

## **28 Plays Later – Challenge #24**

So, as you've gathered, I've been thinking a lot about the idea of whether art should be truthful, or indeed should attempt at representing truth (or perhaps it does so inherently), and if it does, why? And what does it even mean to be truthful? Perhaps it's all nonsensical.

Sebastian! What's the frigging challenge?"  
oh... uhm... I have no idea!

## **BODY POSITIVE**

**By**

**Melissa A. Bartell**

**Time:** Now.

**Place:** An empty dressing room with a makeup mirror and vanity center stage. The mirror has no actual glass, just the perimeter of lights.

**Lights up on Maria, who is seated at the mirror. She's dressed in an a costume reminiscent of the scene in *Sunday in the Park with George* when Dot is musing about being a Follies girl. She begins to take off her makeup as she speaks.**

MARIA: Whew! That was a show! I twisted my knee a few years ago – it was stupid – I was walking my dog and I slipped on the ice, but during Saturday's show I missed the last step down from the dressing rooms and the jolt – pure agony. I thought it was just sore, and called out on Sunday, but on Monday morning, my doctor said I wasn't allowed to perform for a week. Well, actually, he said not to put weight on it at all.

I told him that my calf was cramping from favoring my knee, and he said to try water.

"Can I soak in the tub?" I asked him. Baths are my thing. Baths and pools and the ocean. I prefer the ocean, but that's not always practical. I mean, here at home, I'm five hours from the beach, but I have a pool in my back yard. It's not heated though. "Baths are good, but your calf and lower back are all out of alignment. Is your pool warm enough to swim in? Can you just spend some time not swimming, just floating?"

At first, I thought he was crazy. I mean, it's springtime in Texas, but that doesn't mean it's warm enough to swim. "I'd rather soak in the tub where the water is warm."

"Does your tub have a grab rail?" he wanted to know.

It doesn't. I told him that. "The pool is safer. I don't like to do wrist surgery on knee patients. Float. In your pool. Don't kick. Don't stretch. Don't swim."

So, Tuesday morning, after my agent, my doctor, and I all talked to the necessary people at the theatre, I dipped my toe in the water. It's been a warm spring. The water wasn't bad.

But I felt ridiculous. Just floating. Not swimming. And it was the middle of the morning. What if I'd forgotten the day the gardeners came? What if the cleaning lady accidently locked the back door? What if...

I was hyper-aware of every sound. The neighbor's dog tied out on the deck, barking its loneliness – my dogs always wanted to play with it, but we never managed to meet – the birds in the trees over my head, having sex, bickering over who got the plumpest worm – the garbage truck, the recycling truck – the mail truck.

Finally, I gave up. I just let my head fall back and my legs rise up. I let my arms float free, and closed my eyes.

It's a funny thing about floating. It's almost like being in a state of sensory deprivation. You're out of place, out of time....

But you're very much in your body.

My body.

I mean, let's be honest, I'm not in my twenties anymore. Hell, it's been a while since I've seen thirty. Or forty. I've had a child – nursed her – I've never completely gotten over my love affair with carbs. I hate working out. I have dance training, but I've never been a natural dancer, and there's a reason I play character parts.

My body shows all of that. My body is the reason.

But even without that.... Even without just one of those things, I've always been the girl – the woman – who was teased for being fat. Who had to wear a bra at the age of eight. Who is always too short and too loud and too hairy and too busty and too round.

(I mean, seriously, in the event of a water landing, my tits are built-in flotation devices).

But in the pool that week, floating? I let myself spread out. I let myself be hairy and curvy, and on Thursday, once I knew I didn't have to worry about the pool guy, the lawn guy, or the cleaning lady, I wore my favorite tankini and skipped the top.

I floated, topless, letting the current caused by the filtration system push me into the sunny part of the pool, and then back under the trees. Above me was a blue sky.

And that was the day I started to sing. Now, I may be a character actress – the best friend, the plucky sidekick, the comic relief – but I know from singing, and leading lady or not, when you grow up a theatre brat, you know every lyric from every show.

The singing started with me playing with the birds. There's this bluejay, this annoying, huge bluejay with a mask like a comic book thief, and he is the loudest creature known to suburbia. (I live twenty minutes outside the city, but trust me, it's a different world.)

So, the jay whistled a tune, and I whistled back, and the whistling sounded like a song I knew, and before I realized it, I was floating in my pool singing. I went through my whole repertoire... Cats, Evita, Les Miz, Phantom, Rent, Chess, Legally Blonde (I'm way too old for that one, but my daughter loved it's utter PINKness.)

In my head, the neighbors all join in, singing harmony, counterpoint, duets and trios, and we all leave our pools (because we ALL have them) and stand on our diving boards and take a collective bow and even though we're all dripping wet we're given a round of applause from the neighborhood children who stopped their basketball game to listen. (Why I love my neighborhood: it's safe enough for driveway basketball games.) Then we all dive back into our pools and - blackout!

But in reality? In reality no one noticed. Or if they did, no one cared. Well... the neighbor's dog started to howl along when I held long notes, and I think the birds were super-confused, but...

So, after a week of floating, my knee was no longer hurting, which was great, but what was better – what was *so much better* – is that I felt much more settled in my body, and my soul.

And the *so much better* escalated: my husband couldn't keep his hands off me, Friday night.

So, it's Saturday, and I'm back in the show. And there's this scene where most of us are in some state of undress.

**Maria has completed taking her make-up off, and now she rises and begins to take off her costume.**

MARIA:

It's kind of a burlesque scene. A strip-tease. At one point there's even a can-can... or a can-*can't*, if you're me. Many of the women are topless by the end, a sort of top-drop rather than a mic-drop moment.

Usually, I keep my top on. I mean, once you unfasten the buttons at the shoulders, everything drops below your waist. But that night, that night, I thought, 'what the hell?' They hired me for a reason. And honestly, while a lot of me is lumpy and frumpy, I have a great rack. I know that.

In my head, I heard the gasps and whispers. I heard the audience clicking their tongues and asked, "Do you think she knows she's fat?" "Can you even BE in theatre if you have a belly like that?"

But I didn't let that affect me.

I dropped my top with the rest of them, and felt everything settle around my ample hips, and when we froze into a tableau, my smile wasn't a stage smile, it was real.

Because my week not-swimming in the pool reminded me: my body is perfect for floating. And cuddling. And keeping me warm when the skinny girls are shivering. And raising children. And dancing in a pretend burlesque show in front of hundreds of strangers.

In theatre, in art, we spend so much time creating the imaginary and covering up our flaws. We use glitter and paste and sequins and tights. We cram ourselves into Pleather and Spanx and paint over everything. Shadow there, contour here, stay on the edge of the spotlight, never in the middle.

And maybe we do it because we're representing something we're not, but underneath all the makeup and wigs, we're supposed to be offering truthful emotional moments. We're supposed to entertain, sure, but in a way the audience can relate to.

**Maria removes her bra during this last speech.**

MARIA: Rosalind Russell, though – I bet the young kids coming up don't even know who she is – Rosalind Russell said that acting was standing up slowly and turning around naked.

This is my body. This is my instrument. No art. No artifice. Just me. And if standing up naked in this body means one person, one other woman in the audience feels better because I have flab and stretchmarks and life-saving floatation-device tits, just like she does, that's better than a thousand ovations.

**Maria pushes her underwear to the floor, and steps out of them. She stands there on the stage for a minute, silent, naked.**

MARIA: This is my body. Perfect in its imperfections. Flawless despite its flaws. And from now on, I'm not too short or too busty or too round or too hairy or too loud. I'm just me.

**BLACKOUT.**