

LIFE INSIDE THE BOX

Thomas Zadig

[NOTE: the action should often overlap the dialogue, even if it doesn't precisely state it in the script. A flashlight should be used to light from within the box.]

A bare stage, except for a box. It's a large box, big enough to fit a 6'4" 200# male, if he squishes himself up good and tight. The box is made of cardboard, so one could cause it to bulge in some areas, but at this moment the box is perfectly formed. There's a label that says, "Made in the USA."

The box is on stage, just the box, when the audience enters. The house is open early enough that no one should really have to wait in the lobby. They can wait, instead, with the box. There is no house music. There is no announcement to turn off cell phones. There is no announcement of emergency exits (we'll assume the audience can figure that out the same way they would in a movie theatre).

Once it is "show time," the lights fade to black. Then a spotlight clicks on, covering the box in a warm summer glow. The scene remains like this for a good minute before we see the tip of a knife poke out near the top of the box. It's subtle at first. Then with a sudden burst of energy, the knife pokes straight through up to the handle. The knife is withdrawn for a brief moment, leaving only the slit it has made.

There is a low sucking sound, as if someone is attempting to breathe through this barest of holes. Then a scraping sound, as if someone is trying to enlarge the hole. Then red fingers poke through the hole and pry it open a little wider. A mouth is now clearly pressing against the hole from the inside, breathing the air deeply.

The mouth withdraws and the knife jabs through again, violently. It should be rather shocking to the audience.

Now the knife saws. It saws parallel to the top edge of the box, but down from it by about 2 to 4 inches. When it has sufficiently sawed from one end to the other, the knife withdraws, and a two sets of red fingers poke through the hole. They grip the lower lip of the hole and pull down, crumpling the edge of the hole a bit. Red lips now protrude from the box and desperately gasp for air.

The lips withdraw.

The fingers withdraw.

The knife, slowly, reemerges.

The knife cuts down on one side of the hole for about two inches. Then it turns and cuts back toward the other side. Once it reaches the other side, the knife turn up, and cuts the

flap loose, creating a long, thin hole.

The lips protrude and suck in the air in long, deep breaths, then withdraw.

A set of eyes appear in the hole.

They look right, left, up, down, and all around.

MAN IN THE BOX

(a hoarse whisper)

Hhhhhhhhelp.

The spotlight snaps off, and the house lights and stage work lights all snap on. A man in a suit rushes out with a sheet. He quickly places the sheet over the box.

MAN IN SUIT

Ah, Ladies and Gentlemen, hello! Welcome to my solo piece, *Life Inside the Box*. I'm the playwright and performer, Thomas Zadig.

As the man in the suit speaks, the sheet is grabbed from within the box and is slowly being sucked into the box.

THOMAS

So this my first 100% autobiographical piece. Most of you, actually, don't know my work at all, I'm sure, so I do need to explain that. I usually write pieces that are *thematically* biographical, but none of the events are, quote-unquote, *real*. In this case, everything you are about to see is in fact *real, true*, and 100% autobiographical. I mean, look at how I play myself. Look at how I'm dressed. Would a well-dressed man lie?

He notices the sheet being sucked into the box and snatches it in a tug of war. When he is unable to pull the sheet free, he rushes off stage. The sheet continues slowly sucking into the box. Thomas returns with a large stick and a roll of packing tape. He grabs the sheet in a tug of war, once again, but this time he also beats the top of the box with the stick. With each beat the sheet is slowly pulled from the box.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

(with each beating of the stick)

Give!

Give!

Give!

Give!

(MORE)

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Give! Give! Give! Give!
 Give!Give!Give!Give!Give!Give!
 GiveGiveGiveGiveGiveGive!!!!

The sheet is completely released from the box, and Thomas stands for a moment, panting.

The eyes have withdrawn from the opening. As Thomas pants, the mouth returns and sucks in air. Thomas, seeing this, pulls out the tape and quickly tapes over the hole from one end to the other. He returns to speaking to the audience, still catching his breath a bit.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Um... ah...

