Drama Days

by Adam Strong

You are sitting in the back row of the gym, at try-outs, waiting for your name to be called. You are three days new to a private school and already you are convinced you are some sort of social pariah. In addition to having occasional breakouts and splotches of purple acne, you have this block when you try to talk, a kind of stutter that freezes up your tongue. This block makes it so sometimes your tongue will refuse to move, it just sits there dead in your mouth and then other times, your tongue doesn't do what your brain tells it to do, and it gets stuck on every other word. This stutter is so bad you are convinced that you cannot speak to other people.

What this anxiety rising up in you feels like is the jitter one feels after too many cups of coffee mixed with a debilitating lack of self-control. Another thing about this stutter is how your awareness of it makes it that much worse, so in situations where it is really important to get it right, you totally fuck it up.

You signed up for drama because ever since you could remember you wanted to act, or write. You had a thought in your head, or multiple thoughts that if strung together could show the world a part of you that you've always thought special, if only everyone else could see it.

Prior to tonight's try-outs, you've only had two days of acting in class, but they did not go so well. It was day one and the drama class was in improv mode, the class was in the middle of a game of freeze and what you ended up doing was opening your mouth to justify why your arms were raised, straight out for the scarecrow position you were in, but when you did open your mouth, no sound came out. There was only the sound of your paralyzed tongue and the air rushing through your throat. When a few voices in the class started to laugh, the pressure in your head got to be too much, and then you were stuck in the middle of the line, the middle of the “s” and the “t” in a consonant stutter and then the voices come at you, from the jittery reel of a Porky Pig cartoon.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/adam-strong/drama-days»*
Copyright © 2012 Adam Strong. All rights reserved.

“Abedeee, abedee, that's all f-f-f-f-olks.” they said.

Because of this incident, girls do not want to act in scenes with you. They stand next to other boys in class just so they won't have to act with you. This is what you think.

But in the middle of all of this, an opportunity comes up, try-outs for *Li'l Abner*. Even though the script's not much, and you hate musicals, this could be the chance to let out the person inside of you who has a story to tell. And if your own personality is too broken to do the telling, then you will conjure up the person who is capable of doing it.

Government Man is the part, and it's a bit part. It doesn't have the panache of the main roles of Abner or Daisy, but why would you want that? You want a caricature. You want to throw your classmates' image of you back into their faces.

Right before you walk up on stage for that audition, when you're still in the aisles and everyone is thinking, oh god, not him, you slide your glasses down to the tip of your nose. You've got your heart in that place, the way your heart beats, the way you take in the air through your lungs, the way a panicked bureaucrat who doesn't understand country folk or how they live would, who thinks that a Sadie Hawkins dance is morally irresponsible.

You've been sitting in the audience for over twenty minutes before being called, and the script in your hand is a little damp. All you need are the three or four lines highlighted in neon green highlighter.

With your hands trembling, and the crumpled-up script in your hand, you wait for the hush to come over the crowd, then you close your eyes, open your mouth and feel the weight on your tongue like a rubber band is around it and you say the first line, clear as anyone else might.

You are still a little nervous, with the shaking that carries over to your legs, but you throw just enough of it out there to justify the character “I think this would make a most excellent site for our work,” you say. “But the natives don't seem very friendly.”

When you say that line, you are the government man. You say the line with the kind of over-calculating tone a government insurance adjuster would use, where every syllable is over pronounced. And since you're shaking on stage a little bit already, you let it flow through every shivering body part. You show everyone in the audience how it feels to be you, every day, at school.

You have a talent. You can project yourself out of your own body, to the point where you can live in and become other people, and you do this so well that you even fool yourself.

You fool your stutter. What you do is concentrate on the line a character says in a play or a movie, paying attention to the way the words slide off of your tongue. The weight of syllables and consonants are the key to getting in. It's your entry point in becoming someone else. Once you're inside that person, all you have to do is move your body in a way that matches the way the words are said and the way the character would say it.

There are a few more lines about how the people of Dogpatch don't have any morals, and this is a depraved environment. You say all of it with that shrill, too pronounced nasal voice, but no stutter. At the end of it, the way people clap and laugh when you step down off that stage, you can tell the performance is a rousing success.

When you sit down in the back row all six or seven faces in the audience around you can't stop smiling. You start to smile back for a second, and then you remember why you are here in the first place. These people hate me, you think, they only like to laugh at the freak.

Three days later when the parts are announced, you are not surprised when you're chosen for Government Man. You are given two more weeks at this, to refine your Government Man, for six performances. And if you can turn this bit part into the scene-stealing bit of nuanced evil that you know you can, then your mission will be accomplished.

All of those moments during these six performances change you. The people in the crowd, the same people you go to school with, your parents, their parents, they look at you differently when you're onstage. All of them give you the kind of time they wouldn't normally

give you, a space in their lives where you can tell them a story. You send them your own pain through the flesh and blood of someone else.

Time and space feels different up there on stage, gravity on another planet. There's something about the amount of time it takes to say a line on stage versus in real life, the way people take their time on stage in dialogue to make a clear point, and all the waiting you do in playing this Government Man, waiting backstage and on stage, standing around until your lines come up. During that time, you can tear reality apart and spend the time waiting for your next line to put that reality back together again, re-arranging yourself in the process. You aren't just delivering lines, you are digging into the slow stinging sadness of who the Government Man is, reflecting it back through who you are.

All of that time onstage through those six performances, each with its own do or die moment, when it could have gone so much worse, you could have stood on stage with your tongue just lying in your mouth and the wind howling through. But that didn't happen. Maybe you have a few rough steps, a couple of lines delivered from an unsure footing, but you cover it up enough in the nervousness, in the eternal shake of your government man, that the audience doesn't know the difference, they hoot and howl when you walk on stage, and each time you leave, there's a crack in the applause that means the crowd doesn't want to see you leave that stage.

