

"Joyous and cathartic... Personal and impactful"

Jay Handelman, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

CLOWNS

Like Me

Story & Performance by
Scott Ehrenpreis

Written by
Jason Cannon



Praise for CLOWNS LIKE ME

Brave... Joyous and cathartic... Revelatory... Entertaining and dramatic... Personal and impactful.

Jay Handelman, THE SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

Left me speechless... It was a hypnotic mixture of rage, frustration, exhaustion, and humor. I cried, I laughed, and cried again... I was riveted... It's a damn good story.

David R.

Thought-provoking, compelling, rings true... And above all, extremely entertaining.

Anthony G.

I found answers and closure to my son's suicide that nothing in the past 10 years could give me.

Dena W.

Aside from the authenticity of the story—which was told with humor, humility, and a pure honesty—we all know someone who has been impacted by mental health issues... Scott is brave and wonderful, and truly generous in including us all in what goes on in his mind and heart.

Nelle M.

To say we were blown away would be an understatement... Amazingly well done, sensitive and compassionate, it will appeal to everyone who is concerned with the mental health condition of our country.

Larry and Sheree Z.

I was deeply moved by the severe internal and emotional struggle that a person with a mental health issue faces... It offers hope and understanding for everyone involved.

Susan L.

My wife and I have had very little exposure to mental illness. *Clowns Like Me* gave us insight into the challenges of Asperger's as no amount of reading, lecturing or discussion could ever provide. Our minds and hearts were awakened.

Dale M.

Clowns Like Me

Written by Jason Cannon,
Story and Performance by
Scott Ehrenpreis



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CLOWNS LIKE ME

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For my parents.

*Without their constant empathy and unconditional love, this
play would never have taken flight.*

—Scott Ehrenpreis

Foreword

The creation of Lifeline Productions and the world premiere of *Clowns Like Me* have been years in the making.

I am first and foremost a father. My eldest son has struggled his entire life with multiple mental health issues, so the escalating mental health crisis in this country is deeply personal for me.

The lack of adequate funding to address these issues is one part of the problem, but even more painful is the stigma surrounding mental illness and the marginalization of those who suffer. Even if you are “healthy” and strong-willed, rejection is difficult to swallow. Feeling *less than* is an awful, debilitating state of mind.

My family’s road to finding answers to our son’s challenges was full of potholes, dead ends, and detours. Year after year, well-meaning health professionals misdiagnosed my son’s situation, and by adulthood his journey to any sort of normalcy or acceptance seemed endless.

Miraculously, Scott's problems were eventually properly diagnosed as Asperger's Syndrome (other clarifying diagnoses quickly followed), and—as you will learn about in this play—we finally knew which direction to go.

A few years ago, I began to talk with Scott about possibly telling his mental health story on stage. This was no random idea. Scott's form of Asperger's is one in which he is particularly good at one thing at the expense of most everything else. For Scott, his good thing—his passion, his calling—is *acting*.

The irony has always struck me: my son feels like his true self only while pretending to be someone else.

I imagined putting these two pieces together— theatre and mental illness—could result in something authentic and empowering. And not just for Scott, but for the public as well.

At first, Scott wasn't ready. Coming out of the shadows and telling his story would require a level of vulnerability that he simply didn't possess when we first considered the idea. We took our time, and did the work, and when I broached the idea with him again last year, he embraced it.

I immediately went to work. As I began the philanthropic journey to raise funds for this project, I never met a donor who didn't have someone in their family with a mental health challenge. I told them Scott's story. They told me theirs. And in that sharing, we realized we were on the same journey.

I am overwhelmed by their generosity. Their contributions brought Lifeline Productions into being.

To help Scott tell his story we hired acclaimed playwright/director Jason Cannon, and to ensure the story lives on beyond closing night we also brought on first-class videographer Brad Bryan.

We polished the play draft by draft over the course of five developmental readings. Ostensibly, the purpose of those readings was to get feedback on how to make the show better. But during that process, we found that Scott's story—even in rougher, earlier drafts—so impacted the audience that they were far more interested in having a conversation and sharing their own stories than in giving any sort of editorial feedback. They laughed. They cried. They poured their hearts out. Those who suffered similarly to Scott thanked us for making them feel seen and heard. And everyone else thanked us for taking them on a journey of discovery. Their empathy became supercharged because they were seeing inside the mind of someone who suffers every day.

And *that* is the mission.

Clowns Like Me is not the end. It's the beginning. We intend over the next several years to tell more stories and continue the conversations necessary for society-wide healing.

But right now, I simply invite you to receive the story of my son, who is doing something so brave and meaningful. Whoever you are and whatever your struggles may be, I hope you take Scott's gift to heart, and remember that even in the darkest shadow...

You are not alone.

Joel Ehrenpreis

Sarasota, Florida

May 2023

CLOWNS
Like Me

Production History

Clowns Like Me received its world premiere at Lifeline Productions (Joel Ehrenpreis, Founder; Jason Cannon, Chief Creative Officer) on May 18, 2023, in the Cook Theatre (located in the FSU Center for the Performing Arts, Sarasota FL). The production was directed by Jason Cannon; with lighting and sound design by Alex Pinchin, scenic and costume design by Jason Cannon, and properties design by Joel and Rosalyn Ehrenpreis. The stage manager was Jeff Dillon. The cast was Scott Ehrenpreis, playing himself.

Setting and Production Notes

The set is simple: a 9-foot by 12-foot area rug, a stool, two bookcases (one on up right corner of the rug, one on up left) with their faces covered with fabric so the contents are hidden, and a set of antique-y luggage down right.

The stage right bookcase is jam-packed with DVDs. The stage left bookcase is filled with clown figurines and toys. Both get revealed at different points in the show.

The luggage is filled with color-coordinated cleaning supplies (rags, gloves, goggles, spray bottle), a water bottle, a Dirt Devil, a collapsible Swiffer, and clown noses. Scott takes things out of these suitcases and repacks as needed.

Suggested pre-show music includes: “Just Like Nothing” by Prozak, “Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley, “I’m So Afraid” by Fleetwood Mac, “The Tears of a Clown” by Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, and “Up on the Roof” by James Taylor.

Unless otherwise noted in stage directions, Scott speaks all the dialogue. It is, after all, a one-man show. This also means even

though the script is divided into scenes, the action and dialogue are continuous. No blackouts until the very end.

The pre-show announcement at top of show should be done live if possible. Live is simply more effective than pre-recorded, especially as a way to ensure more of the audience sticks around for the talkback. But if you don't have a host or emcee, definitely use the pre-recorded option. If you go the live route, just change Scott's opening line from "Like the disembodied voice said" to something like: "Like that tall, bearded fellow said" or "Like boss-lady Angelena just said." Make it fit your venue and personnel.

In Scene 2, adjust the name of the Stage Manager and the venue as appropriate, of course.

Scott truly loves kung fu movies. His collection continues to grow. So in Scene 7, adjust "two-hundred-and-seventeen" to whatever is accurate at the time of performance.

In Scene 16, adjust the number of years from "fourteen" to whatever is accurate at the time of performance. The year was 2009.

Every performance must include a postshow talkback. This is non-negotiable. Perfect world, the talkback panel consists of Scott, the host, and a mental health professional. Plan for 20-30 minutes, and highlight the resources available in the playbill, in the lobby, and at lifelineproductionsinc.com.

