

Choose Life: A performance piece featuring Bishop Bishop

The stage set is simple. A chair. A soapbox. A lectern (or music stand representing a lectern). The performer wears a dark suit, a bright yellow cowboy hat and pink sunglasses. The overall look is androgynous, but the performer wears vivid make-up. When she takes off the glasses, she is wearing false eyelashes.

The movement in this piece is simple, but the contrast of the performer's white skin with the dark suit makes her hands, neck and face stand out. The focus is on hand and arm gestures, which are sometimes broad and big and dramatic and sometimes subtle and small and precise.

The piece begins with the performer sitting on the chair in a very stylized pose: head tossed back, hands in an odd position. The position is held for a long count. The performer's breathing rate becomes visibly faster. With a sudden precise movement, the performer rolls head out of position and looks at audience.

Southern preacher voice of Bishop Bishop

Choose life,

Performer pushes sunglasses down her nose and looks at the audience.

that's what the scriptures say.

Takes off sunglasses. Holds in one hand. Long pause. Sad voice, not in character of Bishop Bishop, in the performer's "normal" voice.

I don't know if I can choose life today.

Strong Biblical voice

This day, I place before you life and death.

Uses hands to gesture. Especially the one with the sunglasses.

Choose life.
Life and death.
Choose life.
Choose life.

Sad normal voice.

I don't know if I can choose life today.

Long pause

Voice of Bishop Bishop

Maybe it's time for a revival. A breath of fresh air.

Places glasses on the lectern, picks up "prayer" book. Steps up onto soapbox with "prayer" book in hand.

Welcome one and all to Bishop Bishop's Old Time Turn of the Century, Beginning of the Millennium Revival. Can I get an a-men?

Waits for audience response.

I can't hear you! Can I get an a-men?!

Waits for audience response.

Can I get an a-woman?!

Waits for audience response with big smile on face.

Doesn't that feel good to say? Let's do that one again. Can I get an a-woman?

Waits for audience response.

Can I get a Jesus, Joseph and Mary Fucking Halleluiah?!

Leads the audience through this twice if they stumble over it.

Well, all right then. Tonight, I'd like to welcome all y'all to my revival. Tonight, I will exorcise some of my demons. And I don't mean my demons are going to be running around in sweat pants doing sit-ups and push-ups- as entertaining as that might be. No, tonight I will purge myself of some personal pain.

Tonight, I will breathe new life into myself.

It might be a bit self-indulgent. But this revival ain't just for me. I want to breathe life into all y'all out there. I want to breathe new life into y'all. Can I get an a-men?

Waits for audience response.

Can I get an a-woman?!

Waits for audience response .

Can I get a Jesus, Joseph and Mary Fucking Halleluiah?!

Waits for audience response .

You know I can. You know I can. (*pause*) To be part of my revival you have to understand despair- you have to know heartbreak. And I don't mean that romance shit. Fuck romance! I mean the ache of the heart that is not blind to the pain and suffering of this goddamned world!

I can feel a few of you shifting in your seats in discomfort. You're thinking to yourself, "How the hell did I get in this tent?" Tonight, there are no accidents. You are not in the wrong tent. Let me clarify a little further whom this revival is for.

Any of y'all who have ever thought about or attempted killing your self- you're welcome to join me up here on the alter. Though I understand you might be loathed to admit it to a room full of strangers. Popularity contests are not won by the admission of the desire to slit your own throat. So I am happy to serve as your representative up here on the alter. Know that you have a special place in my heart. I know your pain (*pause*) intimately. You are welcome to sit in the metaphorical first row of my revival tent.

You can sit with all the folks who have at some point in their lives thought on a semi-regularly basis that they might be better off dead.

Now you don't belong in the first row if you've had the thought "Why doesn't someone just take me out and shoot me?" once or twice in your life. I think everyone has thought that once or twice in their life. No, you have to have consistently and persistently thought you'd be better off dead.

In the second row are all y'all who've wanted to disappear- to curl up into a ball and not wake up for two or three weeks. Maybe occasionally, the word forever lingers after this wish to disappear, but not often. You don't think about death. You just want life to pause.

In the third row are the weary. You do your work; take care of yourself, sort of. But everything seems kind of flat. It feels like your ass is dragging four or five feet behind you. You don't think about death or disappearing. Oh no! You realize that many people have it much worse than you do. Somehow that thought only makes you feel worse. You know things aren't as bad as they could be. But you don't know when you will feel good again.

