

## Three and a Half Minutes

By Ryan Humphrey

*Third place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing (UNIV 111/112)*

When I was seventeen, I transformed for three and a half minutes. I sat on the plastic chair taken from the choir room, staring at the ripples and folds of the deep blue curtain. My robe covered me, wrapped around me like a blanket. I gripped the prop scepter tightly—a gift borrowed from a friend—and adjusted the crown on my head.

My breaths quickened as I listened to the excitement of the audience over the calming music coming from the piano. Talking, laughing, waiting for the curtains to open and the show to resume. A sound cut through them all—a laugh I recognized quite well. I smiled, and my breathing slowed back down. My friends had come to see the show. There was no one by me, but I wasn't alone.

At last, I heard a familiar rumbling. The curtains opened, and as they did, the calming piano music came to a close. I looked around at the audience, at the shapeless mass of shadows that I would be singing for. A jolt of fear ran through me, tempered by excitement. The opening chords for my song began to play. I took a deep breath.

And I sang. Three and a half minutes. That's all it was. Three and a half minutes stretched out into eternity. My voice rose and fell as I traveled along the notes and the words that felt as though they had been written for me. I stood up and sauntered around the stage, taking control of the space. Making it my own.

I let myself fall into the part, into the words and the character. Comical arrogance and contempt, hidden under a veneer of indignant love. I reached a high note, one that I had known would be difficult, and sang it as best I could. My voice shook, and I felt a pang of anxiety. How

bad was it? Had they noticed? Was the performance ruined? I had very little time to ponder this before I reached a humorous angry line. I took the advice I had heard many times, looking directly at an audience member and scolding him. I wish I could've seen his expression, could've known if he knew I was speaking to him.

But the lights in my eyes were too bright, and the lights in the house were too dim. I wasn't allowed to see him. I wasn't allowed to know. For all I knew, he was asleep, drooling onto his program.

And I plunged into the deep void of reality. The connection was imagined. I felt something there, but I had no way of knowing if it was real or not. Maybe he loved my performance. Maybe he hated it. Maybe he felt nothing at all. I was God reaching out to Adam, but I was blinded by the blue and pink lights shining onto the stage, and I couldn't see if he was reaching back. Do I lean forward, stretching further into the shadows in the hopes of feeling his fingertips brush against mine? Or do I pull back, breaking the perfect silhouette?

In this moment, in this single blink of an eye between lines, the whole world was shifting and I was acutely aware of how uncomfortable I was. I couldn't see the people who held my fate in their hands, and a vast abyss was emerging between us. The drop at the edge of the stage was widening, becoming a bottomless chasm. The stairs had melted away like butter in the sun. The lines of tape that kept performers from stepping too close to the mics had become an impenetrable barrier, a line of salt laid out to hold back malicious spirits. Those majestic lights shining into my eyes were a weapon, there to keep me disoriented, keep me from reaching them. The robe wrapped around me was a net binding me, restricting my movements. The air in front of me was nothing but the bars of a cell.

I wasn't God. I was a monster being kept at bay. Stuck on the stage, stuck in the moment, in a cage that I had volunteered for. Any mistakes, any voice cracks or pitchy notes or garbled words, would be forever etched into this moment, and it was too late to run away. I had decided to put myself out there, and now that the time had come, I was reaping the consequences.

Then the audience chuckled at the humorous line I had sung, a soft laugh that rippled through the house like a wave. It was brief, but it broke the spell. In an instant, my head cleared. The bars fell away, and the hands on the clock began turning again. I was a seventeen-year-old on the stage of a high school auditorium. I would inevitably make mistakes, but I would also have moments that worked, moments that would make the audience smile or laugh.

I sang the next line, relishing the next set of chuckles from the audience. Maybe they had erected a wall of glass to shield themselves from me. But maybe they hadn't. Maybe what we had was real. I continued singing, sailing along the jaunty melody and letting it pull me out to sea. I was propelled forward by the things I felt coming from them. The occasional laugh, the feeling of enjoyment.

At last, we were reaching the climax. It was time for the biggest risk. I raised my arms and invited the audience to sing with me. And they did. They sang, equally consumed by the melody as I was. We sang through the chorus together, and I cut them off before my final note. I held that note loud and strong, relishing the connection that had been formed. I wanted to keep it there, I wanted to hold that note forever. For the first time in those three and a half minutes, I felt truly worthy of their time and attention, and I knew that when I let go that feeling would go away, like the flame on a candle being kissed by a gust of wind. I couldn't let go.