Everybody loves a clown, so why don't you?

Everybody laughs at the things that I say and do.

They all laugh when they see me comin'

But you don't laugh; you just go home runnin'.

Everybody loves a clown, so why can't you?

A clown has feelings, too.

“Everybody Loves a Clown”

by Gary Lewis & the Playboys

The Honest Man

Scene 1

*As the house lights and pre-show music fade, we
hear a recorded pre-show announcement:*

“Hello and welcome to *Clowns Like Me*. Please take a moment to turn off your phones and remember there is no photography or recording permitted. The show runs 70 minutes straight through with no intermission, and after the show we invite you to stick around and join us for a talkback, so you can ask questions and share a bit of your story. If you can’t stay for the talkback, please note there are many mental health resources listed in your playbill and on our website, as well as out in the lobby. We encourage you to take advantage. And now, Lifeline Productions is proud to present *Clowns Like Me*. Put your hands together for the star of our show, Scoooooott Ehrenpreeeis!”

Top of show music cue plays: "Everybody Loves a Clown" by Gary Lewis & the Playboys. Scott bops out with a big smile. He waves and makes eye contact and points at audience members and winks. He is delighted to be here! He interacts with the audience like a talk show host, engaging them directly, improvising patter.

Hey! Hello hello hello! Thank you so much for coming. No really, too much. Thank you! (*or whatever is appropriate with each new audience*)

When Scott is done schmoozing, he lifts his hand into the air and snaps his fingers: music out.

Yes, like the disembodied voice said, I'm Scott Ehrenpreis. The spelling of my last name is a little tricky. It's E-H-R-E-N-P-R-E-I-S. But once we become friends, you can just call me Scottie.

And fun fact, "Ehrenpreis" means *virtuous* or *honest*. And that's me tonight! The honest man. Make no promises, tell no lies, right?

Scott notices the stage isn't even close to clean enough. It's incredibly distracting.

Um. Huh.

So. I'm gonna tell you some stories tonight. These stories are true, and they come from my experience living with mental illness. Like, *lots* of mental illness.

And this shouldn't be a surprise. It's in all the marketing.

Scott crosses to the luggage and pulls out cleaning supplies: goggles, gloves, rag, spray bottle. He speaks as he preps.

Some of the stories will be funny. Some will be sweet. A few will be extremely embarrassing. For me.

And a couple of my stories will be hard. At some point, I'm even gonna tell you the worst thing I've ever done. Soooo you may have the impulse to get up and leave.

But don't. Cuz if you stick it out with me to the end, I'll also tell you the *best* story I know.

And besides, since the show has already started... there are no refunds.

A Hundred Pounds of Dirt

Scene 2

*Scott begins to clean the stool and suitcases, and
keeps cleaning throughout the following.*

Okay, so my stage manager, Jeff, is awesome. And the crew here at the Cook Theatre also is awesome. They know I like things clean. And I know they clean the stage and the set before every performance.

But there is clean, and there is Scott Ehrenpreis clean, y'know what I'm sayin'?

So, if you don't mind, I'm just gonna give everything a quick once-over as we get started here.

And, yes, if the color-coordinated goggles and spray bottle haven't already tipped you off, I live with some big-time OCD.

You probably know OCD by its technical name, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. But that's not what OCD means. No. What OCD actually means is *Oh Christ, Dirt!*

Yeah. I'm always cleaning. Especially my floors. My floors must be spotless. My floors at home are tile, so they are easily and quickly cleaned.

If cleanliness is next to godliness, then my kitchen is Heaven, my bathroom is Nirvana, and I am Zeus perched on Mount Olympus only instead of a lightning bolt... (*Scott lifts the head/brush of his Swiffer out of the suitcase like Excalibur*) I wield a Swiffer.

Scott sees something on the area rug.

But Swiffers don't work on carpet. I'm sorry, if y'all could just hold on one more sec.

Scott swaps his Swiffer for a Dirt Devil. Yes, these tools also are color-coordinated. He buzzes the carpet. It's practically orgasmic for him.

Aaaaaah. Oh my god-oh my god-oh my god-oh my *god*. This feels *really* good.

*Scott keeps buzzing and buzzing but he can't get
the carpet clean enough.*

But see, this is why tile is so much better than carpet. Cuz can carpet ever really be clean? I don't think so. You never have to shampoo tile.

And did you know one square foot of carpet can hold a *pound* of dirt and still *look* clean? Yeah, true story. This rug is twelve feet by nine feet. Do the math, that's a hundred and eight square feet. So there could be over a hundred pounds of dirt up here, and none of us would know!

I begged the set designer not to use a rug. But I'm just an actor, what do I know? Well, I know enough to travel with my Dirt Devil. And I love it.

"But Scott, why do you have a Dirt Devil? Don't you have tile floors?"

Yes, but what about my couch, huh? My chairs? What about my bedspread? Oh yeah. I used to sleep with my Dirt Devil, to suck up any dust that might fall on me at night and wake me up. But one night I rolled over on my Dirt Devil, accidentally turned it on, and I woke up with hickies in a lot of weird places.

Chia Pet

Scene 3

Scott packs away his Dirt Devil, grabs the collapsible Swiffer, assembles it, and during the following vigorously Swiffers the stage floor all around the area rug.

Here's what you may not understand about OCD. The compulsive actions—like constantly washing your hands or checking and re-checking your locks are locked or your stove is off—those actions are not the actual disorder. They're behavioral manifestations. The disorder is the onslaught of intrusive thoughts.

See, I don't *want* to obsessively clean my floors, but I do it to distract myself from the incessant voice in my head telling me to be afraid. Of imperfection, of contamination, of accidentally harming myself or others.

That voice tells me to doubt the sincerity of all the people I care about in my life. That voice also tells me, “Guess what, Scottie? Everyone thinks you’re a failure and a liar.”

That voice makes it hard to trust people and makes it hard for anyone to get close to me. That voice wants me all to itself. Wants me to believe that I’m alone.

The only thing those of us with OCD can do to combat that voice is to *drown it out...* by obsessing about something else.

*Scott is finished with the floor. He swaps the Swiffer
head for the brush head.*

These obsessions vary from person to person. There’s no cookie cutter or one-size-fits-all formula.

Me? I have six specific obsessions I use to tell that intrusive OCD voice to shut the hell up.

Number one, obviously, is cleaning.

Number two is sorta related to cleaning. I have a deep-abiding aversion to body hair.

And here’s the heaping scoop of irony. You wouldn’t guess it from my gleaming scalp, but I am a hairy beast. My head is a bowling ball. My body is a chia pet.

And I've been hairy since I was born. While the nurse toweled me off, the doctor treated my mother for rug burn.

My parents would take baby-me on walks around the park. People would look into the stroller and go, "Oh so cute! Is he a rescue?"

Here's the thing. It's not about the hair itself, okay? (*Scott gestures at his chest*) It's the pound of dirt per square foot of "carpet."

Coasters

Scene 4

OCD obsession number three is coasters.

*Scott gets his water bucket, dunks his brush, and
scrubs one of the bookcases.*

There are two kinds of people in this world. People who use coasters, and people who go to hell.

If you have a drink in my condo, don't you put it down—*anywhere*—without a coaster. If I see you about to put a glass, cup, mug, or bottle down without a coaster, I will leap whatever chair, table, pet, or child that is in my way to put one down in time.

