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How Do I Play my Dead Grandpa?

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How do I Play my Dead Grandpa?

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Acting

by

Reshma Anna Meister

Thesis Committee:
Eli Simon
Cynthia Bassham
Juliette Carrillo

2021

DEDICATION

To

my grandpa, Milton D'souza

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: WHO WAS HE?	1
CHAPTER 2: THE PROJECT	2
CHAPTER 3: WHAT'S THE POINT?	2
CHAPTER 4: FORGIVENESS	4

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

How do I Play my Dead Grandpa?

by

Reshma Anna Meister

Master of Fine Arts in Acting

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Don Hill, Chair

[I am sitting here drinking vodka and dragon fruit flavored Vitamin Water. I'm trying to figure out how to play my dead grandpa in a film, respectfully. How do I embody this deceased man by navigating my clouded memories and milky family gossip? My impressions of this man were forged by the grubby hands of my younger self and have been warped over time. Can they be trusted? There is something morbid about assuming the role of a deceased loved one. Is it possible to do his character justice or is it just plain rude? After all, he isn't here to defend himself.]

INTRODUCTION

Despite my hesitation and concern, I will put on my black sweatpants, Patagonia sweatshirt, and his blue prescription Ray Bans. I will perform as him in a scene I've written about the two of us and no one is going to stop me. This man lived a heady life of love and pain and nuance, but I'll be squeezing one droplet of his existence into this scene. I feel a bit guilty, as he gets no say in the matter. The scene is about my experience of love and shame and alcoholism within the context of our family. I emphasize the idea that family is something we did not ask to be a part of and remains as something we cannot escape from. Families are as fragile as babies; the babies we came into this world as. It takes intentional effort to make a family grow strong; patience, discernment, and faith. As we grow out of childhood and into adulthood that work and responsibility to improve falls on us. At the heart of the scene is this notion of forgiving your parents. You see, we have to forgive our parents if we're going to achieve any sort of peace. We have to forgive them even if they are not sorry.

CHAPTER 1: WHO WAS HE?

I'd never even had my first drink before he died. He died accidentally on purpose. Stomach cancer after a long life of Camel cigarettes, Chivas Regal scotch, and fried fish. So here I am in grad school trying to communicate through him, *as* him, dressed like him, talking like him, but never really actually him. What's the point of all this? And can he even feel what I'm trying to do here? I'm using him. I'm using his story and character and vibe to try and make a point; a point that I'm not certain he would even make were he alive today. My grandpa didn't actually talk that much. He worked a lot and slept a lot and drank a lot.

He watched *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *Emeril Live!* and soccer. He was an excellent chef and always split his banana with me because he thought I needed the potassium. I remember a lot of what he *did* but most of the words he spilled around me were simply prayers; never opinions or ruminations.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROJECT

I'll break it down right here: I am playing my grandpa and Meghan Minguéz-Marshall, an undergrad actor, is playing me. It's my birthday and I've blacked out and crashed my car (based on true events). In this blacked out, subconscious state I find Grandpa and we talk about why everyone in our family is so sad and self-destructive. One of the many conflicts I feel as a writer, actor, and granddaughter in this piece is that fact that my grandpa has never and probably would never say any of these things. They're all coming from my brain and I can't escape that my version of him is tightly tangled with my own perception of reality. He ends up sounding a lot like an idealized version of himself. He sounds a lot like me. This deviation from truth feels wrong when playing and writing for a character who actually existed. I feel a pressure to write his thoughts as accurate as possible however he's not here to check anything (he's also not here to get offended by any of it). So, after I've acknowledged the guilt that I feel, I am ultimately free from the burden of misrepresentation because I'm not trying to be him; I'm merely using his character as a frame.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT'S THE POINT?

There is immense spiritual and emotional pressure involved in playing a real person, especially a family member. However, I'm not playing him in a biopic. My goal is not

to play him as accurately as possible. I'm simply using his character to critique the structure and quality of our family. I'm using him to process a traumatic event that he wasn't even around to witness. I'm playing him because he was the first alcoholic I ever knew. I remember him wheezing prayers at the end of the night and hacking up phlegm in the early morning. These millisecond memories are the shapes and colors that compose the mosaic of my life. As a child I saw him as a symbol of mammoth faith and grumpiness. Now that I'm older I feel like I understand his pain (or at least a fraction of it) and as a result I feel closer to him. Now he doesn't seem as mysterious or far away. I'm playing my grandpa because I wanted to say hi.

I'm using him to carve out a lesson that others might be able to actively or subconsciously implement into their own lives. That lesson is forgiveness, and forgiveness is near impossible if you've never done it before. What is forgiveness in a spiritual and physical sense? How do we know what it feels like? How do we recognize it if we've never seen it before? I think it feels a lot like letting go and as a result, creating more space for love. When we're holding on to our resentment or pride or clutching our wounds (a posture that has helped us survive and prevent or nurse our pain), our hands and hearts are clenched. When they are clenched, they are not open to receive the gifts that this universe has to offer. Sometimes we may feel like our pain is all we have to hold onto and without it we have nothing. This is false. The universe provides abundantly; it is our capacity that is limited. This is why must let and continue to practice letting go. I think it will make our existence feel a bit lighter.

CHAPTER 4: FORGIVENESS

The question I have for people is: Have you forgiven your parents? —and have you forgiven yourself? It's much easier to conceptualize forgiveness than to exercise it so every nudge and reminder helps. Every image and scenario that demonstrates forgiveness allows it to become less foreign and more natural. Apology and forgiveness should be a reoccurring exchange in our lives, and it should be more prevalent in our relationships. It helps us move forward without carrying the guilt that comes with hurting someone or the resentment we may feel when we are hurt by someone. This is what I'm trying to encourage through this piece and that's why I'm borrowing my Grandpa's identity. Through him, I argue that you can both love your family deeply and acknowledge that they have hurt you. You can accept them as they are and still want them to get better. You can both hold them accountable and forgive them. In a few days I'll light my fake cigarette and roll my r's and think of my grandpa and how so many families have dead people who still show up to the functions. They're impossible to shake off. These people never leave us. They are integral parts of the story, parts of the problem, and can be part of the solution. We can use them. Thank you, Grandpa, for letting me do my thing (not that you had a choice).