us for the long haul is through an emotional investment. The way surprise grabs us in the short term is with emotional jolts. Each kind of surprise has an emotional and physical response attached to it: laughter, tears, screams, goosebumps, confusion, or ah-hahs! Even though we are seated in an audience, when we engage with a good story our reactions are involuntary. A well-constructed story will give the audience the confidence

to turn themselves over to be manipulated. Each surprise is a kind of manipulation.

When they are employed they elicit a physical response.

Let's explore these different kinds of surprises (gags, twists, perception shifts, revelations, scares, and tear-jerkers) and show they are tied to the structure and create physical responses. They may be looked upon as the ligature which connects the story to our physical bodies.

Laughter (Jokes and Gags): These are setups and punchlines (jokes) or pratfalls, incongruities, and physical humor (gags) all designed to make us laugh.

A very memorable setup and punchline is in the Farrelly Brothers' movie *Kingpin*. On an Amish farm, a city slicker, Roy, is trying to be helpful so he goes out and milks the cow. When he returns from the barn, he is drinking from a big pail of what we think is milk. When the farmer tells him, "We don't have a cow...we have a bull," Roy spits out what we now know is a different substance, everywhere. Comedy is a surprise of expectation. Our expectations are met with something exaggerated and odd. We expect the farmer to say, "Thank you, that's so kind of you." The setup and punchline here also really reinforce the protagonist Roy, highlighting his obliviousness, ineptitude, and stupidity, which are his main obstacles in the story.

Charlie Chaplin was a master of gags. In *Gold Rush*, his character is so hungry that he decides to boil his leather shoe and eat it. Most people would probably imagine that he would be grimacing eating a shoe, and Chaplin plays on our expectation by carefully setting the table and then separating the cooked sole from the frame of the shoe, which resembles filleting a fish. He also sets aside the laces, which seem like noodles. Then he sits there eating his fish and noodles as a rich man at a fine restaurant would. The result makes us laugh.

What is important to note, though, is that the gag is not “cheap,” that is, it fully supports the structure of its “fool triumphant” clown genre. The fool triumphant genre states that he who sees the world in a positive and fresh way every moment, succeeds at the game of life.¹⁷ The clown is like Teflon to which no negative circumstance can stick for long. This clown, even on the brink of starvation, is able to triumph, even though he doesn’t have any real food.

Ah-hah! (Revelation): These are moments where we realize something important about a character that we couldn’t quite put our finger on. The character may seem really great, but there is something “just not right” about him. Or we may have seen the character having a suspicious telephone conversation earlier in the piece and we haven’t yet been able to make sense of that telephone call. Suddenly, the previously unseen person on the other end of that call shows up and it’s his mistress, “Ah-hah!” that explains it!

¹⁷ Snyder, B.

One of the most famous revelations in all of movie history is in the film *Chinatown*. Jake, the detective suspects Evelyn of foul play and is really to haul her downtown. The problem is that he is in love with her, and in his heart, he doesn't want to believe she is guilty. Jake shows up at her house and finds that she is detaining a young woman in the house. Jake asks who the woman is. She says, "My sister." He calls her a liar, and she says, "She's my daughter." He slaps her. She then explains that it is true. She had been the victim of incest by her father, and indeed the woman is both her daughter and her sister!

Another very famous example of revelations is in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, when we realize that story's premise, "the sins of the father are passed on to the son," has been fulfilled. The father's syphilis was indeed passed on to the son who has gone mad as well. And when we discover the fact as an audience, our suspicions from before are confirmed.

Confusion (Twists): When the plot takes an unexpected turn of events. Aristotle calls it *peripeteia* and defines this as "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity."¹⁸

A great example of this is in *Forrest Gump* with the Bubba subplot. Forrest has this friend Bubba in Vietnam who will not stop talking about shrimp. He keeps telling

¹⁸ Aristotle.

Forrest that once the war is over, he and Forrest are going to get a boat and become shrimp fisherman. Well, Bubba dies in the war, and in his honor, Forrest, who knows nothing about fishing, gets that boat and starts shrimping, and it ends up making Forrest a millionaire many times over. Again, another “Fool triumphant” whose plot twist first looks like a failure but ends up becoming another success.

Goosebumps (Mind-blowers or Perception Shifts): These are typical in thrillers.

