

INSIDE THE BOX: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (VERSION TWO)

Thomas Zadig

[NOTE: the action should often overlap the dialogue, even if it doesn't precisely state it in the script. A match (or lighter) should be used to light from within the box, if possible. If not, then a flashlight can work. Obviously we need to avoid burning the place down.]

A bare stage, except for a box, center-stage. It's a large cardboard shipping box, big enough to fit a 6'4" 200# male, if he squishes himself up good and tight. At the start of the play, it is a perfectly formed box. There's a label stamped on it 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. Instead, there is just the sound of the audience...

Their chatter...

Their shuffling through programs...

Their shifting uncomfortably...

And an occasional, barely audible, moan from within the box...

Perhaps no one even hears it...

Perhaps everyone hears it, but denies it...

Most certainly, it is a sound one can rightly ignore, or convince themselves that they never heard it...

The moan is never as loud as the audience's conversation. But if everyone falls silent at the same time, they might just catch it...

A moan for help...

"...help..."

Silence.

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," a man, approximately 6'4" and 200#, dressed in a suit, enters from upstage-left. The man is dark green (his entire body painted so). He is verdant. His head is shaved. He's grown tall and strong. He's impressive. His suit fits him well. It's clean. There are no wrinkles. It's a standard business suit. If possible, it is a very good business suit. White shirt. Red tie. Nothing eccentric. At most the tie might have an unusual, but attractive pattern that indicates some sort of personality beneath the business

uniform. He wears stylish glasses, which, of course, may be determined by the styles of the day. Everything about this man should suggest success. He is a man in charge.

When he enters, he does so with a clear purpose. In this case, that purpose is to place a stool in the downstage-right corner. He crosses downstage of the box to the spot where the stool will be placed. There is a correct place for the stool, after all, and he knows exactly where that is, because it's spiked. He makes no attempt to hide this fact. In fact, he embraces this fact. When the stool is in the correct position, the man turns and exits back up stage-left, from whence he came. His movements are precise. He has the air of military discipline.

The audience likely expects that the performance has begun, and may be silent by this point. If they are, then the man will not return until someone in the audience starts talking again. If they don't start talking, then they will sit in a very long and uncomfortable silence as they wait for the show to begin.

When it is once again appropriate for the man to return, he will enter carrying a microphone, attached to a very long microphone cable. He walks toward the stool, and crosses downstage of the box. When he is two-thirds of the way there, the microphone cable goes taut, abruptly halting him. Attempting to maintain his composure, he jerks the cable forward, but it doesn't budge. He pulls it discreetly a few more times, then places it across his shoulder and lunges forward, as if he were pulling a cart with a rope. The cable gives way, and the man stumbles forward, almost knocking over the stool. He regains his composure, and places the microphone on the stool.

He crosses to the box. From behind the box, he brings out a frighteningly large knife. He cuts the tape on top of the box, and pulls back the flaps. He startles at what he sees within. He very hesitantly reaches into the box with his left arm, while simultaneously holding the knife in his right. He does this in such a way that his body is opened toward the audience, vulnerable. His arm seems to be pulled into the box, so much so that he must jerk his arm free. He brings out a short microphone stand. Sets it on the floor. Quickly pushes the flaps down on the box. Holds them in place with his left hand. Can't reach the tape, which is behind the box. Places the knife on top of the box, and switches which hand is holding down the flaps. The upstage flap pops open slightly, as the man reaches behind the box for the tape. He struggles to reach the tape.

A bright, light green hand emerges from the box via the opening in the upstage flap. It feels around. Eventually runs into the knife. Pauses. Grips the knife. Holds it up in a threatening manner. Then the hand, still gripping the knife, slips back into the box.

Just as the hand disappears, the man reaches the tape, and resumes an upright position. He quickly holds down both flaps, pulls out a long piece of tape, looks for the knife, briefly, doesn't see it, and instead uses his teeth to cut through the tape. In his fear and haste, he adds many more layers of tape than were previously on the box.

Once he believes the box is sufficiently sealed, he places the tape back behind the box, stands with exaggeratedly "correct" posture, and straightens his suit. He picks up the microphone stand, careful not to muss up his suit in the process, and crosses to the stool with it.

He carefully places the microphone stand on the stool, places the microphone into the stand, and then takes an old tape recorder from his jacket pocket, placing it in the center of the stool.

He hits play on the recorder.

RECORDING

Testing. One. Two.

The man looks to the back of the house (or wherever the Stage Manager is), points to the recorder, and then points to the ceiling, indicating that the volume needs to be increased.

After a moment, he presses play again.

RECORDING (CONT'D)

(slightly louder)

Testing. One. Two.