If I'm too far away, though, I'll just fling a coaster at your drink like a ninja star. I'm pretty accurate, but if, instead of landing

under your glass, that coaster slices into your side, and you have to go to the hospital for an emergency coasterectomy?

You only got yourself to blame.

A Place for Everything

Scene 5

OCD obsession number four is my need for everything to be extremely and precisely organized.

Scott scrubs the other bookcase.

In my condo, you can always find everything. Keys on their hook. Toiletries lined up like Rockettes. Soup cans and spice jars all facing out like fourth graders on picture day.

Y'know, my grandma used to tell me, "There's a place for everything, and everything in its place."

She almost had it right. It's not just that there's a place for everything, and everything in its place. But that there's *my* place for everything, and no one better goddamn move it!

My Awesome DVD Collection

Scene 6

Okay, before I tell you about my OCD obsession number five, I sense I must tell you about my seriously sick Swiffer. Your amazement and jealousy are palpable.

*Scott disassembles his collapsible Swiffer/duster
and packs it away as he talks.*

First, full disclosure, neither Swiffer nor Dirt Devil have paid me to endorse their products. If any of you work for them, get on that for me, will ya?

And double full disclosure... *(Scott looks around for spies, whispers to the audience)* this isn't actually a Swiffer. It's a collapsible,

multi-functional, all-in-one broom-mop-duster. Even the water bucket collapses. See?

Scott collapses the water bucket and packs it away.

I had this specially designed to fit in my suitcase. Yeah. It's okay. You can *ooh* and *abb*. If only cleaning was an Olympic sport, me and my Dirt Devil would be on every Wheaties box in America.

Scott takes off his goggles, strips off his gloves, and packs them away.

There. We have now achieved "Scott Ehrenpreis clean."

So. OCD obsession number five is my DVD collection.

Okay, it's not just a collection. It's... you ever seen *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*? And at the end, they hide the ark in a box in a warehouse among all these other stacks of boxes looming over you? Yeah. That's what my DVD *assemblage* is like.

See, I've always loved movies, and I had boxes and boxes of VHS tapes, but then DVDs came out. This was around 1997, I was about to turn 18, and my younger brother Noah pulled me aside and said "Hey! Why are you still messin' with VHS tapes? You

gotta check out these DVDs, man. You don't have to rewind, you can skip ahead to wherever you want, they last longer, the quality is better. Toss those tapes in the trash and get you some DVDs!"

So I did.

*Scott yanks the fabric off the stage right bookcase,
revealing an astounding collection of DVDs.*

Noah was right. DVDs are awesome. This is just a handful of mine. And I know you're wondering, so I'll tell you... my first DVD?

Scott pulls a DVD off the shelf.

The Big Lebowski. I still have it. This DVD is old enough to order a White Russian. That's a joke for you fellow *Lebowski* fans.

Scott meticulously folds the fabric.

And I don't just collect 'em. I watch 'em. Over and over. And not just the movie itself. I'm a special features addict. All that bonus material? Those extra discs where they interview the ex-wife of the cinematographer's second assistant or whatever? I

watch aaaaalllll that stuff. The making ofs. The documentaries. I read the damn liner notes, cuz, yeah, I wanna know what craft services served to Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan for lunch on day 18 of shooting *You've Got Mail*. Who doesn't?

Scott packs the now folded fabric.

Do you know what DVD stands for? Digital Video Disc. Or—and I prefer this—Digital *Versatile* Disc. Yeah. *Versatile*.

I'm so sad how they are phasing out these *versatile* discs. Cuz there's something about the physical copy, right? Fighting with the sticky sealing tape. Cracking open the case with its sorta velcro ripping sound. (*Scott rips open the case to make the sound*) They are tangible and shiny. They have weight and mass. You have to lovingly wipe them with a cloth. (*Scott pulls a cloth from his pocket and lasciviously wipes the DVD*) Oh yeah, that's niiiiice.

And I know, I know, I know, streaming is taking over. On demand is *so* convenient. But I will never give up my DVDs.

Because when I walk into my *Raiders of the Lost Ark* warehouse, I'm no longer alone. Streaming is ether. But look here... it's Jeff Bridges. The Dude. The Dude is my friend. The Dude abides.

My DVDs abide. They are always there for me. They don't judge me. They don't look at me like I'm stupid. They aren't afraid of me.

Unlike people, who are so unaware of how mental illnesses operate that they end up rejecting me. My DVD friends don't reject me. They play for me. Take me on their adventures.

And they understand me better than people do, because even if my DVDs don't know what it's like to be *rejected*, they sure as hell know what it's like to be *ejected*.

Ooooo. *Deep*. I know.

Mr. Not-Chuck Norris

Scene 7

Now, I've told you I have to have everything in its place, so you must be wondering... how do I have my stacks of DVDs organized?

Scott puts THE BIG LEBOWSKI back on the shelf, right where it belongs.

Well, it's simple. Everything is alphabetized by title. I don't divvy them up by genre or year released or director or anything like that.

Except for the kung fu movies! My two-hundred-and-seventeen martial arts films? They get their own shelf.

See, I did karate as a kid in New Jersey. Got all the way up to brown belt. Eight, nine years old, my parents sent me and my two brothers to summer sleepaway karate camp. And the teachers were surprisingly good. One teacher was named Mr. Norris. Seriously, true story. Not *the* Mr. Norris, y'know, not *Chuck* Norris, but Mr. Norris. And he was legit: sixth degree black belt.

The coolest thing I learned at summer sleepaway karate camp is that the word *samurai* translates as “those who serve.” And this is why kung fu movies just really get to me, because of the generosity you see between the fighters. They have to put ego totally aside, because you only look badass if the enemy you’re fighting is badass too. You need a worthy opponent to move with you, or there’s no suspense. There’s no payoff. And that’s why the bad guys are the unsung heroes of martial arts films. Those guys are just as talented. But they are willing to lose. To get beat. Publicly. To *serve* the story.

This one time at summer sleepaway karate camp, Mr. Not-Chuck Norris asked all the campers, “Hey! Does anyone want to fight *me*??”

And everyone raised their hand... except me! I looked around and thought, “What is wrong with all of you?? He’s a sixth degree black belt. Also, we are nine years old and he is three times our size. No way am I putting my hand up.”

Instead, I did this.

Scott inhales sharply and pulls his hands and arms tight into his chest.

But of course, who did he pick?

Scott sighs and points at himself.

So I get up, and he sorta puts his arms up like this, and he just says, “Hit me.” I was terrified. He says again, “Come on. Hit me. I won’t hit back.” So I step in and give a little jab to his belly. And he starts encouraging. “Hit me, hit me, hit me, *hit meeee!*” And all the other campers start chanting, “hit him, hit him, hit him, *hit hiiiiim!*” I look over and my brothers are screaming, too, “Hit him, Scottie! Hit him!”

And finally something in me snaps and I just start punching, left-right-left-right-left-right, right into his gut, his hands are up here, and my little 9-year-old arms are going like pistons, and I’m sweating, and all the other campers are screaming with pre-teen bloodlust and waving their canteen cards at my brother Noah who has turned into a bookie, he’s taking bets on how long I’ll last, and Mr. Not-Chuck Norris is laughing and yelling “hit me-hit me-hit me!” and I punch and I punch and I punch and I punch and I finally... punch... myself... out.

And Mr. Not-Chuck Norris flips me over and I land on my back on the mat.