What the audience thought was real about a person or a situation is stripped away. The famous film *Sixth Sense*, is about an investigator who is sent to investigate a young boy who claims to “see dead people.” At the climax of the film, we realize that the investigator is... a dead person! He himself didn’t even know. Goose bumps galore.

Tears (Tear-jerkers): The lines and images that make us cry. In the family drama *You Can Count on Me* by Kenneth Lonergan, an apologetic estranged brother has returned to ask for money, but ends up staying to help out his sister (who is a single mom).

Unfortunately, he makes some bad decisions and puts her son in danger. At the end of the film, he says to his sister, apologizing, on the verge of tears, “Remember, remember what we used to say when we were kids?” And she says, “Yeah,” and they hug. And we as the audience realize that we have never heard anyone say the title of the film yet. And it dawns on us that when they were two small children and both of their parents had died in an accident, that they had told each other was, “You can count on me,” and tears just wash over us as an audience member.

Screams (Jump scares): Simply put, these are things that make us scream out. Just like when we were kids playing hide and seek in the dark, and someone jumped out from behind a door to spook us, storytellers use the same effect. I remember we used to tell ghost stories around the campfire in the summertime, and there would always be a point where the storyteller's voice would get very low and say, "...and there they were, and they heard a light scratching, scratching, and then...AAAAAAAH! The killer jumps out!" Everyone screams!

In Rupert Raison's children's play, *Festivity Planet*, the hero, Frankie disappears behind the backdrop looking for the villain, and just as he does the villain jumps out with a knife screaming and everyone in the audience screams. These screams are tied directly to the climax of the story when the hero kills the villain.

Now that we have some working examples of the marriage of story and structure, I will take a look at my one-person show as a medium to explore and codify a method of working with these elements to create a well-executed story.

My Piece

In April 2015, I premiered the storytelling piece, *I Promise*, at the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo, Italy. The piece was the final project in my MFA physical theatre program. My goal for the piece was to use the storytelling structure and surprise elements we just discussed in order to create an effective and moving experience for the audience. Here I will share a bit of that process. Below you will see all structure elements in **bold** and all surprise elements in [BRACKETS].

Premise

I had a rough idea of some characters and a world, but was not really sure what story I wanted to tell. I decided to start with the premise in order to organize my ideas. Egri says that it is important for the writer to believe in his premise, because he will be the one trying to prove it with the story, so I asked myself, “What do I want to say with this piece? Is there something burning in my heart to say?”¹⁹ I took a good look inside and I felt like I wanted to talk about love, and more specifically, the sacrificial devotion associated with romantic love. I have always thought that people who are in love seem to see the world in a different, gentler, and kinder way. I specifically remembered a girl with whom I worked in Los Angeles who always seemed to be worried about something and rarely smiled. After several months of this sullen behavior, one day I heard her singing and smiling as she worked. Over the course of the next month she was always

¹⁹ Egri, L.

friendly and happy. It wasn't long before I met her new boyfriend. She was in love and it had changed how she saw the world. I felt a bit envious, to be honest. I had not found someone to be devoted to in my own life, and I wanted to feel firsthand what she was feeling. I wanted to see the world the way she was now seeing it. So the premise I came up with was: "There is a special world that only the truly devoted can see." I had studied a few examples of strong premises, like the ones I mentioned in this paper. Using those as a guide, I put forth a universal quality, devotion, and stated what I believe are the effects of possessing that quality. The premise was strong for me to work from because I was personally curious about it. I felt excited to write this story and explore these ideas. With the premise, I could start working on the plot.

Exposition and Rising Action

A narrator tells the story directly to the audience in his living room. He has recently learned a "true" story about the special world the truly devoted can see. He heard this tale of devotion from an elderly couple and it touched him so much that he wants to share it. The story centers around a young teenage couple, Frankie and Gabriela, two childhood friends who fell in love. I knew that by giving the audience goosebumps about the type of love they had for one another, I could have my "save the cat" moment for Frankie right away, thus building sympathy for him, the **protagonist**.

[GOOSEBUMPS] The narrator says that Frankie was so devoted to Gabriela that “when her Grandma died, he brought her flowers every day for a month until she stopped crying.” The narrator then says that the day came when Frankie’s devotion was truly tested.

