

SO YOU WANT TO DO A SOLO SHOW?

Gareth Armstrong

Foreword by Maureen Lipman



NICK HERN BOOKS

London

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Foreword <i>by Maureen Lipman</i> | ix |
| Acknowledgements | xi |
| Introduction | 1 |

Part One

| | |
|--|----|
| What's Your Motivation? | 7 |
| What's Your Inspiration? | 11 |
| What's Your Show? | 13 |
| 1 A previously performed play | 15 |
| 2 A play using your own life experiences | 18 |
| 3 A play based on a real-life character or characters | 22 |
| 4 A play based on a fictional life | 28 |
| 5 A play revisiting a fictional creation | 32 |
| 6 A play celebrating a literary life (by impersonation or in recital) | 36 |
| 7 A play adapted from other media | 43 |
| 8 A play for children | 54 |
| 9 A play based on utilising a special skill | 57 |
| 10 A play based on none of the above | 61 |
| Finally, the First Word | 63 |

CONTENTS

Part Two

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Getting Your Act Together | 67 |
| Money | 69 |
| People | 74 |
| Timing | 83 |
| Rehearsals | 85 |
| First Night | 88 |
| Next Steps | 91 |
| Publicity | 99 |
| Booking Agencies | 104 |
| The Edinburgh Festival Fringe | 107 |
| Life After Edinburgh | 116 |
| Touring | 120 |
| Budgeting | 125 |
| Rural Touring | 128 |
| International Touring | 130 |
| | |
| Postscript | 136 |
| | |
| Appendices | 137 |

Introduction

‘My idea of hell would be a one-woman show, I wouldn’t be able to do that...’

Judi Dench (And Furthermore)

Most actors, however, at some point in their careers will think about doing a solo show. It’s a very small percentage that will actually get their piece staged. A poll as to when and why actors abort their brave attempts would be very instructive. Early quitters may be put off by the responsibility, the solitary status, the sheer hard work or because an offer of more conventional work comes along. If none of these scupper your resolution, it may be money, logistics or loss of bottle. There are innumerable reasons why you’d quit, all of them justifiable, but you’d be missing a life-changing experience.

At whatever stage you are in your career, rewind to that existential moment when you decided the only life for you was on the boards. Choosing to do a solo show will remind you of the sensation of launching yourself on a thrilling adventure, it will empower you, and put you where you know you belong – centre stage. And you won’t even have had to go through the agony of an audition.

One of the features that distinguishes younger actors from many of their older colleagues is an entrepreneurial spirit, born partly of the zeitgeist but also from the changes in the profession, which have diminished and curtailed the opportunities to work in live theatre. A career path for previous generations of performers was much more

INTRODUCTION

straightforward than it is today. After training, getting an agent, applying for Equity membership and learning how to sign-on for unemployment benefit, most young actors would have waited for the phone to ring and hoped it was an opportunity to audition for a season of work in a regional theatre. What followed was not always the effortless rise to the stardom of their dreams, and taking part-time employment in retail or an office was a frequent recourse, but the talented would generally find a network of theatres that would engage them frequently enough for them to at least identify themselves as professional actors.

Changes in theatre politics and policy have dismantled that structure and nowadays young actors realise they have to be more proactive to get work, and ruthlessly self-promoting to *keep* themselves in work. They will have developed their own websites, with links to their showreels and voice-over demos. They will collaborate with each other in forming small-scale theatre companies, take options on plays or novels to adapt into film scripts, and of course devise, commission or write solo performances.

But judging from the majority of solo shows currently on offer around the country it is apparent that most are created not by actors fresh from drama school and eager to take centre stage, but by those with a degree of experience. That experience is often a decade or more working in the profession and, as significantly, *not* working in the profession. Frustration with the trajectory of a career is one of the principal reasons for going solo. That was certainly what triggered my interest in the genre.

The actor Frank Barrie created a one-man show, *Macready*, about the great nineteenth-century actor-manager, William Macready, and toured it for twenty-five years. As well as giving him employment, it brought a degree of independence, great personal satisfaction, a clutch of awards and the opportunity to travel the world. Like many of his friends

INTRODUCTION

impressed by his achievement, I asked him how to go about doing something similar myself. His response, 'First find a subject you are passionate about,' is still the best piece of advice for any would-be solo performer.