Scott takes a drink of water.

See, that's what it's like to fight mental illness. It feels like winning is impossible, no matter how much or how hard you punch. Because you're nine. And he's a sixth degree black belt. And he can take you out whenever he wants.

I said in kung fu movies the hero needs a worthy opponent. But when my OCD, or my Asperger's, or my social anxiety, or my depression, when they step on the mat with me, I can't tell whether I'm the hero, or just a worthy opponent. And honestly, since my punches do no damage, am I even worthy?

How is it that in my life... in my movie... I'm the opponent?

Why do I always feel like I'm losing my own life?

In the mid-90s, in my teens, we left New Jersey and moved to Cincinnati, and I stopped martial arts. Never again went to summer sleepaway karate camp, never got my rematch with Mr. Not-Chuck Norris.

But that part of me that is always, always, *always* punching... it's still with me.

And I live in constant fear of punching myself out.

My Aspie Gift

Scene 8

Okay. I know I've been pretty hyper-focused on OCD—go figure, right?—but I just mentioned a few other disorders and syndromes I've been diagnosed with. Yeah, if you didn't know, mental illnesses are like potato chips. Ya can't have just one.

So lemme bring you up to speed.

Pretty much from the moment I was born, we all knew something was a bit funky in my wiring. I was constantly anxious and agitated. I had trouble paying attention. I wasn't able to process things as quickly as everyone wanted me to, so I was labeled stupid. Social cues made no sense to me, so I was also labeled rude. If my routine got jostled even a little bit, I'd lose it; act out; lash out.

We were desperate for answers.

And thus began the parade of doctors and therapists and clinicians—and this is not to indict the character or integrity of all those folks doing their damndest to figure this stuff out. It is not easy.

But the first swing-and-a-miss diagnosis was ADD. Y'all remember the heyday of ADD? Ritalin was raining down on me like confetti from a cannon.

I had such a surplus of pills, I didn't know what to do with 'em. So this one time, out of curiosity, I refilled my dad's Tic-Tacs with leftover Ritalin.

You ever seen a grown man sit in a La-Z-Boy for eight days straight?

Diagnosis strike two was ADHD. More meds. *All* the meds.

It wasn't until I was 25 that I got my first accurate diagnosis, and check out this story. I was burning through meds for every misunderstood symptom, and my parents were telling this brilliant clinical social worker about me and *she* said—without ever having met me, just based on my reported behaviors, “Well have you considered Asperger's Syndrome?”

Bullseye! More about Asperger's in a sec.

In addition, we figured out I've got Bipolar Disorder, also known as manic depression, which means I have huge, unpredictable mood swings from Rocky Mountain highs to Death

Valley lows. Either everything is awesome or nothing is. It's all caviar and champagne or gas station sushi and cheese whiz.

And I've also got Social Anxiety Disorder, or social phobia. Look, everyone gets nervous sometimes. You're going on a date, giving a presentation at work, hosting a dinner party. Big-ticket items. But for those of us with Social Anxiety Disorder, *every* interaction feels like a big-ticket item. Every day, the stakes are paralyzingly high.

Even just writing an email or sending a text feels like you're taking the SAT. Making small talk feels like you're performing on America's Got Talent and every judge is Simon Cowell.

When you've got social phobia, you yearn for ordinary days, when the stakes are low. But you don't get 'em.

And it all started with that first diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, which means I am on the autistic spectrum.

Now, finally having an accurate diagnosis was a relief. But along with the relief came shock and some despair. Because Asperger's Syndrome isn't something that can be fixed. All these mental illnesses—even though they are called illnesses—don't really have cures. They are disorders. Syndromes.

So, what? I'm defective? Cursed? And now my whole life is about coping?

I will say this for Asperger's, though. There's a guacamole blessing inside that curse burrito. One of the quirks of Asperger's is that most of us "Aspies"—(*goofily proud*) that's what we call ourselves, *Aspies*, it's pretty cool—we have a gift. We are really, really good at one particular thing at the expense of everything else.

My thing? Acting. Storytelling. Theatre. Doing theatre makes all my problems evaporate. When I'm on stage, I feel invincible. I feel like I finally belong. Because when I step into the spotlight, I'm not seen as stupid or rude. I'm brave. I'm not seen as defective or cursed. I'm compelling.

It's ironic, huh? Only when I'm pretending to be someone else am I finally seen for who I really am.

One of my favorite acting gigs I ever had was playing Scooby Doo at a theme park. This was during my high school years, and for four straight summers, I'd put on that ridiculously heavy costume and sweat to the point of passing out. This is Midwest summer, we're talking 90-plus degrees, and when you're in the suit, add another 30. We could only go out in half-hour increments, with a handler who made sure we didn't drop from heat stroke or get tackled by sugar-saturated children.

It was one of the most physically taxing things I've ever done, but also one of the most emotionally rewarding. It didn't feel like a job. It felt like... acceptance. People would travel from far

and wide *just to meet Scooby*. Just to get a hug and a picture. With me.

Understand: the world had never paid me any positive attention until I put on that suit.

It's when I take that suit off, when I step out of the spotlight and exit off-stage back into my so-called *real* life...

Scott steps out of the light.

... that's when I'm invisible.

Stupid Crappy Words

Scene 9

Now I know I still owe you my OCD obsession number six. But I need to set it up before I tell you, because it's gonna be one of those hard stories I warned you about. So...

*Scott peeks underneath the fabric on the stage
left bookcase. He decides something.*

Okay. Contrary to what you might be thinking, the purpose of this show is not for me to get nominated for a Tony Award. Although if you are on the committee, my name is Scott Ehrenpreis, that's E-H-R-E-N-P-R-E-I-S.

No, the purpose of this show is to change the conversation around mental illness. And we can't change a conversation unless we adjust our language, right? The words we use matter.

You ever hear someone say, "Well, he isn't playing with a full deck"? Yeah. My dad hates that turn of phrase, "full deck," because words like that put the blame on me. I'm crazy, or nuts, or whacko, or insane. All words that diminish me, put me in a safe little box, and separate me from the general population. I'm not a person to be approached or understood. I am to be shunned, but it's ok, no one has to feel guilty about it, because "I don't have a full deck."

My dad prefers a different metaphor. He says I was "dealt a shitty hand of cards." At least that way it's the dealer's fault.

But that's not quite right either, because those of us with mental illness, we aren't even dealt cards from the deck the world plays with. It's like you slap down your pair of jacks, and I put down my pair of librarians. You show your royal flush, I show a recipe for banana bread. And I'm not trying to cheat. Nothing up my sleeve. I'm just wired differently.

And yet, well-meaning people will say the most callous and ridiculous things. I'm never sure how to react when they do, but this gal I met at NAMI—Oh! You should totally go check out NAMI. That's N-A-M-I. The National Alliance on Mental Illness. And this also is not a paid endorsement. It's a heartfelt

testimonial, because, hey, I'm not just the star of the show, I'm also a client. (*Scott winks and gives a thumbs up; SFX "ding"*)

NAMI has chapters all over. It's a great place for those who feel defective to find some community. One of NAMI's best programs is the Connections Group. We sit together, share our stories, devour doughnuts, encourage each other to stay med compliant. Good people, doing good work. That's NAMI. N-A-M-I... (*Scott winks and thumbs ups again; SFX "ding"*) dot org.