At this point, I needed to provide the **exposition** for the world of the piece and begin to introduce my **symphonic array of characters** (Frankie, Gabriela, the Messenger of the Gods, the mother, the Gods, the Lord of the Aliens, and the Green Bird). I sprinkled in some jokes and scares into the exposition to make it palatable. A lot of times the exposition gets bogged down. Often this happens because there is not yet enough tension in the rising action. Basically, at the beginning of the story, nothing has really happened yet, so the audience needs to be wooed.²⁰ Surprises are helpful in hooking the audience’s attention at this early stage of the story.

The narrator goes on to say that there was once a city above which was a green cloud where aliens lived and a white cloud where the Gods lived. [JOKE] The narrator explains that the Gods wanted to protect the humans, but the aliens wanted, “of course,” to steal an especially pure baby from the humans in order to, “What else? Enslave mankind and rule the Earth.”

A flute begins playing and the story shifts to a house where the baby is sleeping peacefully in a crib. The window opens, a dark figure creeps in the room and a hand

²⁰ Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat Strikes Back*. Save the Cat Press, 2015. Audible Edition.

shoots over the baby's face trying to grab it when [SCREAM] "AAAAAAAHAH!" an invisible force-field of energy burns the hand of the dark figure who screams and runs from the house whimpering. The baby's mother comes inside and lets out a prayer to the gods for help. The prayer rises up from her lips like a comet into the sky and is [AH-HAH] caught by the winged messenger of the gods, who flies to the white cloud.

On the white cloud, the head god tells the messenger to take the baby to the human guardians. They transport the baby to the mountains, where it will be safe.

We have now established the "save the baby" **subplot** and added **symphonic viewpoints** about devotion with the mother, messenger, guardians, and the Gods. I failed to develop the mother, Gods, guardians, and the messenger beyond these few scenes. With the Gods, I may have missed an opportunity to have them add to the opposing forces against the main character and his allies. I could have employed a trope which is common in cop stories, (such as *Dirty Harry*), where the hero's battle is not just against criminals but the bureaucratic system he must work within. The Gods could hold up the messenger with personal agendas and red tape, putting Frankie, Gabriela, and the baby in even more danger later on. This would also show a **viewpoint** of selfish devotion.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, Frankie is praying in the temple. As an 18 year-old boy, he is required to go to the temple to ask the Gods about his destiny. [JOKE] He has a small problem. Instead of praying about his future, the only words in his head are: "Gabriela, Gabriela, Gabriela," and he blurts out, "Gods if you help me win the heart of

Gabriela, I promise I will be good for the rest of my life.” The prayer flies into the sky like the mother’s prayer but [SCREAM] an ugly green bird steals it and flies to the green cloud above the city. [GAG] The narrator makes a loud squawking sound and imitates the bird.

On the green cloud, the Lord of the Aliens takes Frankie’s prayer from the green bird and realizes he can manipulate Frankie. "Bring me the girl!" he shouts. [GAG] The green bird squawks again and flies back down to the earth where Gabriela is putting up the wash. Frankie comes up to ask her to the big dance, but he is a little nervous. As they had grown older, Gabriela had grown so beautiful, but Frankie hadn't grown so big and strong as he hoped. He tries to act cool. [GAG] The narrator acts out Frankie trying to be cool. [JOKE] The narrator says, “But Frankie wasn’t quite sure she saw him in ‘that’ way.”

Structurally, it’s good to have the **protagonist** be a bit weaker because he will have to use more than just his muscles (since he doesn’t have any) to succeed.

[JOKE] The narrator goes on, “There was one thing that Frankie knew how to do better than anyone in the world. He could make her laugh. He told her, like he did every day, his best joke. He said, "Gabriela, what is your cat's favorite color? Prrrrrple!”

She laughs her lovely laugh and then he asks her to the dance. [GOOSEBUMPS] She agrees to go to the dance with him, and the narrator says, “Their eyes locked. They exchanged that twinkle that only the truly devoted have in their eyes.” [SCREAM] Just then the green, ugly bird plucks Gabriela up and carries her towards the green cloud.

[AH-HAH] Frankie now sees the green cloud above the town that he had never seen before. The fact that Frankie begins to see this special world, as the narrator mentioned before, signifies his growing devotion for Gabriela. Frankie decides to go and rescue her.

Frankie decision here is a **protagonist choice**, and is important to the **rising action** because it signifies what the **climax** is likely to be: rescuing Gabriela.