Again, the man looks to the back of the house and indicates that the microphone needs to be louder.

He presses play again.

RECORDING (CONT'D)

(extremely loud)

Testing. One. Two.

When the recording plays, far too loud, the man startles, and covers ears. He angrily points at the SM, and then points down, insisting that the volume be lowered.

He reaches to press play again, but first stops. He points to the SM. He points to the

recorder. Holds up his ear as if the volume is too low. He points to the SM, and then runs a finger across his throat, threatening the SM. Again, he points to the SM. He points to the recorder. He feigns being startled, and plugs his ears. He points to the SM, and runs his finger across his throat in an extremely dramatic manner, his tongue hangs out of his mouth, his eyes roll back in his head, as if being executed. He points to the SM in a non-threatening way, and then holds his hands up, as if to say, "I can't help what will happen to you if you get this wrong, Buddy."

RECORDING (CONT'D)

(perfect volume)

Testing. One. Two.

The man holds his hand together and bows his head ever so slightly to thank the SM. He then quickly spins on his heels, and exits.

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 the knife poke out near the top of the box in it's downstage face. 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 light green 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 light green fingers poke through the hole. They grip the lower lip of the hole and pull down, crumpling the edge of the hole a bit. Light green 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 piece 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. The man in the suit rushes out with a sheet. He quickly places the sheet over the box. Steps to the microphone and audio recorder. Looks to the SM, snaps his finger, and the house and work lights snap off, as a spot light snaps on, focused on the man in the suit, as well as the stool and microphone. He hits play on the sound recorder, steps a few feet stage left of the stool, and then mouths the words “spoken.” It is not the actual voice of the man in the suit, but a compilation of other voices. See the notes on when a new voice is used.

As the man in the suit “speaks,” a top-light very slowly rises on the box.

RECORDING

(deep male voice)

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to tonight’s lecture. As you know, I am Michael Smith. MBA. CEO. JD. MD. MFA. ASPCA. PhD. RSVP. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. And tonight, I am going to introduce you to the skills that you’ll need to be victorious in business, life, and love. What you will hear is one hundred percent autobiography.

As the man in the suit (Michael Smith) speaks, the sheet is grabbed from within the box and is slowly being sucked into it.

RECORDING (CONT’D)

(a different deep male voice)

Your financial, spiritual, and familial well-being may well hinge on your ability to learn from my successes and, yes, failures, but *never* defeats, because I have failed from time to time, but I have never succumbed to the illness that is defeat. Because this is America. Land of the Free. Home of the Brave.

(MORE)

RECORDING (CONT'D)

When we get thrown from the horse, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, and we turn lemons into lemon meringue pie.

Michael Smith fires off an “award-winning smile.” He holds it extra long, until he realizes that the recording has stopped, and he awkwardly moves to the sound recorder, still showing his toothy smile, and jams the button with his finger until it plays again.

MICHAEL SMITH

(to audience, through award-winning smile)

Sorry.

RECORDING

(a different, and higher pitched, male voice)

The first rule is: never apologize.

Michael Smith flips the bird to the sound recorder, and turns to return stage-left of the recorder, and notices the sheet being sucked into the box.

RECORDING (CONT'D)

(same voice)

Obviously, I'm not the first person you've heard distribute such sage advice, but...

(Michael is unable to keep up with the following, though he tries at first)

...it is advice worth repeating. Do not apologize. Do not show any signs of weakness whatsoever.

(a growling male voice)

In fact, show your teeth. Be aggressive. If you want to compete, you must strive for victory by *any* means possible. If you error, don't admit it. Attack it. Cover it. Hide it. *Transform* it. Turn your errors into weapons with which to pummel your enemies. Make your enemies apologize to you for your errors.

(a calmer male voice)

But aggression need not be violently displayed. Use more thoughtful forms of personal empowerment, as well. If you must lie, lie. If you must deceive, it is clearly the fault of your thoughtless counterparts and combatants who are simply too stupid to recognize the truth. Of course, I would never lie to you, because you're too smart for that. Remember that deception is a friend. Befriend your enemies. Make your way into their quarter and kill them in their sleep.

(beat)

Metaphorically speaking.

(MORE)

RECORDING (CONT'D)

(beat)

Let us meditate on the wise words of Sun Tzu from *On the Art of War*: “Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected.”

(at the end of this recorded dialogue there is silence, and then the tape begins to screech, quietly at first, but with ever growing intensity)

Michael Smith's attempts to continue mouthing the words above, correspond with the following action:

Michael crosses to the box and snatches the sheet 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. Michael returns with a large stick and a roll of packing tape. The sheet is almost completely inside the box, but he is able to grab a corner of the sheet. He gets much of it out in a quick pull, but then once again is in a tug of war. This time, however, Michael beats the top of the box with the stick. With each beat the sheet is slowly pulled from the box.