Anyhow, I met this gal at NAMI, let's call her... "Athena," protect the innocent here. Athena is much more... *assertive* than I. She refuses to let people get away with saying stupid crappy things. One of the stupid-y crappiest? "Why don't you just cheer up?"

There are a couple variations on this theme. Like, "You should just try harder!" Or the less friendly version, "Snap out of it." Yeeeah. A little piece of advice: don't say "cheer up" or "just try harder" to people with depression and anxiety. It doesn't work that way.

So this one time, a reporter came by NAMI to interview us, sit in on our Connections Group, do a little feature article. And this dude obviously had not studied his Big Book of Stupid Crappy Stuff *Not to Say to People with Mental Illness*. After hearing a few of our more harrowing stories, you know what he said? Oh yeah, you know what he said.

“Well why don’t you all just cheer up?”

Athena brought this reporter a doughnut and sweetly said, “Hey thanks! While I work on cheering up, why don’t you work on being taller. Lemme know how that goes.”

The reporter tried again: “But none of you *look* depressed.”

Athena snatched the doughnut back and said, “Well, we don’t *look* depressed because it’s invisible, dumbass. Just like you don’t *look* insensitive, and yet here we are.”

The reporter looked around for help. But by this point, everyone was laughing at him or trying to hide the fact they were. So, ego being what ego is, he doubled down. “Well, (*sniff*) I know people who have it way worse. So I think you should count your blessings.”

This one is infuriating, because guess what? It’s not a competition. And even if I was competing in the Championship of Suffering, I don’t wanna win. But before I could calmly and constructively explain this to him, Athena goes, “Blessings? Okay. Let’s count.”

Scott holds up all five fingers on one hand and counts them down till only the middle remains upright!

“One, two, three, four. Oh! Well lookie there, Mr. Reporter Man.”

The words we use matter.

The Priest-Clown

Scene 10

You know, we have a word for those of you *not* on the spectrum, those of you *free* from mental illness.

“Neurotypical.”

Typical. *Normal*.

And that begs the question, doesn't it? What is “normal”? History shows that *normal* is a moving target. There was a time when it was *normal* for people with mental illness to simply be accepted. We were just woven into the fabric of everyday life. In fact, anyone a bit odd or off was thought to have been touched by the divine. And that's where we get the term, “Oh he's touched,” as in “Oh he's a little nuts.”

You know who else is touched by the divine? Priests. And I don't mean "priests" merely in the contemporary sense. I mean *priests* as in any holy person acting as the religious leader of a community. Yeah. So chew on this. In the earliest societies, there were two jobs that required you to be touched by the divine. Village priest. And village *clown*. And those two jobs were usually held by the same dang person! The priest-clown.

I think we should go back to that model. How much more fun would services be if the rabbi, while reading from the Torah, also wore a rainbow wig and made balloon animals?

If you believe in baptisms, no more dunking people in water, just smack 'em in the face with a pie. Hallelujah, the Holy Spirit tastes like banana cream!

And if your place of worship has a choir, just imagine all the singers getting out of one tiny car.

The priest-clown.

So this oughta blow your mind. My parents created this awesome tradition for me and my brothers. Every year at Hanukkah, they'd give us each a theme present.

Will, my littlest brother, every year he got vintage baseball cards.

My other brother, Noah, he got *ark* stuff. Y'know, toy boats. Pairs of stuffed animals. This one year, a kiddie pool and a garden hose so he could play "flood the sinners."

Maybe it was a bit on the nose, but I tell you what, we looked forward to our theme presents every year.

Oh yeah. And me? The eldest? What did my parents get me every year?

Clowns.

*Scott whips the fabric off the stage left bookcase,
revealing his collection of clowns.*

In my living room, in a place of honor above my TV and DVD player, there's a shelf that displays my collection of about twenty perfectly preserved, lovingly dusted, antique clown figurines and toys. I brought a few along to show you, like this one right here that pops out of a box.

I've got one at home that sweeps a broom. That one's my favorite, of course. He's cleaning.

Another one spins around on a crossbar. Another dances like a music box ballerina. It's like... my parents *knew*.

Nah, I'm sure that's not true, that's just starry-eyed projection, but think about it. I'm a clown. I'm... odd. Sad. Alone. Touched... by the divine.

Scott takes out a red clown nose from the smallest suitcase, puts it on, looks at the audience.

See, this is how I feel when I'm out in the world. People staring. People wondering. People taking that half step back, because something about me is... off.

No wonder we priest-clowns start to hold back. We don't raise our hands (*raises hand*) or take risks, we do this— (*arm-pulling-in gesture*) We put on as much armor as we can.

And sure, that becomes its own form of self-fulfilling prophecy, right? How can we ever connect if we never take a chance (*raises hand*), but why take a chance when the unavoidable outcome is people pointing and laughing for all the *wrong* reasons?

My DVDs Reprised

Scene 11

Scott takes off the nose and pockets it, then meticulously folds the fabric and packs it away.

And so, with all that in mind, I now can tell you my hard story of OCD obsession number six. Making its return appearance to the stage, give it up for my beloved DVD collection.

I can admit it. Jeff Bridges isn't always my friend. Often the Dude is my master.

I love acting. I love movies. I love versatile discs. But it's a fine, fine line between love and obsession. Compulsion is like a rip current spewing you into a tidal wave that throws you into a whirlpool. No matter how hard you swim...

Do I own those DVDs or do they own me?

There was a time in my life when getting the newest DVD meant *everything*. Fun fact, new release DVDs always drop on Tuesday, so Monday night I'd pace around my kitchen like a caged animal. Then super early Tuesday morning, I'd stalk Wal-Mart's parking lot until the store opened. Forget Target or Best Buy, those suckers opened an hour after Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart was where it was *at*, baby. First copy off the truck. Only copy in the universe that mattered.

One time I was there so early in the morning, I ran into the overnight manager. Guy named Eddie. Eddie can see I'm jonesing hard. He says, "Hey, what are you looking for?"

And I say, "Oh you know, just some, just some, just some DVDs."

Eddie sees right through me. "DVDs, huh? C'mere."

And Eddie takes me over to a pallet stacked with boxes. He pulls back a flap on the top box, and I can see it's jam-packed with beautiful, shrink-wrapped plastic cases. I must've whimpered cuz he goes, "You want a taste? First one's free." He hands me a copy of *Miss Congeniality 2*, and I tear the wrapping off with my teeth and I press Sandra Bullock's plastic face to mine.

And Eddie became my supplier. True story. He wouldn't make me wait for the store to open. He'd hook me up at midnight,

earliest possible moment I could get my trembling hands on the newest DVD.

But you see where this is going, right? No DVD was ever enough. No *amount* of DVDs was ever enough. Titles didn't matter. Genres didn't matter. Stars didn't matter. Whatever the new release was, I had to have it. I had to have more. I had to drown out that voice inside my head.

Rip current. Tidal wave. Whirlpool.

In Jail with Jimmy

Scene 12

I started shoplifting. Got caught almost immediately. This poor security guard chases me down and tackles me in the parking lot.

While we're waiting for the cops to show up, he asks me what I do. I tell him I'm an actor. True story: he asks for my autograph. "In case you ever get famous."

Awwww. Thanks for believing in me, Frank.

