Confessions of a Flash Artist

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Ladies and gentlemen—but most of all ladies—allow me to introduce myself: Dr. Humphrey Humdinger. Now, at this introduction there are bound to be shrewd or skeptical persons who are frowning and shaking their heads, suspecting that no one could possibly have such a name. And of course they are right. The name is indeed pseudonymous, an invention of mine to disguise my identity. On the other hand it is true that I am a doctor, though not the kind it takes real brains and dogged dedication to become; that is to say, not a *medical* doctor. Instead I have a Ph.D. in mathematics from the City University of New York, in which institution I also have a tenured professorship. I wouldn't have felt it necessary to hide my identity were it not for certain disagreements between myself and the police, as well as those between myself and my colleagues. In both cases the points of contention are of a philosophical-aesthetic nature. Insofar as they relate to the police it is unfortunate that they exist at all, for I have always had the utmost respect for them as upholders of the law. Unfortunately there are certain inconsistencies between the letter and the spirit of the law with regard to myself—but more about that later.

Ladies and gentlemen, the first thing you should know

is that what I do has nothing to do with the common notion of a "flasher." That very word makes me cringe; it is a vulgar word for a vulgar act. It denotes nothing more than some twisted half-wit popping out in front of some old lady, showing his sad self, then running off with a diabolical shriek. Such behavior serves no socially redeeming purpose and the people who do it should be locked away. True, the word "flasher" is implied in the title of these *Confessions*, but only out of begrudging deference to what is, as of this writing, the public's ignorance about "Dramatic Exposure," which is the proper term for what I do. I mention this at the outset because the reader who is looking for a little dirty thrill had better look elsewhere—perhaps some tawdry Internet site. From those twisted absurdities the world of dramatic exposure is a universe away and on an infinitely higher level. It has little to do with starts and screams (though there are plenty of starts and screams in it) and almost everything to do with the flexible use of language, the graceful development of body language, the—as it were—subtle manipulation of the lights and shades of personal interaction in order to evoke a specific atmosphere and emotional response; in short, it is nothing less than a dramatic art in one of its highest manifestations, and which vies with the best in theater and cinema.

Oh, to have talent! It isn't the blessing everyone thinks it is. Even a mediocre talent signifies a divergence from the herd. But a large and original talent? One might as well have been born into a different species

altogether! Moreover the works of art produced by such a talent are invariably misunderstood because they are disconnected from the precedent forms to which the public has become accustomed. They are like a newly-discovered language no one understands and whose mysteries only rare perceptive spirits perceive the possible importance of and are willing to make the effort to untangle. And yet originality in art is where the real magic and majesty lies, even if, as history shows us, it is sometimes met with a less than positive response. My art has aroused a lot of hostility precisely because it is so groundbreaking; in the same way that *The Rite of Spring*, at its premiere, made the audience riot, and Gauguin's first paintings made the critics sneer. And where originality does not evoke hostility it is, as one might say, hostilely ignored. In the arts publicity counts for a great deal: with it, mediocrity can rise to public acclaim while without it even the most talented will struggle to make their way. This is especially the case in the acting world where ambition does not scruple to the most degraded behavior for the sake of the smallest advantage, and where consequently backstabbing and character assassination are the order of the day. It is no coincidence that those who have said the nastiest things about me—who have tried to vilify me at every turn—have been other actors. I will deal with them a little later, but for now let me just say this: when any two-bit ham can climb on a stage, strut back and forth like a turkey cock, ranting and raving, and mowing and

gesticulating like a madman, and then be hailed as a "fine dramatic actor"—is it any wonder that when a real actor comes along with his subtler, genuinely fine talent, his new, inimitable way of doing things, and even presents to the world a whole new art form;—is it any wonder that the hacks, at once perceiving that beside his their own efforts are bound to appear inconsiderable, do and say everything possible to bring him down, or, better yet, enter into a conspiracy of silence by which his name shall not be mentioned, his work remain unexplored, and thereby ensure that only their stale and uninventive productions continue to dupe the public?

