

## Gorilla Theatre

When I was a junior in high school, I submitted two entries to a 20 minute play festival for young writers in my home town of Tampa, Florida.

One was a very quiet, subtle, symbolic play about aging and the search for purpose in life. The other was kind of different. It was about an entrepreneur who starts a business called “Destruction Room Incorporated,” where you can pay money to destroy anything on the premises—as a kind of therapeutic exercise or stress reliever.

That play, I aptly titled “Destruction Room.”

“Oh like Fight Club.”

“No, not like Fight Club,” I kept insisting over and over again to my friends. Just go and see it.

I’m not sure why I decided to submit “Destruction Room” to this festival, because it was kind of one of those plays that probably should not ever be staged. The script calls for the two actors—one male, one female—to literally smash an entire shop of chinaware, pottery, fine art, etc.—and... it was kind of crazy.

But I submitted it, and sure enough, the Gorilla Theatre of Tampa selected it to be produced as part of their Young Dramatists Project of 2008.

Now, “theatre” may not be the most adequate term I could use to describe The “Gorilla Theater” of Tampa. It was founded by a magician named Aubrey, who had made a multi-million-dollar fortune selling organic hair products, which he proudly displayed in the backstage bathrooms.

And, while Tampa may not be a cultural Mecca, it is fondly known as the Lap Dance Capital of the World.

And, conveniently sandwiched between Mons Venus Strip Club and 2001 A Space Odyssey of Bodies, you can find the 80-seat black box Gorilla Theater in a retrofitted warehouse, where my play was going to be staged.

So the first day of rehearsals, I walk in, and Aubrey greets me. He's about 80 years old, stands 4 feet 11 inches tall, wears a garish blue suit with thick white stripes, and has white hair extending down to his lower back. "It's nice to meet you," he says. "Here's an iPod," and he pulls a brand new iPod Nano out of his pocket and gives it to me.

Aubrey then informed me that for the smashing sequences of the play, he had sunk \$4000 into purchasing two weeks worth of

porcelain dishes, a buzz saw to produce sparks, a blowtorch, and baseball bats to smash tables and chairs. And because of liability issues, his insurance agent required that everyone in the audience wear plastic safety goggles.

Now, the director had already been rehearsing with the actors for few days when I got there. And one of the elements I had written into the play was a little bit of chemistry between the male and female characters. Subtext to give the dialogue a bit more tension.

So you can imagine my surprise when, about 10 minutes into the run-through, the actors start to take their clothes off and begin making out on a table onstage.

The director says to me, “I really think it needs a sex scene, Gabe.”

“No, that’s a terrible, terrible idea.”

But he wouldn't listen to me, so I just kind of sat there with my mom in the back of the theatre cringing. This wasn't just going to be a failure of massive proportions. This play was going to ruin my reputation! I'm the guy who won my school's Good Citizen Award and the Attendance Award four years in a row. And I'm not artsy. I wear plaid shorts and polo shirts. I normally try to write serious and dignified plays. Stuff Arthur Miller's mom would be proud of.

But this... this was getting completely out of control.

My grandparents would be there. My aunt and uncle were driving up from Sarasota. Friends. Neighbors. Classmates would all be watching this monstrosity.

And then there was the actual audience—which in Tampa, Florida is mostly comprised of geriatric patients. These little old ladies didn't know what they were getting themselves into. And if one of

them didn't have a heart attack from the explosions onstage, they were at least going to be scarred emotionally.

I'd just have to tell Aubrey the deal was off. Cancel the damn show, and be done with it.

... But... he gave me an iPod, and I felt guilty.

So... I went along with it. Opening night arrived. And despite not being a particularly spiritual person, I said a quiet prayer to myself and slow slinked lower and lower into my seat.

Stage hands dressed in matching jump suits with a fake "Destruction Room" logos on their backs handed out goggles to everyone.

And then, I looked around, and saw elderly Bernie and Gertrude Leibowitz from my synagogue sitting there. And next to them,

tweaking his rimless glasses and donning his goggles was Mr. Mike Murphy, headmaster of my school.

Now when things go wrong during a show, it's usually during the second night. The actors tend to become a little lax. They've already done a show, and they think they have it under control. But we didn't have to wait for a second night, because the male lead got a little careless and hurled one of his plates very, very hard, so when it splintered, ceramic shards flew into the seats, causing an old lady in her lab goggles to scream like a banshee and run out of the theatre. Heavy metal music shook the room. Plates and chairs went flying.

After the show, my headmaster walked up to me with a kind of dazed look on his face and said to me, "That was very interesting, Gabe," and walked away.

The review in the newspaper was fairly scathing. Wrote the theatre critic, “Neustadt’s play is mostly an excuse for actors to break stuff.”

Which is kind of true.

But I had intended to make people think. The play at its heart was an ideologically conservative political satire that touched on themes such the nature of laissez-faire capitalism, the futility of liberal political activism, and the presence of violence in American culture. Or something like that...

And then, something interesting happened... the play started to develop a kind of miniature cult following. An audience member wrote the Gorilla Theatre to say that my play “changed his life.” And then another. And another. And another.



And by closing night, this bizarre, noisy, obscene little play had, through word of mouth, a packed house of devoted, mostly male theatergoers who recounted to me that my stupid show actually meant something to them.

Now, I still can't figure out why I—normally so reserved and conservative—wrote and then submitted this crazy play. Perhaps I'm really not that reserved or conservative. Perhaps, like Aubrey, I actually have a penchant for this kind of schlocky sensationalism.

Or maybe, like the rest of us, I can appreciate being a little crazy, at least every once in a while. Thank you.