But I did. No matter how hard I tried, I would never have been able to sing forever. I let go of that blissful note, and I breathed a deep breath.

The room exploded with applause, or at least that's how it seemed to me. I gave one final wave in character and turned to leave, stepping past the crew member who had come to move the chair for the next performer. At last, my three and a half minutes were over. I walked off the stage, and... that was it. The show moved on. The next performer entered stage right. The piano changed key. A new song began, and I had ceased to exist.

Of course, my body and my mind still existed as I exited into the hallway. My heart still beat, my feet still walked. But for those moments that I had been onstage, I had been more than that. There was something special that had been created, a connection between me and the audience that felt irreplaceable. But perhaps it wasn't, for there was now someone else standing where I had stood, and the audience had forgotten about me.

But had they really? I had gotten them to sing with me. I had opened up my heart to them and they'd responded. I'll never know exactly how it felt to be in the audience at that moment, but it didn't seem to me like a moment that would be forgotten as quickly as it happened.

Maybe one day the stars will align. I'll meet a stranger and start talking to them, and I'll find out they were in the audience that day. I'll ask them, slyly, if there were any performances that stuck with them, any moments that they remembered. But even if they hadn't forgotten me the instant I left the stage—like a baby with no object permanence—who's to say they wouldn't forget me in the days, weeks, months, years after?

I thought back to the months of preparation—struggling to pick a song, trying to memorize the lyrics without slipping up, figuring out a key to play it in, practicing it over and over, trying to breathe new life in with each attempt. Months of practice, all culminating in three and a half minutes. Had it been worth it?

I had looked at the audience and created stories, of a monster held back, of a painting on the ceiling of a chapel, but what were their stories? Was I even important enough to have a story? In all likelihood, no. To them, I was a seventeen year old on a stage who had taken up a few minutes of their time.

I wasn't a monster, that was for sure. Monsters have power, and that vast ocean of shadows was the one in control. I needed them. I needed them to like me, to compliment me, to cheer for me, to *validate* me. To tell me that I was talented. To tell me that I was worth something. To tell me that those months of preparation weren't for nothing.

And what did they need from me? Nothing but three and a half minutes of decent singing. A brief respite from the monotony of a high school show. If they didn't enjoy my performance, if I hadn't been able to give them what little they asked of me, it would reveal a truth too dreary to even think. In preparing rigorously for months, I had eliminated my excuse for failure. If those months of work couldn't result in me giving an adequate performance, then maybe the problem was me. Maybe I just wasn't good enough.

But my experience wasn't wholly contained in those three and a half minutes. I had gone through so much more than just singing on a stage. I had practiced with my choir teacher and vocal coach, taking to heart all they had to teach me. I had watched other people's performances and given them advice, helping them out and receiving help in return. I had talked to my friends and shared my anxieties, letting them do the same. I had bonded with others and grown as a performer and as a person. And when that fateful day finally did come, it's true that I agonized over each individual moment, each minor slip-up and mistake. But when I felt those worries, those fears that I wasn't good enough, I did what needed to be done—I let them go and kept singing.

I'll never truly know exactly how much the audience liked me, but in truth, it wouldn't do me any good to know, and it certainly doesn't do me any good to try to figure it out. They sang along with me and clapped for me, and that was all I could've asked for. Should I panic because their cheers weren't loud enough, or their claps didn't last long enough? Should I weep because they didn't stop singing the nanosecond I cut them off? What amount of enjoyment would've satisfied me? I had gotten the response I wanted, and it hadn't been enough to appease my anxieties.

And that was the central truth of it all. There would never have been any audience reaction that could've convinced me of my worth. My worries and anxieties were just that—mine. The audience had power over me, but it paled in comparison to my own. Nothing they did could've hurt me as much as my own inner voice.

When I think back to those three and a half short minutes, I know that they could never be enough to contain the totality of my worth. Giving a good performance was important to me, but it didn't erase all of the ways that I had grown throughout the months leading up to it, and my mistakes and errors didn't either. My performance was imperfect and it was impermanent, and in the end, it was only a small piece of a larger whole. Ultimately, that was what made it beautiful. Those three and a half minutes transformed me, but they did not define me.

Author bio:

**Ryan Humphrey** was a second-year student majoring in Political Science at the time of publication. He composed “Three and a Half Minutes” for Kimberly Zicafoose’s UNIV112 course in fall 2021. In his free time, he likes to write stories and watch movies.