

PELICAN(ette)

We can't talk about 2018 without talking about one thing. Donald Tru... just kidding, it's *Nanette*. But how can I explain what this show became - and what a vital, transformative, necessary work of art it was? Well, I am not Hannah Gadsby, ladies and gentleman, so don't expect intelligent post-dramatic catharsis from me.

All I have to talk about is July. So here goes.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'July' as 'a body of people (typically twelve in number) sworn to give a verdict in a legal case on the basis of evidence submitted to them in court.' And in July we were glued to our screens as though nothing else mattered, and not just because of a certain Netflix special.

We were all wondering the same thing : how the hell were those boys going to get out?

Because in June a group of twelve boys went into a Thai cave – and in July they were still there. Trapped. In fact, it was only on the 2nd of July – eight days after they'd entered the cave – that divers discovered the group, miraculously still alive.

And you know what's really funny about this story?

Nothing.

Nothing is funny about this. These were children stuck in a horrific situation. They would be underground for a total of 18 days. Some of these young men were considered "stateless" so even if they got out, their ability to move freely in their own country would make any of us still feel trapped. A Navy Seal, Saman Kunan, died in the process of delivering them oxygen. He had volunteered for the position.

So what the hell can I bring to this? I write shlocky plays and pithy solo shows about myself. But even I'm not narcissistic enough to compare anything I've been through to this.

Because it's unimaginable.

...

Unless you've been trapped in a cave.

Which I have.

... just saying.

And it's a pretty good story actually. A lot of *themes* in it. Some witty observations about 'class'. 'Identity'. It's no *Nanette*, but...

But this is not about me. Or my... amazing story.

Until it is.

Because much like these young men in Thailand, I grew up attending an exclusive private school in Brighton, Melbourne. This was the type of school with proud traditions like singing hymns, learning latin, the cane . The kind of place where your phys-ed teacher - a man with a pronounced lisp and shaved legs - would watch you shower naked after sport, and comment on how your body was changing to the female teachers, also watching.

The strangest thing about my schooling was how perfectly normal it appeared to everyone else. It didn't seem normal to me to wear a suit. To kindergarten. It didn't feel normal to see a teacher hold a boy up against the wall by his neck. And it didn't feel normal to be exiled into the country for two weeks. But in year 8 that's exactly what happened when we were forced to attend CAMP PELICAN, a place so cruel it's named after what we can all agree is the world's most terrifying carnivorous bird.

How bad was it? Well let's just say that in my research to find out where this hellscape actually took place – an island outside of Bairnsdale (!?!!) – I also learned that the official job title of the man who ran this camp was 'warden'.

This was a prison island, and it is a loooooong swim back to Brighton, bitch.

For two weeks I battled every effeminate boys natural enemy, the outdoors. I learned first hand that five years of gymnastics didn't help me balance in a kayak, nor did I look particularly graceful as I drowned. 'Orienteering' proved only that I definitely had the wrong orientation. In fact, there was only one aspect of Camp Pelican that came naturally to me, and that was being appointed head waiter to the teachers table in the mess hall. Ingratiating myself to people in power would also prove to be the only skill that's been of any benefit to my career in the arts. The warden found me funny and even though I loathed him and wrote devastatingly incisive poetry about him late at night, I knew it was important to stay on the good side of the screws. This camp prided itself on being character building, and as the days progressed I slowly built my new identity – a terrified, snivelling court jester.

If anything these two weeks proved something I'd long suspected - I WAS NOT LIKE THE OTHER BOYS.

Because it was bizarre how quickly they threw off the conventions of the world we'd known. Precious urban brats morphed into rugged adventurers. Food was suddenly about fuel rather than the sweet taste of exclusivity. Even the teachers threw in the occasional swear word. But what for them was *Robinson Crusoe* felt a lot more *Lord of the Flies* to me. Because rich kids

really do regress quickly when mummy and daddy aren't looking. We weren't hunting each other just yet, but I think the first sign I had that things had maybe gone too far was when boys started defecating in the showers. I never thought it was possible but suddenly I longed to be watched over by a peculiar man with shaved legs.

On the final day the warden took us to the edge of a cliff and told us we'd be abseiling - as if walking vertically down a mountain side was as natural as... well, any of this shit. I have a serious fear of heights - I'm pretty sure I'd made MOTHER write it on my permission slip - so I made sure to get a private word with my good pal the warden and let him know I wouldn't be able to participate.

"That's fine", he said. Followed quickly by "you're next."

There's no way to maintain dignity while trying to push past a group of boys, especially when those boys surround you and push you to the edge of a cliff. There's no way to look impressive as the staff force you backwards into the abyss. And the only thing that will stop you shaking and crying once you're finally on solid ground, is being told you're now going to climb back UP the cliff.

This is where the cave comes in. Because as I slowly crawled my way up the cliff I noticed a crack in the cliff face. It was tall but too thin and shallow for any dignified animal to make it their home, so I fit in perfectly. I tetrised my body into it and immediately began phase two of my genius plan.

I LIVE IN THE CAVE NOW.

And like all of you, at first the folks above me and below me found it amusing. I bet the warden didn't know his jester could commit so hard to a bit. But as time went by and it became obvious I wasn't actually joking, the group turned.

Three figures enter. They are BULLIES! (This is a play now)

BULLY 1: GET OUT OF THERE FLANDERS!

BULLY 2: YOU CAN'T HIDE IN THERE FOREVER!

BULLY 3: COME OUT!

And then the chant began.

ALL: COME OUT! COME OUT! COME OUT! COME OUT!

It's an odd thing when your inner voice suddenly syncs perfectly with the world around you, especially when you're living in a hole in the wall. Come out. Come out. Come out. I was literally trapped in an echo chamber.

Which takes me back to that cave in Thailand.

Because those young men in that cave trusted that someone would find them. Even after they'd been in the dark for over a week. They trusted that people cared. That they'd help them escape. And when it came time to escape, these boys – some of whom couldn't swim – trusted their lives to complete strangers and dove into dark water.

So what the hell was I afraid of?

Obviously, I eventually came out. Of the island cave, and from other dark places. But it never ends, and every time I'm forced to trust it's like I'm trapped again.

But I want to trust. I want to believe there will be people wanting to catch me.

Ash stands on a chair. This has become a trust exercise all about... BELIEF!

The BULLIES magically transform into SUPPORTERS!!!

And I want to be honest.

But I'm scared.... will you catch me?

The SUPPORTERS nod supporterly and rush to catch our hero

Because it's hard to be honest when it could cost you the people you care about.

And there's something I haven't been honest about.

Oh god this is hard.

But you'll be there for me right?

Ok. Here goes.

I'VE NEVER SEEN NANETTE AND I DON'T PARTICULARLY WANT TO!

Oh my god that feels good to say! Ready?

Ash is about to drop, when –

SUPPORTER 1: HOW DARE YOU!

SUPPORTER 2: THAT'S PROBLEMATIC!

SUPPORTER 3: YOU'RE A REAL PIECE OF SHIT!

They exit – and are right to do so.

I guess more than anything, July taught us that unlike a group of soccer players, or even a powerful Netflix special, some things – like a turd in a shower, or an unpopular opinion – are best kept in the dark.

Thank you.

A giant mirror descends onstage.

The audience are suddenly faced with themselves. It is a cold moment of reckoning.

Blackout.

Rapturous applause.

A man with shaved legs (could it be?) exits the theatre, forever changed.