

Portrait of the Artist as Artist: The Celebration of Autobiography

by Jenn Stephenson

Although the notion of celebrity is premised on popular recognition and fed by voracious media reportage on a global scale, it can also take on a more homey and local flavour. Niche celebrities arise in diverse smaller communities carved out by geography or specialized interest. Without invoking an oxymoron, we can reasonably talk about “local celebrity.” The high school principal of a small town is a celebrity of this kind. Likewise a pioneer of anime, an iconoclastic documentary filmmaker or a bassoon virtuoso will be a celebrity to fans and aficionados in those fields. On the other hand, by virtue of their narrow appeal and dependence on particular knowledge, these celebrities pass unknown to outsiders. The marker of celebrity, then, is epistemological, tied up in knowing the answer to the question, “Who are you?”

However, when reflecting on celebrity performers, there is an added ontological aspect to our perception of, and interest in, these individuals. Celebrity actors show us two different kinds of personae—the actual actor and a fictional repertoire of characters. The characters they create are offered for public consumption. Performance grants the audience an intimate engagement with the actor’s external features blended with the emotional life of a fictional character. As tantalizing as this portrait is, implying an authentic connection between audience and the performer, it is, of course, an illusion (and I am no closer to really knowing Brad Pitt than I was before). For celebrity-watchers, it is the quotidian life of the actor that attracts our curiosity. Our desire is for contact with the real.

Usually this real aspect of the performer is made invisible to audience perception, obscured or ignored as the fictional aspect is promoted. This is the basic duality at the heart of the embodiment convention, allowing both actual actor and fictional character to coexist, such that the audience engages primarily with the fictional character, but without





Vancouver-based TJ Dawe performs in his autobiographical solo show *Totem Figures*.

Photo by Alec Toller

forgetting the provisionally absent actor. However, in the case of well-known actors adopting fictional roles, this duality is challenged. Here, the audience's knowledge and interest in the actor-as-actor can overwhelm the fictional characterization and make transposition difficult, if not impossible. The mediation process undertaken by the audience is itself under siege; so we end up with a resolutely singular perception of the celebrity actor on stage. (Excluding eponymous characters, ask yourself if you can name a character played by Julia Roberts or Brad Pitt. This task is less challenging when we think about stage actors, especially in Canada where the overpowering actuality of celebrity is not as strong.)

Autobiographical performance, where the actor performs as himself or herself, also produces a singularity. Instead of overwhelming the fictional persona, autobiographical performance takes a different tack. A singular impression of the real is achieved by blending the actual and fictional

so that they become virtually indistinguishable. The performer is 'me' and the character is also 'me.' To some extent this too is illusive, since there are definite and unavoidable performance elements that mark the performance persona as fictive. As in the calculus, autobiographical performance approaches a "zero" point where the actual and fictional personae are equivalent, but never attain perfect identity. Celebrity performance, then, invariably fails to produce a fully fictional world, remaining resolutely actual because the gap between fictional and actual is so large. By contrast, autobiographical performance, where that gap is minimized almost to singularity, co-opts this failure, encouraging the actual to shine through.

Audience knowledge of the actual actor-as-actor can be established in advance of the performance, but even for initially anonymous performers, autobiographical performance develops an acutely local kind of celebrity as a feature of the performance itself. For solo performers in Canada, where celebrity culture around stage performers is not well developed, it is this second kind of local celebrity-within that prevails.

Among solo artists, Vancouver's TJ Dawe is arguably the most prolific creator of autobiographical plays in Canada. Beginning with *Tired Clichés* (1999) to his most recent work *Totem Figures* (2008), Dawe has performed in more than 80 Fringe Festivals in Canada, the U.S. and abroad, logging upwards of 700 performances. In recent years, Dawe's Fringe commitments have expanded to include directing and co-writing other shows with regular collaborators Charles Ross (see Ross's article in this issue for discussion of his own experiences as a solo performer), Mike Rinaldi, Greg Landucci, Keir Cutler, and Alice Nelson. With numerous awards, critical praise and

sold out shows, Dawe is an unqualified celebrity. But even without this external identification garnered from specialized

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knowledge of Fringe culture, the simple act of standing on stage and saying “I’m TJ Dawe” makes the autobiographical performer a 90-minute celebrity. And within Dawe’s autobiographical oeuvre, *Totem Figures* is especially direct in establishing the equivalency of the actual actor/writer and the fictional narrator/protagonist:

Hi
welcome to the show
thanks for coming
I’m TJ Dawe
as I mentioned, I’m from
Vancouver, BC
I’m 33 years old
and for the last ten years I’ve
toured the Canadian Fringe theatre
circuit—which, in case you don’t
know, is a sequence of ten, eleven,
twelve day theatre festivals very
deliberately arranged in an orderly
sequence east to west across
Canada
starting in Montreal in June... (CTR
141, 57-58)

The word celebrity derives from the verb “to celebrate.” A celebrity is someone who is celebrated, in the sense of being honoured or famous. A second associated sense of the word “to celebrate” denotes the performance of a rite or ceremony, or the marking of a significant event. And just as autobiographical performance engenders celebrity in the first derivation of the word, this secondary sense also applies where the celebrity becomes a celebrant. The indication of a change is a central feature of various rites and ceremonies. Through rites, participants mark the experience of a change in identity associated with a change in social status (i.e. from child to adult, bachelor to husband, wife to widow), or a change of degree as one graduates through the ranks in an organization—be it military, educational or professional. The upheaval of change is often actually made manifest by these performative acts. Yet, outside of formal communal rites, change can take many forms and require other celebrations and demarcations of passage. The performance of autobiography is a celebration of this kind.

In *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, literary scholar Susanna Egan observes that autobiography emerges out of crisis, which she defines as an unstable condition seeking change (Egan 5). Fellow scholar Jean Starobinski notes “one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life” (78). Anthony Paul Kerby concurs: “[m]uch of our own narrating can be usefully seen as driven by some...conflict, tension or crisis in our own lives” (63). The central crisis of *Totem Figures* concerns Dawe’s future as a Fringe performer:



Another scene from *Totem Figures*
Photo by Alec Toller

Another question I’ll sometimes get is
so what are you gonna do now
I mean, all these little skits you do on the fringe
are fine and dandy
but you’re not gonna tour the fringe the rest of
your life, are ya?
What are you really gonna do
and my general response to that is
fuck you!!
[...]
I usually phrase it a little differently than that
(CTR 141, 58)

Although this question marks a significant crisis for Dawe-as-performer, in terms of traumatic content, it is not perhaps on par with other contemporary autobiographical plays about surviving rape (*The Trigger* by Carmen Aguirre), gender reassignment surgery (*The Silicone Diaries* by Nina Arsenault), or loss of a parent to cancer (*Scratch* by Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman). Crisis is featured frequently in the content of autobiographical narratives, yielding stories of disaster. But in the peculiarly doubled genre of solo performance, crisis can also manifest as a dramaturgical strategy. With regard to the dramaturgy of solo performance, the dual identity of the performer as both actual writer/performer and fictional

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narrator/protagonist allows for potential interaction between these two subject positions. In an essentially monologic genre, this separation of personae permits dialogue between inside and outside views of self, between subjectivity and alterity (Neuman). Although there is only one voice and one body on stage in *Totem Figures*, Dawe primarily uses two strategies to create otherness and explore the central crisis.

The principal throughline of *Totem Figures* is Dawe’s autobiographical account of his history as a Fringe writer and performer, from making up scenarios with *Star Wars* figurines to a high school audition, theatre school in Victoria and his first Fringe tour. Interwoven with this self-narrative are biographies of Dawe’s totems. Totems for Dawe are iconic figures who reflect back some aspect of our self-image:

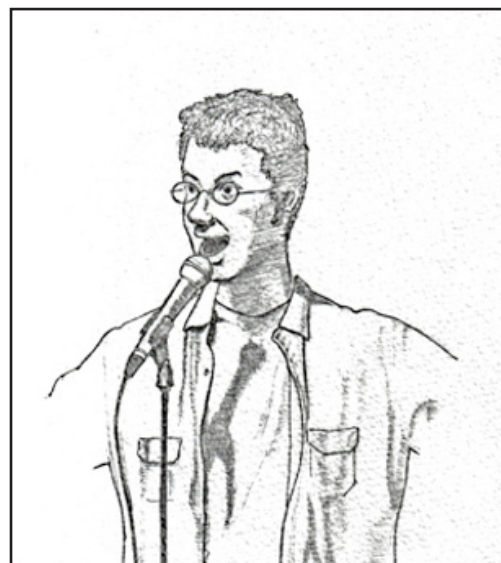
[. . .] your own totem pole
 [. . .] your own personal Mt. Rushmore
 your own Sgt. Pepper’s album cover
 that told the story of who you are
 and what you’ve done
 and who and what has influenced you (CTR
 141, 57)