Cops show up. I take a ride in the back seat of a real life po-lice cruiser. I'm booked. I'm put into a holding cell, by myself, which was horrible, but then they migrated me to a common area. It was still terrifying and disgusting—just a lumpy mattress on the floor, and a couple of blankets you would never want to

look at under a black light. But at least I wasn't alone. A couple other guys were in there. This one guy, Jimmy, he calls me over.

"Siddown, kid."

I'm shaking and crying, snot and tears everywhere. Jimmy pats me on the knee and says, "What're you in for?"

"Shoplifting," I say.

"Damn, kid. You at least get some good stuff?"

"Um, I stuffed Season Three of *Everybody Loves Raymond* down my pants."

"Oh kid, what's wrong with you? Everyone knows Season Five is the best."

"You think I don't know that?!?"

And I'm back to weeping and wailing and Jimmy is trying to calm me down. "There there, kid, there there."

"You don't understand, Jimmy! My life is over! This'll be on my record! I'm an actor, who's gonna hire me now?"

"You're an actor?"

"Yeah."

"Can I have your autograph? In case you ever get famous."

I scribble my autograph for Jimmy and he says, “Thanks, kid. Calm down now. It’s not like you murdered anyone.”

But I kept whining and crying, and so Jimmy tries to distract me. “Hey, kid, why was the innocent painting found guilty?”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard him right. “What?”

“Why was the innocent painting found guilty?”

“I dunno. Why?”

“It was framed.”

Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either. Jimmy was making jokes. In jail. To calm me down.

“Hey, kid, you hear about the Energizer bunny getting arrested? Yeah. They charged him with battery.”

I couldn’t help it. I giggled uncontrollably. Thank god Jimmy was there, telling horrible jokes, because that was one of the scariest nights of my life. My dad—

My dad. He talked to the store manager. He talked to the cops. He told them a bit of my story. They let me go. Didn’t press charges. My dad... he got me out.

As I was leaving, I looked back. “I didn’t ask. What are you in for, Jimmy?”

“Oh, I don’t believe in paying traffic tickets, kid. I’ll be all right. But answer me this: what do you call a bank robber who goes camping?”

I braced myself. “I don’t know, Jimmy. What *do* you call a bank robber who goes camping?”

“Criminal intent.”

I Want a Red Light

Scene 13

Y'know, that experience with Jimmy confirmed something that up to then I had only suspected. My syndromes and disorders are not unto themselves the problem. Not really. It's the resulting isolation. The loneliness.

See, Jimmy didn't treat me like an outcast, or like I was cursed. He invited me over. And it didn't bother him that my deck of cards was filled with librarians and banana bread recipes. He was perfectly happy to make up new games as we went along.

But Jimmy is the exception who proves the rule, and that rule is that even though those of us with mental illness want to sit down at the table and play cards with y'all, we are constantly dismissed—*seat's taken, table's full, move along*. And that casual cold shoulder? That constant dismissal? *That* is what causes the

anxiety, leading to anger, creating desperation. Mental illnesses are just wiring. But loneliness... is debilitating.

You want to know what loneliness is? What it *really* is? Because a lot of you don't. Some of you out there, some of you do. You know that loneliness isn't a choice. It's a condition.

Loneliness is not still. It is always pulsing; vibrating; rattling.

Loneliness is not silence. One of the loneliest places in the world is a crowded city sidewalk.

Loneliness is not passive. It is always poking, always hissing, always whispering: "You're worthless. You deserve this. No one cares."

Loneliness is not solitude, which is what meditation tries to achieve. See, after you meditate, you can go back out into the world, refreshed. But when you are afflicted with loneliness... there's no world to go back out into.

Scott exhales, frustrated. Words aren't cutting it.

Okay. I'm gonna give you a little taste.

Scott snaps his fingers. SFX "kerchunk" as lights snap down to a tight spot on Scott.

*Faintly, we hear an electrical hum overlapped
with carnival music, a bit spooky, on a loop.*

See? *This* is loneliness. No sense of connection to anyone. No sense of mattering. You get none of the benefits of solitude. No joy of a quiet mind, no peaceful bliss of self-awareness, because mental illnesses are always making noise. They never rest.

The music intensifies.

They never need to take a pit stop or gas up, so you're going around and around and around, and you can't stop. Usually when you're driving, you like it when you hit every green light, yeah? But loneliness is *exhausting*, you *want* a red light, you *need* to stop, roll down your window and exchange even just a "hey-what's up-how ya doin'?" with the driver of the car next to you, but you can't, there's no way to have a conversation going ninety on the freeway, plus your damn car stereo is stuck, it only gets one station, and that station is playing one song over and over, over and over and over and *over*.

*Scott snaps his fingers. Music out and lights re-
store.*

I wish I could just snap my fingers like that and control it. Because when you're zooming around doing lap after lap of loneliness, do you even exist? If an event happens to you during the day, but you have no one to share it with... did it even happen?

My Porn Star Name

Scene 14

So now you know a little bit of what true loneliness feels like. And... uh... can I be fully vulnerable with y'all? Yeah?

Um. I am looking for that special someone to share life with. Honestly, I yearn for it. Don't we all?

But the purpose of this show, as I've said, is to change the conversation around mental illness. It most definitely is *not* to get me a date. Although, if you are a single lady who loves movies and always carries disinfectant wipes—*(Scott spots an eligible lady in the audience and turns into a smooth operator)*—my name is Scott Ehrenpreis, that's E-H-R-E-N-P-R-E-I-S, and there's a rumor going around that I might be up for a Tony Award. *(He winks at the eligible and now blushing lady!)*

Anyhow, my romantic loneliness? A few years ago, that particular isolation became so acute, it actually crossed my mind to become a porn star. (*beat—if no laughter...*) Thank you for not laughing.

And don't ask me why I thought to do this, but I ran the idea past my mom. Yeah. True story, I swear.

“Hey mom. What do you think about me becoming a porn star?”

She says, “Well, it's a job.”

I say, “Mom, you're not worried I'll get an STD or something?”

“As long as it makes you happy, Scottie.”

Ya gotta love moms.

Then she asks, “Oh, Scottie, you won't use your real name, will you?”

And I explain to her no no no no no, porn stars all use fake names. The rule is you combine your middle name with the name of the street you grew up on. And she says, “So your porn star name would be... Adam Longview?”

I say yeah. She says, “That's good.”

What's really fun right now is that from up here, I can see so many of you whispering your porn star names to each other. We'll share 'em at the talkback.

Then my mom asks, "Scottie, does this porn star job have any benefits?"

I say, "Besides the obvious?"

"Well, will you get paid time off?"

"Ummmmm, I'll get paid for time *getting* off."

So I looked into getting an audition for a bona fide pornographic film, because of my mom's encouragement. But I couldn't do it. See, I could picture what was gonna happen. I'd show up. The director would tell me to take off my sweater. I would. They'd say again, "C'mon, take off your sweater." (*Scott gestures to his chest—chia pet, remember?*)

I considered self-financing and self-producing my own porno. I even had a title: *Saving Ryan's Privates*. (*off the laughter...*) Yeah, I know, you'd totally watch that, right??

But ultimately I realized the pornographic film industry is just not ready to bring back hair back. Not even for Adam Longview.

Backpage.com

Scene 15

But I was still super lonely, so I started going to strip clubs. For the attention. And the buffet.

For weeks I sat there, eyes down, sipping on my Diet Sprite, fighting the urge to Swiffer every surface.