[CONFUSION] On the green cloud, the Lord of the Aliens has Gabriela hooked up to a strange machine.

Frankie finds a [GAG] creative way onto the ship by shimmying up a wobbly radio antenna. He steals a pilot's uniform and reaches the control bridge undetected. There he expects to find Gabriela and the captors. The captain's chair swivels around and [AH-HAH] it is Gabriela all dolled up in an evening gown. The narrator says, "She explained to Frankie that she wanted him to think she was kidnapped. She told him that this was a test of his true love and devotion for her. He passed the test. The Gods have brought him here. Because he promised to be good there was a special mission for him. He was to save a baby that was going to be murdered by evil humans. Frankie agreed to do it. He would do anything for her."

This is a major [TWIST] in the story. We think, as an audience, that Gabriela is going to be held hostage and that they will force Frankie to do their bidding that way. That's typical. But this is where my story is unique in playing against the audience expectation, and gives you a thrilling [AH-HAH] revelation. They are going to play a trick on Frankie so that Frankie thinks he is actually doing good when he is doing the bidding of the aliens.

They are actually using Frankie's naïve devotion against him, thus reinforcing the **premise**.

Frankie gets to the mountains and steals the baby from the monks using [GAG] fake kung fu. [GAG] He runs away from the monks but trips and falls. The baby goes flying but is caught by Gabriela who strokes the baby's head in a creepy way, which the narrator mimes. [AH-HAH] Gabriela says, "Thanks Frankie. Now, we can enslave your entire race and finally attack the Gods." She disappears.

[TEARS] The narrator, in solemn tones, says, "Frankie. He looked at the faces of those monks who had taken off their hoods. They were just normal people, just like him. He knew that couldn't be the real Gabriela. He just hoped and prayed to the Gods that she was still alive. He was so sad. He asked the Gods again for help. 'Gods, I'm really sorry. Please, help me make things right. Help me find the baby. Help me find Gabriela.'" "

I wanted this to be an incredibly moving moment for the audience, as the lowest point of the story for Frankie. This scene has a great deal of **emotional movement**, as he has gone from thinking he was James Bond (positive), to being the guy who has betrayed his people (negative). At this point, the audience ought to be on the edge on their seat.

There are so many questions by now. Is the real Gabriela gone for good? Can Frankie get the baby back in time? How will he be able to succeed against such powerful opponents? Things are looking quite bleak, and from a story standpoint that is really

good. Blake Snyder calls this the “all is lost” moment.²¹ From the all is lost moment, we are now able to reach the climax, or the final assault on the protagonist’s goal.

[AH-HAH] For the first time in his life, Frankie sees his own beautiful fireball prayer. This is another progression in the **premise**. His devotion is changing from a naïve devotion to a true one.

The **genre** of this piece is “guy with a problem” drama, and that means that the hero relies on his uniqueness to defeat the enemy. So, keeping with that genre rule, I wrote the scene. Frankie sees the winged messenger of the Gods collect his prayer in the sky. It is then that Frankie realizes he can now shoot more prayer fireballs from his mouth. He starts shooting off prayers left and right. He catches the tail of one of his fireballs and flies up to the green cloud on it to rescue his love.

Climax

Frankie lands on the ship just as the white winged messenger arrives to help him. They find Gabriela tied up in a prison room and as Frankie goes to her [GAG] my female stage manager in the theatre running the light board shouts, "No Frankie it's a trap!" At this, the audience ought to really lose it, laughing, because this is a solo show and the narrator has played every character up to this point.

²¹ Snyder, B.

Frankie sees that there is another Gabriela in the prison room, just exactly the same as the other Gabriela tied up. He needs to figure out which is the true Gabriela. [JOKE]

Frankie thinks, "I'll do what I do better than anyone else in the world." He asks both Gabrielas, "How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?" "Tentacles."

Frankie recognizes the real Gabriela's laughs and he rescues her.

There is a lot of rapid fire action in the sequence as we are in the **climax**. The climax has the highest tension, the highest stakes, and the greatest effort from both protagonist and antagonist, almost always ending in a decisive victory for one side.²²

The winged messenger subdues the fake Gabriela and the Lord of the Aliens while Frankie and the real Gabriela find the baby in the clutches of the green bird. Frankie shoots a fireball out of his mouth and knocks down the squawking bird.

