

U R ★ (you are star)

Origins

By finkle

I stopped writing in 2012 for the better part of a year. I felt the world changing and was unsure how to synthesize it. I felt my work yearning for something different but was unsure what that was, so I sat in silence. I knew that I was unhappy in my artistic practice. I felt that I wasn't connecting to my true voice. I had spent the last 12 years mostly making "well-made" plays for traditional theatre spaces. Was this the kind of work I had set out to do? If not, where had I gone down the wrong path and why? I began questioning my relationship with the audience. Who was my audience? And how can I connect to them in more profound ways? I found myself squirming in theatre seats. Why must I sit in this chair in this space? My favorite theatre always happened outside traditional spaces, how had I found myself inside one?

I began peeling back the layers of my artistic life in an attempt to find my first artistic impulse. I wanted to rebuild myself, become naïve again. I reached back to my childhood. I grew up in the suburbs of Miami, Florida – far enough away from the ocean that I didn't feel connected to it. As a child I spent a lot of time alone in my room, creating stories for myself in order to escape a world I didn't feel I fit. My earliest memories of artistic creation center around writing songs on a small keyboard, recording them on a tape recorder and then drawing pictures to explain the songs. Later I branched out into invited performances in my room or in the living room for reluctant neighbors and family members. My stories then and now were almost always fantastical in nature: my characters would go on some great ridiculous theatrical journey to discover or find something they desperately needed and along the way something unexpected would happen. As a way to rehabilitate myself, I decided to go back to this primal form. At the same time, I started to think about the kinesthetic work I had been doing in public schools as a teaching artist – how students need to see, hear and touch in order to understand and I wondered how this could better inform my theatrical work.

Over the course of six months I made hours and hours of recordings on Garageband and created hundreds of drawings, with markers, charcoal, crayons as well as painting (oil and water color). A story emerged about two best friends who had lost each other over the years and who both were grappling against a darkness inside themselves: Would they succumb to this darkness, overcome it or...was there some other way to come to terms with it? The piece was becoming both fantastical in nature as well as unflinchingly honest. I liked this push/pull of the content and felt for the first time in many years that I was fusing together dissonant sides of my voice into some kind of strange and unexpected harmony. I began sequencing the drawings and connecting them directly with songs. Around this time, I invited a few friends over to see what I was making. My genuine question to them was: Is this anything or should I seek psychological help? My first audiences were very generous and encouraging. They told me how much they enjoyed touching the drawings, feeling the materials on the page, how they would get charcoal on their hands and enjoyed feeling the weight of the paper. They told me how much they relished the story that felt so private, how much they enjoyed sitting comfortably on a couch, intimate with their fellow guests, how intimate the sound was and how much they enjoyed my close proximity to them while experiencing.

I put my full trust into the instincts of the piece and spent the better part of another year making more and sharing it with friends every couple of weeks. As the piece came more into focus I found

that I was starting to share it 2-3 times a week and that my friends were sometimes bringing friends with them. Soon it became a more organized affair with friends arriving, my giving instructions on how to read and listen and then having a conversation/reflection afterwards over drinks and food. It dawned on me that I was actually doing a performance and that I was playing a part – host/artist/guide. I gave this character the name **finkle** differentiating him from me, Kenny. I gave the piece a title – U R ★ (you are star).

In 2014 I was told very bluntly by my husband that I needed to find another place to share U R ★. I applied to and was accepted into The Orchard Project (Saratoga Springs) with the very specific and honest question: Can this piece live outside my apartment? While there I met Ariane Barbanell who at the time was the Director of Special Projects at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA. She invited me to further develop the piece with the A.R.T. Over the course of two years (2014-2016) with continued support from the A.R.T. and the Orchard Project, I was able to enhance the production elements of the show and formalize the relationship between finkle, the space and the audience. In 2015 the Orchard Project produced a sneak peak production of the show and in the fall of 2016 the A.R.T. produced the show for its subscriber audience. In 2017, the show had a limited run at Ars Nova in New York City.