The moment the curtain comes down, of course, all of that comfort ends. The hugs people give you, the praise, all of it stings. You feel the burn for having to do this in the first place, just to feel good. That you just can't wake up in the morning without feeling so full of anxiety simply because to have a conversation with someone is an exercise in tongue gymnastics.

Just after your performance at *Li'l Abner* try-outs, you sit with some other kids at lunch, and they are all talking about Government Man, and saying things to you like, “Boy, that must've been a stretch, playing that role.”

And you lean forward and all of that caffeine anxiety rises up in your throat, the pressure in your jaw, a series of weights and pulleys on your teeth and at the back of your mouth. So when you open your mouth to talk, no sound is made, only the sound of your tongue refusing to move.

The looks on the audience's faces, it's the first time they've seen someone at lunch sit there with his mouth hanging open. It's only then that you realize you are sitting there, with your mouth wide open, and the noise you make is not words but the absence of words. The words you conjure up in your mind have jumped down your throat and they won't tell you who they are or what they have to say, so this big mass of air comes out, and so does the partially chewed up hamburger and bun, rolling right out onto the table, and when the words you've lost at the bottom of your mouth do come out, finally, they are all chopped up, wound up in the padlock tied to your tongue and mouth. And then up from the cafeteria, every square inch of table and lunch tray around you is filled with Porky Pig noises.

“Abedeee, abedee, that's all f-f-f-f-olks.” These voices, these packs of laughter going off, the voices of Porky Pig overlapping like a recital, one side of the chorus starting one note and the other side another, until the pig voices are the only voices in the cafeteria.

When you are performing, that stuttering, chewed-up hamburger guy is gone. You love how socially accepted you can be when you are performing. All in all, those folks at school, your parents and teachers and peers, they all want to see you happy. They want you to be the way you are on stage all the time, eloquent and rehearsed, each line burning with overtones both personal and political.

After *Li'l Abner*, you go on to another bit part role, the Cab Driver in *Harvey*, who offers the closing maybe-we're-all-crazy-in-this-mixed-up-world soliloquy that is your favorite part of the play.

Inside the weight of that Cab Driver, you are comforting yourself in front of hundreds of people. Through the frame of a four-foot, nine-inch body you are a heavyset man from Brooklyn with all the world-weary wisdom of a sage.

When you say those lines on stage as the Cab Driver, you are the calm center of the world. You use the voice of your therapist. You are in his office, with the two fern plants, with pots so big they take up almost the whole office. In that office at the end of a long humid Miami winter, you tell him how you feel, you tell him you are living your life underneath a microscope. You tell him everyone judges you.

One day in the middle of third-period English, Mr. Rosen has your class watch some old warped VHS copy of *Kiss Me Kate*. The cast on the video sings “Brush up Your Shakespeare” and the tracking on the tape is all squiggly black bar up from the bottom of the screen. Normally someone in class would get up and fix it, but no one is even paying attention to the tape.

“Hey, c'mere” Mr. Rosen says. He calls you over. He has a way of looking at students that makes it seem like he is going to offer you drugs or a peek at some kind of great porn mag he has stashed underneath his desk.

It is a script for *The Fantasticks*, and there are green bits of highlighted lines all over the page he has before him. It's your role, the one he's picked for you. You don't even have to try out.

“Not bad, huh” he says, in that Groucho Marx voice of his. He is always making that Groucho Marx voice. But in the glance that comes with the voice, there's something more than just the stock eyebrow up on the forehead, his eyes have found you, the perfect Henry.

Henry, the retired Shakespearean actor, the comic relief in the story, because of the way his defect, his own senility makes him mix up old lines from Shakespeare.

“Brush up your Shakespeare,” Mr. Rosen says. He's singing aloud to the VHS tape, “Start quoting him now.” He points at you with one hand, and the other is on the unlit cigar he is holding.

You are to live in and embody the mind of a man whose brain has turned against him in the form of not remembering. And for you it might be the most liberating part you will ever play. In this fugue state of a role there is a world of possibilities. In the twilight of his mind you will find a place where his movements as an actor are built

up in your mind, all of the Shakespeare plays and all of Henry's performances, mixing up not only dialogue but movement, so each night the performance is different.

Before the first performance, Mr. Rosen is outside the auditorium, with a big cigar going, the same one he's been wearing like a prop above his ear all afternoon. “Roll around in that dirt, that's it,” he says.

“This is going to be beautiful,” he says. You could tell by that smile on his face he is getting a kick out of watching you come into your own, through the mind of someone else.

You roll around in the dirt so you look like you've been filed away in a trunk for twenty years. You leap out of boxes. You don wigs. You don medieval garb. You steal each scene Henry is in.

Up there on stage, there's a look on the faces of the audience, where fear begins to creep into the equation, the way they look at you. You become that old Shakespearean actor, the way Henry gets into you, affects your movements, your speech, there is fear on those faces out in the audience, because in this way, on stage, with you reciting and ranting and raving, you are a sixteen year old capable of anything, of leaping out into the audience, arms and legs stuck out.

This sword you use, to duel with other characters, the way you fight your enemies on stage. One second you are screwing your courage to the sticking post and the audience is laughing, and the next the audience is silent. The kind of silence that notices how you are able to manipulate intricate swordplay, and they see it, how even with an imitation child sword you are capable of real violence. How even with a fake costume sword you could slit their throats and paint the room with their insults.

It's acting as revenge, and with the make-up on at the curtain call, you see it in their eyes. You feel it in the handshakes they give you after, the pats on the back. You are feared.

You are fearless.

Originally published by Intellectual Refuge, April 2012