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Lilly Bright's *American Standard: A Story of Enough*

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at Highways Performance Space, Los Angeles (through September 28)

By Steven Mirkin

Although the Los Angeles premiere of her one-woman show, *American Standard: A Story of Enough*, is just a few weeks away, Lilly Bright sounds relaxed and self-possessed talking on the phone. It's more impressive when you find out she's working with a new director, Valerie Hager. This makes a bit more sense if you've seen the play. A wrenching story of bulimia, family secrets, addictions and cures, the show ends with Bright finding comfort and understanding in an unexpected manner and place, *American Standard* is unsparing in its self-examination, but leavened by Bright's humor, sharp ear for detail, and arresting presence. The story is told through voice (she's a wicked, precise mimic) and stylized movement (she studied in Tel Aviv with Ohad Naharin and the Batsheva Dance Company, learning his Gaga movement language).

Bright and Hager were already familiar with each other; they'd met in a workshop and stayed in touch. When Tanya Taylor Rubinstein, who directed the show in its Santa Fe, New Mexico debut, was unavailable, Hager was the only person who came to mind. When it started to work, Bright knew she made the right decision. "We sat down and little light bulbs started going off," to the point where the script is "nearly unrecognizable." The biggest change, she says, is that Bright no longer tells her story in flashback; the entire play takes place in the narrative present. "Once you take out any sense of there being a narrator" without any what she calls "a bird's eye view" of the story, "everything started to be infused with a new perspective."

A regular writer since her youth, Bright decided to write and tell her story in 2012. But why take on bulimia, an eating disorder that Bright admits is the "ugly stepchild of addiction"? "I never felt served," she says. "I've never seen a show on this subject depicted in an honest, truthful way." Most writers, she says, are advised to write the book you want to read. "I wanted to write the show I wanted to see." But she felt she was "writing around" the story. She realized the show needed to be told in a solo voice. Having never written a one-woman show, she started researching, finding inspiration in the works of Spalding Gray ("Swimming to Cambodia," "Monster In A Box") and Anna Deavere Smith ("Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992"), masters of the staged monologue. Once she got down to work in 2016, she was surprised by how quickly it came together. The first draft, she says, "came very fast, and was fun." But writing and performing *American Standard* wasn't a catharsis, she says. Instead, it felt "very clear." Part of that she credits to distance. "Unless you're really over something," she says, "you can't process it. You can't go back in there and play all these parts until you step back from it."

That doesn't mean it was easy. "It took a lot of drafts to get really honest about oneself. The degree to which I hurt myself, how much pain I was in." The hardest part, she says, is "calling yourself out on your own bullshit. It's easier to be honest about what you see in other people." One of the toughest things to confront was the scene where her bulimia, drinking and drug taking caused her to fall out with her college friends. "I had forgotten that they really abandoned me. Maybe they were saying 'you need help,' but it didn't cross my mind that anyone would care about me." The experience was "painful back then and it was hard to go back. But the memory's kind of amazing. When you do this, you kind of time travel. You hear the voices and remember the dialogue."

And bulimia, she admits, is an "unsavory topic." Not as glamorous as anorexia, she wryly notes that "even within the world of eating disorders, there's a stigma." The cycle of binging and purging isn't about food, she says. "It's about control/lack of control. That's the high." And unlike alcohol or drugs, food is something humans need to live. "You're faced with it three meals a day, that thing that you used for all your self-soothing." For a bulimic, life "swings between being too little and being too much. Not enough being too much. That pendulum swing. You lose your ability to withstand uncomfortable situations. Instead of confronting what uncomfortable, "you turn to your crutch, your darkness. After a while, without it, you start to believe you can't face any discomfort. As an artist, as a person, there's nothing more important than sitting with stuff, being with it, having the experience of it. I can't imagine thriving as an artist and suffering."

What finally brought her out of what she calls her addiction was unexpected: becoming a mother. It was never on her to-do list, but after she became pregnant, she never felt happier, or more comfortable in her own skin. "I really shifted me. It snaps you into a different time frame where you think 'I really don't have time for this bullshit anymore.'" Everything, she said, "becomes a little more precious."

American Standard: A Story of Enough is at Highways Performance Space, 1651 18th Street, Santa Monica, through September 28.