The Greek philosopher Heracleitus tells us that a man's character is his destiny. Everything someone is ever to be is already there in him as a child. Thus the crafty little boy grows up into a scheming deadbeat, or a cheating corporate executive. If he is a chronic liar he will probably turn into a lawyer or a politician. And if he is interested in biology and has a proclivity to extortion?—he's sure to wind up, in America, a doctor. As for the tot charmingly good and without any obvious or great personality flaws, he will probably grow into a dutiful son, an upstanding member of the community, a cheery, good-natured fellow and worker, liked and respect by all, who just makes his living from year to year, raises a family, and passes away in his eighth or ninth decade, surrounded by sorrowing relatives. But there is another kind of child, very different from all the foregoing. He is the

little performer who unabashedly sings and dances for the applause of adoring parents and aunts and uncles. Nothing pleases him more than to show off his little leaps or pirouettes, or to act out a scene from a movie or a television show, or to declaim some speech from a play he has read. His proud parents will trot him out before company to repeat his performances, which he does with gusto, eager win more of the adoration on which he thrives. Such a child is a born actor, and that was the case with me. Even as a boy of seven or eight I loved to perform and was proud of the satisfaction I gave in that way. "What a good little actor he is!" people said. My parents often told me I was sure to wind up a movie star in Hollywood, and I intended to be just that.

Where did my acting talent come from? I myself am a loss to account for it. I look to my father's side of the family, then shift my retrospect to my mother's, and so far as I can see there is nothing in either direction but a wasteland of inartistic mediocrity, the common and appalling spectacle of every generation striving for the same foolish things that motivated and wore out its forbears. Which is not to say they were bad people; on the contrary, they were good people—honest, hard-working, careful of their children's welfare; but they knew and cared no more about art than they did about the composition of Saturn's rings. Working toward anything other than buying a bigger house or a newer car never crossed their minds. My appearance among them as a creative person was one of those mysteries

of genetics in which two indifferent lines combine to form something far beyond either one. It is said that the apple never falls far from the tree, but in my case a genetic storm carried the apple so far from the tree that none could say which one in the orchard it came from.

But as so often happens with children, in getting older I became a lot more self-conscious and was no longer so eager to perform. My gangling adolescent limbs, my cracking voice, and the pimples on my face made me embarrassingly aware of my own physical awkwardness. But most telling of all was that certain hormones were causing me to think about other things than acting. Who cared about assuming a character, learning a new speech, and impressing my parents or their friends with a monologue from a movie or a play when two rows away from me in Social Studies class was Judy!—Judy who was so pretty, whose lips were so lusciously puckered, who wore such tight jeans! Every time she looked over to me I wanted to wobble my tongue at her;—though, of course, I had sense enough to restrain myself. At any rate, Judy, and a succession of pretty girls like her, so filled my head that acting was the last thing I thought about.

And yet the creative urge was still there. In those school years it manifested itself in the staider arts of writing, painting, or learning guitar and composing music. My efforts in these ways were not very good; they couldn't have been because they were inconsistent with the essentially dramatic nature of my personality;

they were just stopgaps and makeshifts to appease an impulse whose proper mode of expression was in very different field. It seems to me now that the hours I spent working at them was just so much wasted time, so much effort doomed to failure and, worst of all, a diversion from my true vocation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know what you want to hear, I know what you're waiting for: descriptions of my performances, and the more vivid the better. But that would be to strip away the temporizing, conditional explanations necessary for you to get the proper idea of them. It's sad that I even have to say such a thing. If this were a more enlightened age, people would understand that they might need a certain preparation to appreciate something unique and sophisticated that they are coming to for the first time. But it is not an enlightened age; it is a dark age; and a hasty one at that; and nobody wants to wait for anything. Everybody's in a hurry, everybody wants things *now*. People want their reading like their food—fast. Well, I am sorry but you are going to have to wait. The meal I offer is not a hamburger and fries on a plastic tray. It's not scrambled eggs with two strips of bacon slapped on a worn oval plate and shoved in front of your face at a Formica counter. No!—it is a gourmet meal, made of rare ingredients, painstakingly prepared, subtly spiced, elegantly presented, served on fine tableware: it is to be savored, lingered over, each fork- or spoonful of it to be seen, smelled, lovingly chewed and swallowed