Dawe’s declared totems include poet Charles Bukowski, comedian George Carlin, guitarist John Fahey, Jesus, and Dawe’s father—a high school principal. He also traces affinities to fictional characters: Luke Skywalker, Bilbo Baggins, and Fiver the rabbit. First in the selection of these icons and secondly in the qualities that Dawe chooses to highlight, similarities come into focus: the outsider, the detached observer, the artist with a unique perspective, the one whose insight transforms the experience of the group. In these portraits, it is not difficult to see a reflection of Dawe as a Fringe writer-storyteller. Dawe’s biographical accounts focus on the growth of these figures who are often disadvantaged or dismissed at first and through some kind of testing become who they are meant to be. He directs his stories particularly at the epiphanic moment discovered through performance, when these totems find their voice or their audience or their distinctive style. Clearly, by auditioning these other stories and binding them to his own self-narrative, Dawe hopes to clarify his experience.

Beyond navigating his trajectory through past experience to present identity, Dawe’s narrative shaping of the biographies of these totems also sketches possible futures. Fear, associated

with an impossible task, is a central motif of many of the totem histories. Often these impossible tasks result in failure (at least at first)—Luke Skywalker defeated by Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* or the abuse suffered by Bukowski and Fahey as children or the crucifixion of Christ. Out of the darkness comes rebirth for these protagonists. With humour, Dawe recognizes that his trials are not on par with the trauma of these mythic narratives. He ironically notes that it does come across as self-aggrandizing to see parallels between himself and Christ; nevertheless he draws inspiration from the patterns. Talking about the intense fear he experiences in preparation for a show, the failure of an early Fringe venture, and the joy he experiences in performance, Dawe makes explicit the connection to the totems’ fear-failure-rebirth schema. Through multiple analogies, *Totem Figures* creates horizontal links between these various protagonists and Dawe himself as a past-tense fictional protagonist. However, looking at vertical connections, we might see *Totem Figures* as offering another perspective on these biographies and their plots. For Dawe, the present-tense writer/performer, the path of fear-failure-rebirth still lies in the future. In this case, the crisis lies not in creating a Fringe performance, but rather in not creating a Fringe performance. Will Dawe leave the Fringe for something unknown? This dialogic strategy shifts consideration of the crisis from a narrative level (horizontal) to a performative level (vertical) where the performance itself is part of the celebratory process.

As marginal figures and situations go, Fringe festivals are, well, on the fringe, and proudly so. Linked to the outsider/shaman mythology of Dawe’s associated totems, the physical space and cultural conditions of the Fringe correlate to the identity collage being created and considered here. This is the second dialogic interaction generated by the play, performing a conversation between Dawe’s actual history as a Fringe



TJ Dawe—monologuing.
 Sketch by TJ Dawe

performer and his current (necessarily fictional) performance of himself as a Fringe performer. Set in the Fringe, *Totem Figures* is a rare piece of site-specific autobiographical performance. (Melanie Bennett has a site-specific autobiographical show in development, but I can't think of any other Canadian examples.) The site-specificity of the performance is curiously not dependent on one unique site but rather on a series of "fill-in-the-blank" sites. For *Totem Figures*, it is not an individual theatre space that is doubled in performance but the geo-cultural situation of any Fringe venue within the temporal frame of a Fringe in progress. The same venue a week later post-Fringe would not have the same resonance. As with all site-specific theatre, the synchronicity of the fictional site with the actual site permits dialogue between these two locations. When autobiographical performance of the actor-as-himself is layered on top of the specific site as the place-itself, the action of the play is profoundly performative.

The performance mutates under these circumstances from narrative about crisis to embodied enactment of the crisis. In this case, for Dawe, solo autobiographical Fringe performance is both the means of working through crisis and the crux of the crisis itself. The play does not offer a resolution, ending with a restatement of the original question:

so what am I gonna do now
will I tour the fringe for the rest of my days
as challenging and fulfilling as it is
or will I work on some of those other ideas and
step out into a bigger world
can I do both?
do I have the energy?
do I have the guts?
blackout
(blackout) (CTR 141, 94)

In terms of the content of the narrative perambulations of TJ the fictional protagonist, the move to change is still under consideration. But, from the dramaturgical perspective of TJ the writer-performer, the choice to stage this crisis, to ask this question under these circumstances, tells a different story. The act of asking the question provides Dawe with an answer. *Totem Figures* as a rite of the Fringe community, as an act of celebration, enacts the change in progress. It is a biography of a celebrity performer. It is a valentine to the Fringe. It is a farewell tour.

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