(snaps fingers)

Well-dressed man! Would a well-dressed man lie? Would a playwright lie? OK, now that's a trick question, right? Because that's what we do, right? We playwrights. We actors. We of the theatre. We lie. *But* it's the lie that tells the truth!

Thomas smiles, very pleased with himself.

The eyes appear behind the tape in the hole of the box. A finger appears next to the eyes and pushes the tape. It does not poke through. The eyes stare at one audience member after the other, always making direct eye contact, pleading for help.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

So if I lie to you, I might be telling you the truth. So I could reveal to you the most awful things about me and you have no way of knowing whether they are *emotionally* true, *thematically* true, or *really* true, like, *physically* having occurred in the material world. And, of course, the same is true of the most wonderful things about me, though I imagine that those you are more likely doubt. If I lie to you about something awful, it's just weird. Why lie about how awful you are? But if I lie about something great, then I'm, quote-unquote, full-of-shit.

Noticing that a number of the audience seem to be distracted, Thomas turns back toward the box. Seeing the eyes and the light, he become irate. He snatches the tape and the sheet. Places the sheet over the box and tapes it on tight. He does this violently, angrily.

He steps back from the box and watches it for a moment.

A moan of despair arises from the box.

Thomas picks up the stick and smacks the box once. The moan immediately stops.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

(goes over the lines in his head really quick,
indicating his thoughts with a dancing finger)

...Full-of-shit! And... so... fuck, what's the next line? Goddamn it!

He picks up the stick and smacks the top of the box several times to vent his frustration.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Well-dressed man. Full-of-shit. Lies. Bad things. Good things. Fuck!

He pulls a script out of his jacket pocket.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

(Pause. Collects himself.)

But if I lie about something great, then I'm, quote-unquote, full-of-shit. I mean in real life. In a play, in art, it's the lie that tells the truth, and therefore no one questions whether or not it *really* happened, unless it's based on a true story, as this one is. For example, if I lie to my wife, Sarah, and it's to claim a more honorable thing, then you probably agree that it makes sense, even if it means I'm "full-of-shit." If I say that I was shopping for her birthday present, but in fact I was at a strip club, then I might be an "asshole," but I make sense, so I'm not dangerous, just an asshole. But if I lie to her and claim to have done something bad when in fact I didn't do anything bad at all, then you probably get really nervous. I mean, if I'm capable of something like that, then I may well be capable of anything. Maybe I have some screws loose. Maybe I've killed. Maybe I've sent inappropriate pictures to women I find attractive. Maybe when I was a cashier at Burger King I systematically stole hundreds of dollars. Maybe when I was a bartender I pissed in the bottles of liquor that regulars I hated were known to drink. Maybe I torture small animals as a child... or as an adult. All of these things, by the way, I have actually done...

(Long pause. He nods slowly...)

Worse yet, if you know me outside of the theatre, you start to wonder what kind of person would even write something like that.

MAN IN THE BOX

(muffled from within the box, a scream)

HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!!!!

Thomas picks up the stick and walks over to the box, but at the last second he decides not to strike the box. Instead, he looks into the audience and holds a finger to his lips, asking

for silence. Again, the man in the box screams.

MAN IN THE BOX (CONT'D)

HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!!!!

Thomas steps down to the audience.

THOMAS

(whispering)

Let's try a different technique. Punishment can go only so far, and you actually get diminishing returns. Instead, let's try planned ignoring. Rather than striking him each time he does something wrong, let's just ignore undesirable behaviors. It works perfectly. My good friend Charles is a clinical psychologist at NYU; they do this all the time.

The box rocks back and forth.

MAN IN THE BOX

I know what you're doing! Open this box, Thomas. Open this box right now.

THOMAS

It's already taking effect.

MAN IN THE BOX

(crying)

Please...

Please...