[GOOSEBUMPS] The baby goes flying from the bird's hands and is caught, this time by the real Gabriela. The narrator breathes a sigh of relief as Gabriela gently calms the crying baby. Frankie grabs her by the hand and they search for a way to get home.

Falling Action

Frankie has a parachute in his stolen flight suit and he and Gabriela jump off together.

They float softly down to the earth as the narrator mimes the soft parachute landing with a swinging motion of his whole body.

²² Snyder, B.

This is quite literally **falling action**. The falling action reduces the tension back down, and so the use of the narrator swaying back and forth serves to calm things down. He starts speaking in a low voice, slowly and calmly. This is a time for the audience to “regain their dignity,” as Robert McKee says. We use the ending to prepare the audience member to return to the real world.²³

[GOOSEBUMPS] The narrator says, “They presented the baby back to the mother who was so grateful. The guardians, when they saw that Frankie had redeemed himself, they all knelt down in gratitude to him. And Frankie, he bowed to them. Gabriela grabbed him by the hand and she said, ‘Come on let's go.’ As the winged messengers were finishing off the battle above, Frankie and Gabriela walked home and they didn't even notice.”

[JOKE] Back in the living room, the narrator says, “And so that's the true story of true devotion that I heard.” The joke really causes a hearty laugh in the audience because obviously, that was just about the most outlandish story they may have ever heard.

[GOOSEBUMPS] The narrator finishes by saying, “It makes me wonder about that old couple in the tea shop. What is this invisible world that that old couple gets to see that I haven't seen yet? I don't know about you, but I'm gonna find out.”

My plot structure follows the Freytag pyramid but is always giving shocks and surprises. The audience thinks they know where they are going, but things always get twisted enough to keep them guessing.

²³ McKee, R.

Audience Feedback

I worked hard with my advisor and test audiences to make sure that the laughs were working, because that was my main surprise element. I also would ask my test audiences if they cared about Frankie's journey, and how I might be able to challenge him even more.

During the show, if you watch the video, you can hear quite a bit of laughter at the parts meant to be funny. When Gabriela is first revealed on the alien ship there are gasps of surprise from the audience. I hear some "Oh no's" when people realize what is going on with the cloned Gabriela. I heard sighs of relief when Frankie found the real Gabriela. Overall, the audience appeared to be quite engaged during the performance.

I had a chance to speak with my mentors and some audience members after the show. The comments ranged from "very engaging" to "How much acid did you take to write that?" I noticed that most of the comments mentioned that there were some odd and memorable surprises in the show and the way in which the story was told was extremely unique.

The feedback was encouraging, and when I myself watched the video for the first time, I was quite pleased with the results. It really made me feel like I had accomplished, at

least at some level, my goal of moving the audience. Now I will talk a little bit about how I could move them even more effectively with future revision.

Future

Moving forward, I would like to strengthen the story. One of my professors, although he admitted he was entertained, thought that the entire story could be more profound and touch the audience more deeply. I think the best way to do that would actually be to lengthen the piece and put some more subplots in there with more challenges for Frankie. I could make the bad guys even worse and start Frankie off as even more clueless. Aristotle speaks of a protagonist moving from “ignorance to awareness.”²⁴ A story is a journey, and I can make Frankie’s flaws even more pronounced at the beginning so he has somewhere to go. I had written a scene where Frankie gets beat up by the other boys from school and then I cut the scene. I think if I were to revisit the piece I would add the scene back in. I would also add more exposition to establish exactly who Frankie and Gabriela are. This would make the piece substantially longer.

With that expansion I would then like to adapt the piece into a feature science fiction film. I think that it would benefit from those “b-stories” or subplots I mentioned above: there are other supporting storylines to explore with the classmates of Frankie, with the human guardians, and the angels. These subplots could deepen the premise by challenging and strengthening it.

²⁴ Aristotle.

If it were a film, I think the story in the film could still start like the play: from the guy who wanders into the Chinese tea shop and speaks with the old couple. I would play that role. The teashop scene reminds me of the story within a story framework of *The Princess Bride*, in which the grandpa recounts the fantasy story to his grandson or *Man of La Mancha* where Cervantes tells the story to the prison inmates. Everything could still grow from there and it might work nicely if we gradually leave the tea room for the magical world and then return occasionally.