with pleasure;—*not* to be gobbled down as quickly as possible because you want to get back to business. My performances as an exposure artist? Believe me, I have a few choice ones lined up for you—you'll get an eyeful soon enough. But in the meantime, please, a little patience!

All through my college years I was still too self-conscious to perform, and quite apart from the distraction of pretty girls I also had to think about making a living. I decided to become a mathematics professor. That is probably the furthest thing from an artistic career but to me it seemed the logical choice because I had always been good at numbers. I liked the effect complicated equations had on my mind: the way they forced me into what, on the face of it, seemed bouts of strictly linear logic, but which ultimately conveyed me to a greater distance than ever from boring everyday life. And I did very well in school. I was one of the best students, and earned my Ph.D. in five years. My dissertation was entitled, *Quasiconvexity of Stable Compactifications in Modular-Hyperbolic Quantum Ergodicities, with Observations on Equivariant Homotopy Theory*. This title was written tongue-in-cheek, as a kind of inside joke meant to give my professors something to chuckle over. I expected many of them to tell me that while they appreciated my attempt at levity the title would of course have to be changed to something more sober and readable. But would you believe it? Not one them did. On the contrary they complimented me

for its "completeness," for its "accurately describing" the contents of my work. Their reaction, or rather lack of it, was really my first ominous clue about the knucklheaded academic world they inhabited. Soon afterwards I was working as a professor with the City College of New York, happily scrambling the brains of my students who (I have noticed) have been entering my classroom with brains already mostly scrambled.

For a time teaching satisfied me. It pleased me to be able to arouse mathematical passions of a student who, when he entered my classroom, didn't know what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, but who, on account of my influence, decided to spend the rest of it groping his way through the fog-swirls of theoretical calculation. The only problem was that such young enthusiasts were few and far between. Not more than three or four of them crossed my path in all my years of teaching. Most students took my class because they had to for the sake of earning certain required credits. They had no real aptitude for or interest in the subject; merely slogged along in it; and rather resented me as part of the academic machine that had forced them into committing so much of their time and energy to something they disliked and which was preventing them from developing their expertise in their chosen field of study. And in all this they were right. The great majority of people get along quite nicely in life with only basic math skills, and should they ever need more than that they can go to a discount store and pick up a calculator for a buck fifty. Their having to study

its higher forms in school only amounts to a wasteful expenditure of time and stress. Such requirements even injure society by holding back young people who might sooner enter it, and the more passionately, with their field of expertise more fully developed. I myself would make an effort to change the system but for two things: first, my art, which takes up all my free time, and second a politic concern for my financial well-being, since without students I wouldn't be making my high salary and be assured of a comfortable retirement plan; and as much as I like to help others it would be foolish not to help myself first.

In time teaching satisfied me less and less, and for the same reason that any regular job would have left me unsatisfied: it was too repetitive, too boring; in a word, *uncreative*. This also highlighted the difference between me and my colleagues. They were satisfied with their careers and in most cases were proud of them. They loved introducing themselves as professors of this or that. But the fact that they could find so much satisfaction and pride in their work, even after decades, was the proof of their second- or third-rate intellects: for any labor that is repetitive, that becomes second-nature, is mindless, because unthinking and rote. Thus there isn't much difference in intellectual liveliness between the shopkeeper in a cheese store who can babble off facts about the cheddars and Roqueforts in his display case, and the professor who has droned out the same lectures semester after semester for the last five, ten, or fifteen years; indeed it may be that the