MICHAEL

(with each beating of the stick)

Give!

Give!

Give!

Give!

Give! Give! Give! Give!

Give!Give!Give!Give!Give!Give!

GiveGiveGiveGiveGiveGive!!!!

The sheet is completely released from the box, and Michael stands for a moment, panting. The eyes have withdrawn from the opening.

The tape screech is growing ever louder.

As Michael pants, the mouth returns and sucks in air, panting, as well. Michael, seeing this, pulls out the tape and quickly tapes over the hole from one end to the other.

RECORDING

(the voice is now distorted, stretched out and slowed down)

Always dress well. Well-dressed men are perceived as successful. Clothing makes the man.

Michael, hearing the tape distortion, runs to the recorder, but before he can reach it, the voice is stretched to its breaking point, and the tape snaps.

RECORDING (CONT'D)

Being stylish is important, because you cannot succeed if you don't have your finger on the--

Michael takes the tape out of the player. He pulls on one end, revealing that the tape is broken. He pulls it and pulls it and pulls it. Looks to the audience. Frightened. Shocked. No idea what he needs to do or say at this point.

In a moment of fashion improv, he takes the tape and wraps it around himself at an angle, making a kind of sash out of it. He does this until the tape is completely used up.

Michael smiles, very pleased with himself.

MICHAEL

(trying to remember)

Be aggressive.

Dress well.

Succeed.

Lie.

The box is lit from within. Preferably, it is lit by matches, one after another, but if that doesn't work, then some other source can be used. 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.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

(Michael snaps his fingers, and then very quickly says)

If I lie to you, it's your own fault. You can't handle who I am, so I lie. You can't handle my mistakes, so I lie. You can't handle my dreams, so I lie. You don't love me, so I lie. You don't like me, so I lie.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

You don't want me to succeed, so I lie. You want me to die, so I lie. You want me to lie, so I lie. You want to be inside, so I lie. So I lie, and I lie, and I lie. But sometimes when I lie, I tell the truth. I might be telling you the truth right now. Perhaps if I tell you awful things about me, they are a lie to impress you. But they may be the truth, covered in lies, just so I can have plausible deniability if you get upset. Isn't that how we succeed? Is that how we find our way into each other's hearts? Isn't that how we test the waters to find out what about me is acceptable, and what about me is an utter shame that needs to be hidden from everyone I don't know, and even those closest to me? 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, Michael turns back toward the box. Seeing the eyes and the light, he becomes 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 deep, primal moan of despair arises from the box. Michael picks up the stick and smacks the box once. The moan immediately stops.

MICHAEL (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 was I saying? Goddamn it!

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

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

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

He runs offstage and returns with a script in a three-ring binder.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

(Pause. Collects himself. Finds his spot.)

But if I lie about something great, then I'm, quote-unquote, full-of-shit.

(aside)

I mean in real life. Not in a play, which we can no longer deny this is. Unless it's based on a true story, of course.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

(beat)

As this one is...

(back to the script)

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.

(beat)

All of these things, by the way, I have actually done...

He nods slowly. There is a sustained moment of silence, then...

MAN IN THE BOX

(muffled from within the box, a scream)

HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!!!!

Michael 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!!!!

Michael steps down to the audience.

MICHAEL

(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, Michael. Open this box right now.

MICHAEL

It's already taking effect.

MAN IN THE BOX

(crying)

Please...

Please...

Please let me out...

MICHAEL

(holding his fingers just apart)

We're this close...

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

MICHAEL (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!!!!

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

MICHAEL

(whispers loudly)

That was just the extinction burst.

Michael waits a moment, watching the box, his back to the audience. There is no movement. No sound. All lights drop out, except a spot light 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 Michael's weight.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Things are better now. Let us continue.

(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. I find no purpose to life.

(consulting the script)

Shit! I mean, I really am a wonderful human being!

(aside)

Sorry, I forgot we changed that part.

(back to the script)

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.

Michael closes the script, and looks into the audience. He tries to make eye contact with one audience member after another. 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 Michael, 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. [Note that the actor will need to change his hand and face color while in the box. If some of the old light green make-up bleeds through, that's fine.] And the body tears away the box, until a man has fully emerged, naked, covered in red, glistening like a newborn. He steps toward Michael, who backpedals, trying to get away. Michael finds the stick and holds it up toward the man from the box, but the man from the box easily knocks it away. They are circling one another, Michael steps backwards, trips over the now empty box, falls to the ground. The man from the box stands over him. Michael 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. Michael is completely obscured.

The lights black out.