Finally, I worked up the courage to ask one of the bouncers how to talk to the dancers, y'know, maybe get a date. This one bouncer, who—true story!—also was named Scott, he told me about Backpage dot com. This was an actual website where sex workers would post their ads. Backpage dot com.

Scott picks on an audience member.

Sir, no, put your phone away. They closed. Authorities shut 'em down, so it's no use trying to google 'em. (*Scott winks and thumbs ups*)

So I said, “Gee thanks, Bouncer Scott. Any other pointers?”

He said, “Yeah, don’t compliment them. They hear that all the time. Just be upfront. And use the code.”

“The code?”

“Yeah. Think of any particular activity you want, then shorten it into code using just the first letters.”

“Oh. So, like, holding hands would be H-H?”

“Yep.”

“Kissing and cuddling?”

“K-C.”

So right there, I pull out my phone, look up the website, Back-page dot com—

Scott picks on the audience member again.

Sir, seriously, it doesn’t exist anymore. Bookmarking won’t work. Just put your phone away. Besides, (*stage whispering*) she is sitting right next to you.

Sure enough, all the activities are listed in code. H-H. K-C. Then Bouncer Scott said, “Scottie. Holding hands? Kissing and cuddling? Sounds like what you’re looking for is a GFE.”

“GFE?”

“Yeah. Girl Friend Experience.”

And I was like that is *exactly* what I’m looking for! I set up a profile under the name “Adam Longview.” I click a couple ads, send a couple messages, and set up a date with a lady named Lovely. I assume “Lovely” is not her real name, but hey... who is Adam Longview to judge?

I pick Lovely up and bring her back to my place. We hang out. I show her my scrapbook, and when she sees photos of me as Scooby Doo, she says, “Oh you’re an actor?” I say yeah. “Can I have your autograph? In case you ever get famous?”

She lets me put my arm around her shoulder. I show her my clowns and she pretends not to be freaked out. We talk. We get Chinese delivered. I show her my DVDs, and that I think actually impresses her. We watch *The Big Lebowski*. And... well, she “stays over.”

The next morning—I’ll never forget this—Lovely made it feel so normal. So *real*. Like it wasn’t all just a business transaction.

As I’m driving her back to her place, I ask if she wants to get lunch later. Like, I really liked her, and maybe this could be...

And Lovely said, “Sure.”

I drop her off, and the rest of the morning, I'm really excited. But then she texted, cancelling, making her excuses.

And I'm not sure if she was protecting me from myself or from her, or protecting herself from me. Like how often does she experience a client wanting to "rescue" her, right? I felt burned, sure, but how often might she have been burned?

The Worst Thing I've Ever Done

Scene 16

The carnival music creeps in, but slow and scratchy and distorted. Scott looks around, takes a sip of water. Something is wrong. Music fades.

It's coming. The moment I might lose you. The moment I tell you the story of the worst thing I've ever done. And I'm gonna tell it to you not because I want your pity. Maybe a touch of understanding, sure, but I'm gonna tell you this story so you can witness the power of grace and forgiveness. Cuz there ain't no peak without the valley, right? No rising dawn without the dark night of the soul.

Fourteen years ago, I attempted suicide. Twice. But that's not the worst thing I've ever done. Both times, I popped a bunch of pills, but then both times I also immediately went to someone and confessed. Got my stomach pumped or they gave me charcoal to bring it all up, y'know.

See, it's not that I didn't want to live. I *want* to live. But I didn't want to live *this way* anymore, outcast and alone. I remember thinking... everything I touch I break. Everything I say or do pisses someone off. This never-ending, high-speed merry-go-round of loneliness... how do I get off it? Besides, who's gonna miss me? The Dude may abide, but he's just a plastic case, he's not gonna miss me. What's one less hairy beast in this world?

After my dad busted his ass to get me out of jail, my parents brought me home to live with them. Help me get re-grounded. Find my way back into some kind of life. But then, one night, I realized I needed money. Because I needed some DVDs. I didn't want to shoplift, but I had no money, and I *needed* more DVDs.

Rip current. Tidal wave. Whirlpool.

So I went into my dad's closet—and this still is not the worst thing I've ever done—and I stole money from his wallet. Put it under my pillow. Waited for the morning so I could go see Eddie and get my fix.

But my dad sniffed it out. Confronted me over breakfast. I denied it. It got ugly. I confessed. And everything... broke.

My parents kicked me out. I don't blame them. I landed in some ratty motel, and my horror at my behavior... the pressure built up. There's a symptom that many of us with mental illness suffer from. It's called Pressured Speech. When our minds get to spinning, and our thoughts start to red line, and our feelings become volcanic, we flip into a manic mode. And the words vomit forth.

Music starts in again, creepy, unsettling. Scott snaps his fingers, but it has no effect on the music. He snaps and snaps and snaps. No effect.

And there's no stopping it. Round and round, no red lights, no brakes, no pit stops, same song on repeat. And whoever is in the passenger seat with us, whoever we are forcing to listen to all our pressured speech, all they can do is grab on to that *oh shit* handle and hang on for dear life.

Music intensifies. Scott snaps. No effect. Scott acquiesces.

Okay!

Music out.

Okay, here's the worst thing I've ever done. After betraying my parents by stealing from them after they had gotten me out of jail and given me safe haven... they've kicked me out, I'm festering in that filthy motel room... I call them. I get their answering machine. And with all the rage and shame at my disposal, I spewed torrents of pressured speech at them like a fire hose. Like a dam bursting. Here's the gist of what I said.

SFX: an answering machine beeps. Then we hear Scott's voice (pre-recorded). He sits and listens to himself along with us. It is unapologetically awful.

“I fucking hate you guys! I hope you die. You're pieces of shit. As parents, you're failures. You don't do this to your son, your own son. I'm sorry I was ever born. I'm sorry I was such an inconvenience. I loath you. You disgust me. You do not understand love or devotion. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you-I hate you-I hate you. I hate you. I hate you-I hate you. I hate you-I hate you-I hate you-I hate you-I hate you-I hate you!”

Sound out.

It went on like that for a while.

After the tenth “I hate you” I realized I wasn’t saying it to my parents anymore. I was saying it to the world. (*Scott gestures at the audience*) To you.

We hear a loud and clear “I hate you-I hate you-I hate you!”

After the fiftieth “I hate you” I realized I was now saying it to... god? The universe? Fate? Whoever the dealer was for my shitty hand of cards.

*Again the answering machine message rings out:
“I hate you-I hate you!”*

And by the hundredth “I hate you” I realized I was saying it to myself.

We hear a final “I hate you, Scottie! I hate you!”

So I hung up.

And I didn’t see or speak to my parents for four years.

It was after that phone call I tried to kill myself the first time. Because I couldn't imagine coming back from that. And I'm not making excuses. The mental illness stuff is real, but I can't grow if I don't take responsibility for what I can and absolve everyone else for the actions I decided to take. Honestly, that's a big reason this show is even happening.

While working on this show and talking with my parents, that voicemail came up. You know what's funny? To me, it's the worst thing I've ever done. It looms huge in my memory as something unforgivable. But my parents don't really remember it. For them, it was just part of all the chaos going on at that time.

Those four years we didn't communicate... I was lost. I felt worthless, and in my desperation for human contact, I let people take advantage of me. I did odd jobs that paid in cash. Let drug dealers hide in my hole of an apartment. One even pulled a gun and threatened to shoot me if I didn't drive him where he wanted to go and help him avoid the cops. It was all I could do just to survive.