Please let me out...

THOMAS

(holding his fingers just apart)

We're this close...

The box stops rocking. There is silence for a moment.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

(Huge smile)

See!

MAN IN THE BOX
 OPEN THIS BOX NOW OR I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU AND YOUR
 ENTIRE FUCKING FAMILY YOU SELFISH PIECE OF SHIT!!!!

Thomas looks a bit scared, but quickly re-gains composure.

THOMAS

(whispers loudly)

That was just the extinction burst.

Thomas waits a moment, watching the box, his back to the audience. There is no movement. No sound. The house lights drop out as a spot light again rises on the box. Thomas is now in darkness. Only the box is lit. After a moment, he steps up to the box and sits on a corner of it, crushing the corner down slightly. Clearly, the man inside the box is supporting Thomas's weight.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Things are better now. Let us continue.

(Beat)

Why write a play at all? I've struggled to get my work produced and it has come to absolutely nothing. The only work I get produced, I must produce myself. This was true even in college. Even as I got my MFA in Playwriting. Now, some of you may well be thinking right now, "Well, duh, this play sucks, so I'm sure the others do to." And for you it may be true. But for me what does it mean? Why keep writing? If the work is merely to end in a drawer, unread, save for a select few, then why write? A good friend of mine, and former professor, Charles-- or was it Sarah?-- once said to me that my plays are like letters. When you write a letter you've addressed it to someone specific. If someone else comes along, finds your letter in the street, picks it up, and starts reading it, you wouldn't be upset when they didn't "get it," so why let be upset when literary managers and interns don't "get" your plays. The point is really to just keep sharing letters with the intended receiver. Right? Because you have something to share. And yet every intended receiver has a suggestion of how to "fix it." Imagine. Imagine sending a letter and the response you receive is to correct your paragraph structure!

(Beat. He pats his hand on the box.)

I really am an awful human being..

I've lied.

I've hurt those close to me.

I've been jealous.

I've been angry.

(MORE)

THOMAS (CONT'D)

I find no purpose to life.

Shit! I mean, I really am a wonderful human being-- sorry, I forgot we changed that part.

I've volunteered to help those less fortunate than me.

I've told the truth on many occasions.

I've tried to be less angry and more accepting.

I try to enter every day with an open heart.

I contribute to society in a positive way. I work hard. I work hard for the benefit of others, and I don't take more than what's mine. In fact, I've given up writing. I've given up theatre altogether. If you're seeing this, it's because someone found a letter blowing in the breeze, and for some reason it connected with him and he put it on. You better be careful of him. I worry about people like that. People who connect with plays like this. They're capable of anything. I'd dump my drink and make my own, if I were you...

(Long pause)

Perhaps I'm even dead. Maybe it's the year 2020 and I died by falling in front of a subway car on my way home from working in my midtown corporate office, and someone found this script in my suit pocket and decided to perform it. Of course, then I'm not really me. He's me. Or she. Maybe a woman is performing this. But it's no less autobiographical.

There is a long pause. Thomas stares into the audience, pleadingly. The spot light is on. A light can be seen dimly beneath the sheet and through the taped hole.

A knife is violently thrust through the side of the box, opposite Thomas, who leaps to his feet. He searches for the stick to hit the box, but before he can find it the knife stabs through many, many more times, shredding the box a bit at a time until, finally, a head pokes through. The head is completely shaved and covered in red. Then fingers protrude. Then arms. All are red. And the body tears away the box, until a man has fully emerged, naked, covered in red, glistening like a newborn. He steps toward Thomas, who backpedals, trying to get away. Thomas finds the stick and holds it up toward the man from the box, but the man from the box easily knocks it away. The two have circling, and Thomas steps backwards, trips over the now empty box, falls to the ground. The man from the box stands over him. Thomas is now eclipsed by the man from the box.

The man from the box raises the knife above his head. His back is to the audience. Thomas is completely obscured.

The lights black out.