Years later, whilst playing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, I became obsessed with the character, and was reluctant to abandon him at the end of our short run. There was nothing as challenging on my professional horizon so I decided to devote the next year to creating a one-man show about Shakespeare's infamous Jew. I started only with the prescribed passion but I was still performing my play, *Shylock*, ten years later, and, as well as tackling another Shakespearean icon alone (Prospero in Stephen Davies's play *Dr Prospero*), I have had a hand in creating over a dozen solo plays for other performers. What I learnt from my own creative process and from nurturing others is the subject of this book. It will try and guide you through the process of conceiving, realising and presenting your solo show. It will question your motives, your commitment, your dedication and your stamina. The only element it will take for granted is your talent.

What's Your Show?

Your show will come under one of the following ten categories:

- 1 A previously performed play
- 2 A play using your own life experiences
- 3 A play based on a real-life character or characters
- 4 A play based on a fictional life
- 5 A play revisiting a fictional creation
- 6 A play celebrating a literary life (by impersonation or in recital)
- 7 A play adapted from other media
- 8 A play for children
- 9 A play based on utilising a special skill
- 10 A play based on none of the above

1. A Previously Performed Play

This is the most straightforward choice: to reprise a performance of a play you have seen, or stage a published play that you have read. This frees you from many of the artistic dilemmas of more complex routes. If you don't already have a copy of the script you have in mind, if it is out of print or not available from a bookshop, you can try and access it via internet sites or direct from the publisher. If the script has not been published you should contact and request a copy from the playwright's agent.

If you have no definite play in mind you can search online for solo plays written by playwrights whose work you admire, the sites of play publishers or the sites of producing theatres that specialise in small-scale work or new writing. More adventurously, you could contact literary agents and investigate the availability of unpublished or even unperformed solo work. There may be a neglected gem by a writer who is as eager to be performed as you are to perform. Or a revival of a once-staged but now forgotten play could be good for you and the writer. If you are receptive to looking beyond the British repertoire then use the same resources to search out North American or Australasian plays, or European plays in translation.

An invaluable resource is the website Doollee.com which is a truly comprehensive guide to modern playwriting and English plays which have been written, adapted or translated into English since 1956. By clicking on the link to 'Characters' and specifying one male or one female actor, you will be bombarded with solo plays of every description

WHAT'S YOUR SHOW?

with further links to the playwright, their known works and how to contact them.

Be sure, before you start learning the lines and rehearsing your curtain call, that the necessary rights to your chosen text are available, and that you can afford them. Another actor may have had the same idea and already taken an option on the performing rights, the playwright or his agent may not be prepared to release the rights to you, or the fees charged may be prohibitive.

Don't capitulate at the first rebuff if you get a rejection because polite and persistent approaches sometimes pay off, but ultimately be prepared to accept rejection and look for another play.

Be realistic about casting. Just because you long to play a part doesn't necessarily mean you *should* play it. Think hard about how suitable you are for the role. Canvass some opinions from friends and fellow professionals whom you trust and look out for the literal or metaphorical raised eyebrow.

CASE STUDY

Guy Masterson, *The Boy's Own Story*

Guy Masterston's name appears in this book more than once as, in one guise or another, he is responsible for more solo shows than anyone currently working in the UK.

His first foray was as an actor needing to generate his own work and searching around for a suitable scripted one-man vehicle. *The Boy's Own Story* was the first full-length play written by Peter Flannery and had premiered in Manchester. The story of a goalkeeper, bored with inactivity at a Sunday-league

match recounting his background, frustration and ambitions, took Guy to Edinburgh for the first of the eighteen Festivals he has attended since, and went on to tour the UK for two hundred performances. This first experience got him hooked on solo shows, and his work has subsequently grown more innovative and ambitious. Since that outing in 1991, he has performed seven, directed sixteen, and had a hand in touring over forty-four one-person shows.

His stable has been an eclectic one and has embraced virtually all the different approaches catalogued here. It's the passion and skill of the actor that he rates as pivotal but warns against the 'ego-play' as the surest way to alienate an audience. Energy, humility, sensitivity and stamina are the qualities that he rates most highly.

For his goalkeeping debut, Guy needed a large Astroturf six-yard-box goalmouth, but his most recent performances have required a single chair and imaginative but uncomplicated sound and lighting plots.