All of these changes would be great to explore, and I think to realize them that I would also seek more training in storytelling, comedy writing, movement training and acting training. One of the first workshops I would like to do is a “Save the Cat” intensive. It is a 48-hour workshop where basically you take your best story idea and flesh out all 40 “beats” or major scenes of the story on index cards over the weekend. At that point, you could actually go home with an interesting story and start writing the script. With that expert story guidance from established writers, it would be really helpful in laying the foundation for expanding this project or starting another. I believe that constant feedback from those who have done it is a key to becoming better.

I would also like to take a few comedy workshops. I think joke writing is a skill that takes a lot of discipline. I would love to learn a lot more about jokes, because comedy is my favorite genre. I think jokes are a mini-version of a story: they need both structure and surprise. The other issue with surprise-creation skills is that I don’t think anyone

gives specific workshops in the other surprises I talked about in this thesis. You are just sort of expected to know how to do them or figure them out. It's interesting because scares, goosebump-makers, tear-jerkers and the like are very prevalent as devices in the theatre and cinema yet there are not taught individually. I also think all of my surprise setups and structure in future drafts of *I Promise* would benefit from a prolonged study of suspense, which might include deconstructing Hitchcock films and *Twilight Zone* episodes and carefully studying books on the subject, such as *Cinematic Suspense* by Xavier Perez.

Through the process of creating a piece, I have discovered a link between the artist and his art and this piece has given me an opportunity to discover areas in which I would like to improve as an actor. As far as the actual execution of the performance, I really want to continue to develop my acting, voice, and body. The body is the tool and the instrument of the actor. I need to keep in shape, flexible, and healthy. I really want to continue to cultivate a lightness and gracefulness on the stage to create beautiful performances for my audience. I want to focus on classical dance and movement for actors (which might include things like Feldenkrais or Alexander Technique). At the same time, I would love to explore more of the Roy Hart voice technique in order to make the voices of the characters more diverse and interesting. The voice work, called "extended voice" has really helped me to see my voice as an expression of a state of being. I have stopped being so calculating with my voice, stopped trying to just sound beautiful, but let my

voice truly express something, some emotion or idea. The same with the body. I need to free my body up as much as possible so that it can communicate the feelings and the thoughts of my character. Audiences are moved by the movement, growth, and inner turmoil of the characters, and I want to make sure I am letting them in on what's going on inside my head.

I have several other ideas that I would like to develop into performance. Especially with comedy, being in front of an audience, where you can hear the laughs, is essential to getting a definite answer on if a piece is effective. In comedy, if they don't laugh, it didn't work and you need to rewrite. I would love to showcase new work in front of an audience as often as possible. Audience feedback is extremely valuable. Of course, before I would show any piece in performance, I would use some of the structuring techniques I described in the first section of this paper.

I believe that the most important discovery I made in the creation and execution of my piece can be summed up in one word: planning. You have to plan the framework of story before you write it and then allow yourself to find surprises as you embellish the story. It is just like a journey, even if you are flexible on where you are going to end up, you still have to decide to go in a certain direction at first, even if you completely change your mind later. I also think as actors a lot of us have the misconception that inspiration and "feeling it" are everything. But after studying how great writers consistently churn out interesting material, and how they may work for several months before actually doing

any “writing,” I really had to put aside that notion of inspiration being the key to a critical and popular success. Inspiration is a jumping off point. I took the time to structure my story and then spice it up with surprise.

The effects of balancing both structure and surprise can be seen in the audience’s faces as they watch the piece. You can learn so much about the story’s effectiveness by hearing their laughter or their silence. With the proper balance, the audience will be engaged, and when an audience is engaged throughout a piece, the story is working. A story that works is one that sticks to and fully explores its premise, has a protagonist who changes, has emotional movement in every scene, and is chock full of surprises. The story structure puts your audience on a familiar path, so that they think they know what’s going to happen, and they watch in order to confirm their guesses. On the other hand, the story surprises keep the audience on their toes emotionally—they never can *predict* exactly what will happen next. Compelling the audience’s interest for the duration of a performance is a difficult balancing act but it can be done, as evidenced by some of the great dramatic works we have discussed in this paper. Writing an unforgettable story can be summed up like this: once you’ve laid out your story’s structure, you just have to remember to “Rama-lama-lama.” Structure and surprise, they go together.

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Vita

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