The fourth row is special to these here United States of America. If you have ever wept because of how fucked up and hypocritical US foreign policy is, take a seat in the fourth row.

And in the fifth row are seats for anyone who has ever felt that maybe their hearts are too fragile for this world.

I think I've covered just about everyone. For those of you never touched by despair's heavy hand, I wish you well. I'm jealous as hell, but I wish you well. This revival is not for you. No, it is for everyone else.

Are you ready for a revival?

Can I get an a-men?

Waits for audience response.

Can I get an a-woman?!

Waits for audience response .

Can I get a Jesus, Joseph and Mary Fucking Halleluiah?!

Waits for audience response .

You know I can! You know I can! But first let us visit why my revival is necessary.

Steps down from soapbox. Takes off hat. But still holds book. No longer in preacher character. Now "normal" voice of the performer.

Lecha dodi. Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat ne kaballah
Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat kne kaballah.

The regulars are in their spots; the slightly crazy man who sometimes disrupts things; the middle-aged man who started coming after his father died and me. The shul is packed. Lately, more and more folks have been coming to Friday night services. In front of me is a woman with a beautiful tattoo on her neck- a tattoo that technically will keep her some day to be dead body out of a Jewish Cemetery. It is not kosher.

Lecha dodi. Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat ne kaballah
Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat kne kaballah.

I sit in my usual spot. I come every Friday night. A community of prayer answers deep needs in me. But tonight, I find no comfort. I feel alone in my skin. My status as a wannabe Jew is etched in the flesh of my forehead like Cain's mark. I am not kosher.

I want to kill myself. I sit in a room of 40 people praying, praising god's majestic wonder and all I can think about it death.

Lecha dodi. Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat ne kaballah
Lecha dodi likrat kallah.
P'nai Shabbat kne kaballah.

Tonight, the Rabbi- famed in San Francisco because he sat zazen as a practitioner of Zen Buddhism for ten years before his teshuvah- his return- to his childhood faith. Tonight the Rabbi gives a schpiel about life.

V'shamru bnai isreal et-hashabbat. Lasot et-haShabbat lidorotom berit olam.

On Friday nights, the d'var torah is given like a jazz improvisation. A phrase is taken from the holy book and the Rabbi goes on a metaphysical riff.

Tonight he has chosen

Biblical voice

I call heaven and earth to witness against you. I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.

V'shamru bnai isreal et-hashabbat. Lasot et-haShabbat lidorotom berit olam.

I feel implicated. I'm not sure I can choose life. I'm not sure if I will survive the weekend. My recurrent thoughts of death of recently made the significant shift into the realm of suicidal ideation. How can I choose life when I want to shove knitting needles through my eyes? How can I choose life when as I sit at my desk at my shitty temp job- the idea of slitting my throat and bleeding all over the expense reports is. . .not comical. No it is a serious consideration.

I choose death in my thoughts every day. I am guilty.

V'shamru bnai isreal et-hashabbat. Lasot et-haShabbat lidorotom berit olam.

God, I'm not sure I can choose life today. Please help me. God, I'm not sure I can choose life today. Please take away this pain. Please. I'm not sure I can choose life today. Please. Please. Oh, please, God, help me!

V'shamru bnai isreal et-hashabbat. Lasot et-haShabbat lidorotom berit olam.

No one hears me. I sit in a room full of people- a community of prayer- praising God, and I am guilty. I choose death. I want to kill myself. I beg God to help me choose life.

Please. Please. Please. Oh God, please help me.

Sings fast and super fucked up.

V'shamru bnai isreal et-hashabbat. Lasot et-haShabbat lidorotom berit olam.

Thanatos. The death drive. The pretty little pills prescribed by the psychiatrist did little take the edge off my death drive. My drive to Thanatos was so long. The death drive can be so strong that to choose life seems like cowardice. This driveway connects a moody Prince of Denmark to a Southern Gothic Girl.

To be or not to be, that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to — 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1

I wish I could tell you it soon got better, but it didn't. It got worse. I have done tons of healing since then. Yet there still are days I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And no god's rod or staff can comfort me.