My parents, meanwhile—and I didn't know this till later, of course—my parents spent those four years going online and scouring police blotters to see if my name came up in reports. To see if I had been arrested again. To see if I was dead. Imagine that. Drinking your morning coffee, not checking the scores of your favorite team or how the stock market is doing or what the

weather's gonna be like that weekend. But holding your breath, hoping *not* to see your first-born son in some horrifying report.

See, those of us *with* mental illness aren't the only ones who suffer. Those who love us, and stand by us, and try to help us often suffer just as much. They certainly feel just as powerless. Their rip currents and tidal waves and whirlpools are just as inescapable. They drown in guilt, thinking it's all their fault, when in fact assigning "blame" is a complete waste of time.

Example. My mom once said she feels such guilt because she raised me as the child she *wished* she had rather than the child she *actually* had. But she was raising me at a time when our societal understanding of mental illness was nothing compared to what it is now. How *awful* that she feels guilt simply for doing the best she could with what she knew.

And then, one day, my parents came across my mug shot online. Washed out, worn out. I can't even tell you what I'd been arrested for. They couldn't take it anymore. For whatever reason, they needed me back in their lives. They found where I was living. And they put money into my account. My mom emailed me to let me know to look for it. I was staggered. I still am. I called her back right away, and as calmly as I could, asked, "Why are you giving me money?" I don't remember what she said, but I remember how her words felt. They were full of compassion. And pain. And love.

And it struck me... oh my god. It's not just that for four years I've been without them. They truly feel like they've been without me.

They helped me move back close to them. Helped me pull my life together, again. I wouldn't be up here tonight without them.

Don't get me wrong, though. It's not all sunshine and lollipops and rainbows now. There are days I get so frustrated with them because, through no fault of their own, they don't fully understand what I'm going through. They can't, right? And there are days when I know I push their grace and patience to the limit.

But the sun goes down, the sun comes up, and we try again.

The Best Story I Know

Scene 17

And that's all we can do, isn't it? Because all of us... we all have days that are tough.

And I'm talking to *all* of you now, even you neurotypicals. We all have days when we feel totally, absolutely, utterly, hopelessly *alone*. Days when all we want to do is put that armor on.

Scott does the arm-pulling-in gesture.

Days when taking a risk (*Scott raises his hand*) feels laughable, ridiculous, impossible.

When those days come—and they will, no matter what meds or therapy or support structures you have in place, those

days when you feel isolated and cut off, those days when Mr. Not-Chuck Norris has you in a headlock and it's like you're the only one going through hell, oh yes, those days will come—when they do, I want you to remember something.

I want you to remember that each and every one of you, in your own unique and special way...

You're all clowns. Like me.

Don't believe me? Look around. (*House lights come up.*) Seriously, look at the clowns on either side of you. Yeah, go ahead, look at them. Look at the people in front of you and behind you. They're clowns, too. Make eye contact, wave hello. They won't bite. (*Scott points at someone in the audience*) Well, she might. But look at them. And remember them.

Look at this clown on his phone still trying to pull up Backpage dot com. Remember him!

Now look at me. Eyes up here.

Look at me. And remember me.

Lights begin to tighten, gently, until the only elements illuminated are Scott and the clowns.

I'm Scott Ehrenpreis. The honest man.

That's E-H-R-E-N-P-R-E-I-S. But we're friends now. Call me Scottie.

Remember that I am not my diagnosis. No one is.

Remember that I am not disabled. I am differently abled. I'm an actor.

I'm a son. And a brother.

I love movies.

I have really clean floors, and I did karate as a kid.

I am hairy everywhere except on my head, and my porn star name is Adam Longview.

I have a cool collection of antique clowns, and I am touched... by the divine.

And I have one more story to tell you. It's the one I promised you back at the beginning, the *best* story I know. It's only four words long, so listen close.

Scott looks the audience right in the eye.

You...

... are *not*...

... alone.

*Scott pulls out his red nose, puts it on, and again
looks the audience right in the eye.*

Remember.

We...

... are not alone.

Blackout.

END OF PLAY

Curtain Call and Talkback

In the blackout, music starts for bows. “Everybody Loves a Clown” by Gary Lewis & the Playboys. Suggested pick-up: right on the lyric “Everybody loves a clown, so why can’t you?”

Lights up. Scott bows a couple times. He suddenly gestures: wait wait, one sec! He rushes to the small suitcase and pulls out a handful of clown noses. He tosses them into the front rows, like Elvis slinging his scarves. Scott bows again, music fades, and he gestures for silence.

Thank you! Thank you so much for coming. We’re gonna take a quick 3-minute break to get set up for our talkback, and I hope you stick around to keep the conversation going, ask your questions, share your stories.

And if you didn't catch a clown nose, never fear! We have noses available for you out in the lobby as you leave, for the low low price of whatever you feel like donating. All donations tonight will be going to support NAMI (*or whichever organization is sponsoring that night*), and once you grab your nose I hope you'll put it on, take a selfie in front of the *Clowns Like Me* banner, and post it to your various networks, tagging us at *hashtag-Clowns Like Me*.

Thank you again for being here tonight. Now I'm gonna go wash my face, maybe Swiffer the bathroom, and I'll see you back here in three minutes!

Scott bops off-stage and "Everybody Loves a Clown" plays to cover as the audience hangs out and stage management sets up chairs and a mic for the talkback participants.



JASON CANNON is an award-winning actor, director, improviser, playwright, and teacher, as well as a best-selling author and publisher. He holds an MFA in Directing, a Master's in Drama, and a BA in Theatre and English.

CLOWNS LIKE ME is his eight produced play.

As an actor, Jason has portrayed everything from a rapping dinosaur to a robot and from a hitman to Hamlet. He has written plays about Stevie Wonder and J. R. R. Tolkien, directed plays about hiccuping dragons and foul-mouthed puppets, and once while improvising he was attacked by a stage light.

He lives in Florida just a holler from the Gulf with his partner Rebecca and their two silly pups, Gaia and Odin. He makes a killer key lime pie and runs lots of 10Ks and half-marathons.

Jason believes storytelling in all its forms—whether seen on the stage or read on the page—has the power not only to entertain but also to comfort, provoke, and inspire us to be better humans.

If you enjoyed *CLOWNS LIKE ME*, please consider leaving a review. They are super helpful!

Jason is also available as a workshop leader, story coach, editor, teacher, speaker, emcee, and even wedding officiant.

Visit Jason at jason-cannon.com and check out his books at ibis-books.com.

Author photo by Shyla Rose Photography.



SCOTT EHRENPREIS earned a BFA in performance from Ohio University.

Stage credits include *NETWORK* and *SMOKE AND MIRRORS* at Florida Studio Theatre, *THE MANAGER* and *MOON OVER BUFFALO* at the Players Theatre, as Ben Silverman in *THE SUNSHINE BOYS* (multiple productions), *THE FRONT PAGE* at Asolo Repertory Theatre, and several shows/new play festivals at Theatre Odyssey.

Television credits include *SOUTH BEACH TOW* (TruTV), as a CIA officer in *BURN NOTICE* (USA Network), and as Isaac Andrews in *ANASTASIA AVENUE* (web series).

Film credits include *I AM A WHITE BLOOD CELL*, *THE ACTOR*, and *MR. SMILLER*.

Photo by Shyla Rose Photography.

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