God will not save me. God does not save me. I begged for salvation. I begged. I have supplicated myself in search of tender mercy. Sitting curled up in the bottom of my shower letting the water wash away the damning evidence, I pleaded for a balm for my wounded heart. I did not find a divine salve to sooth my hurt.

God does not save me. God will not save me. I begged for salvation. I asked for deliverance. I remain unanswered.

God does not save me. The pretty pills have not worked well so far. My attitude is positively chipper compared to the average depressive. So what pulls me through?

This summer, in conversation with a friend, I mentioned that the last time I wanted to kill myself was about two weeks prior. Technically, I feel like killing myself at least once a month. It is hormonal, but really it is way more complicated than that.

He, high out of his mind, said to me,

“Sheila, if you decide to kill yourself, promise me that you’ll call to say goodbye. I won’t try to talk you out of it. But promise you’ll say good-bye.”

I promise.

The odd thing is that I used this silly promise to pull myself through a very bad night not too long ago. It was one of those nights when the hammers of self-hate were pounding. When I wanted to rip my flesh off the bone. I wasn’t sure I could hold more pain. I wasn’t sure if I could make it through the night. Then I remembered my promise. I could not call my friend for some reason or the other. I could not say good-bye. So . . . I could not kill myself.

It might seem stupid to you, but I’ll take whatever can pull me through. I have a bag of tricks that I use until the feeling passes, and it always passes.

Am I ready for my revival?

Bishop Bishop takes the stage once again.

Can I get an a-men?

Waits for audience response.

Can I get an a-woman?!

Waits for audience response .

Can I get a Jesus, Joseph and Mary Fucking Halleluiah?!

Waits for audience response .

Now what revival would be worthy of the name if it didn't pass the plate? But instead of asking y'all to tithe, I'm giving you a little something. A taste of the Promised Land. A chocolate communion.

You know more of y'all would go to church if they passed out chocolate. Don't deny it. And if all preachers were as mighty fine as I am you know you'd be sitting in the front row every damn Sunday come rain or shine.

Sings.

Joy and pain
Like sunshine and rain

At this point, chocolate kisses are passed out to the audience. The performer improves based on the audience while the kisses are being passed out).

It is not all peaches and cream, you know.

Biblical voice

This day, I place before you life and death.
Choose life.

Break character. "Normal" voice.

Some days it is not easy to choose life. So what helps me postpone an irrevocable bad decision? Well, the fact that my life is a great big experiment. I'm trying to see how much joy, hope, pleasure and beauty I can hold. I want to fill myself full with joy, hope, pleasure and beauty. I want to seed the world with joy, hope, pleasure and beauty.

Sometimes, I am afraid that this is all for show. This show of hope. That when push comes to shove, I will shove off.

I am a novice at joy.
I am taking toddling first steps on hope's ground.
I have not drunk deep enough from pleasure's cup.
And I have just begun to make beauty.

I am a novice at joy.
I am taking toddling first steps on hope's ground
I have not drunk deep enough from pleasure's cup
I have just begun to make beauty.

Repeat after me:

I am a novice at joy.

Waits for audience response.

I am taking toddling first steps on hope's ground

Waits for audience response.

I have not drunk deep enough from pleasure's cup

Waits for audience response.

I have just begun to make beauty.

Waits for audience response.

Now during most services there's a point when you praise God and all his glories.
Tonight, we're going to praise some people. We are going to give a giant thank you to one another.

When my life fell apart, I called Daddy and asked if I could come home. He said, "Come on home, baby."

When push comes to shove it is the Society of Mutual Admiration that pulls me through.

Now there are only two official members of the Society of Mutual Admiration. But it is not an exclusive club. All my friends are welcome to be card-carrying members. Membership has its privileges.

Improv patter based on people in the audience.

Back to Bishop Bishop voice

This wouldn't be a proper revival without a little singing. Got to have a bit of song.

The song I'd like y'all to sing with me is religious, but it also is a song of freedom. It was as much about being saved from slavery as it was about getting to heaven. At its core is the hope and promise of mutual aid.

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Comin for to carry me home
A band of angels coming after me

Comin for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get to heaven, before I do
Comin for to carry me home
Tell all my friends, I'm coming there too
Comin for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down
Comin for to carry me home
But still I know I'm freedom bound
Comin for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

If I get to heaven before you do
Comin for to carry me home
I'll cut a hole and pull you through
Comin for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.

THE END