Hey Mark -

Saw "In and of Itself" last night at friends' place. Why I write you about this is explained at the end here.

This was a concert film of magician Derek DelGaudio, knitting together slices of many acts (from over 550 in New York) into a 90-minute stage piece.

The piece weaves some truly inspired card trickery into a bio-narrative about growing up dealing with homophobia directed at DelGaudio as the son of lesbian mother in during the 80s and 90s, from which he learned how to hide in sight. His first magic trick.

At some point as a young man traveling, DelGaudio encountered a mysterious stranger who retells him the tale of the (apocryphal?) “Roulettista” – a survivor of WWI returning home with dark compulsion to survive (recalls the Russian Roulette sequence from the Deer Hunter). Woven in at about this point in the act is the parable on the dog and wolf (to which DelGaudio returns at the very end of the act).

The act next flips to audience participation, including an uncanny sequence involving volunteers choosing letters from a stack (pulled from a wall display made to look like what would find in an old apartment lobby) like cards, then reading them to discover they are authored by very intimate loved ones. Hypnosis? Confederates? The tears seem quite real and spontaneous.

Then comes the climax. A drawn out parable on "the real self" hidden beneath the tag-lines placed on us from birth, accumulating like post-it notes on the soul--culminating with the magician naming the tag line adopted (from wall panel of identity tags posted at entry to the theater) by everyone in the audience who "chose a tag they believed really said something about" their true selves. Methodically panning the faces of those choosing to stand up (nearly everyone in the audience did so), DelGaudio ticks them off, one at a time.

"You're a healer," "You're a good time", "You're a unicorn", "You're one of a kind", "You're a teacher".

And so on, one at a time, the audience members gush and tear up upon hearing the magician name the tag line they had adopted for themselves before the show. Finally nearing the top of the theater aisle, one head peers from well above the rest, but by himself.

"You're a leader". Cue the smarmy, very carefully glow-lit smiling face of Bill Gates.

Stephen Colbert and wife Evelyn were two of the executive producers of the film.

Reputedly, Colbert saw the act and was impelled to film it. Colbert's hosting of Gates on the Late Show you are familiar with—including Colbert’s quip about Gates' slip of tongue about "final solution".

The friends I saw this with are two of my closest. He's an education professor. Utterly genuine guy who would give the shirt off his back. Together with his wife, he co-teaches a hugely popular class on sex ed.

My friend became mysteriously immune-compromised a couple of years ago. The pandemic has been a slow running panic and nightmare for their household in particularly personal ways experienced by so many like them.

Early in the quarantine I realized I couldn't continue talking with my friend about the stage-craft of it all. About Gates' part in this. About the dangers of the promised vaccine. My friend emailed me at some point he just couldn't take any more of that in. He was just trying to protect his family. Keep them safe.

Up until the Gates cameo, I was enjoying the entertainment of the film and some genuinely moving moments, at which my friend had teared up, as he does regularly at melodrama moments in film.

Then came Gates, and the chill went down my spine. I could feel my breath shorten and gaze tighten and narrow.

When the film was over, I said that Gates must have been there because Colbert had been a producer, to which both friends, at about the same moment, "Oh".

Then quiet, followed by light banter about the show, the tricks, how they could have been set up, etc. It had been such a lovely evening--a return to some normalcy (we gathered so often for years before the pandemic), finished with a film about a gifted magician and his odyssey growing up queer-influenced, about realizing he'd never have the father he'd hoped for, searching for his authentic self, producing magic in the journey for us all to participate in.

All topped off, quite literally, by a cameo of the paragon "leader" of our time (a tag line so effortlessly bestowed, and claimed, by him), soft-lit and glowing at the top of theater, made floating above the stagecraft like a guardian apparition. A father-figure for millennials everywhere, consumed with fabricated doubts about their true, fatherless selves and an increasingly uncertain future consumed with fears gripping them like children.

And so a sentiment that otherwise could have authenticated something meaningful about actualizing one's self in the continuous present of life suddenly felt force-fed, and I could feel my throat tighten at the chilling realization: my most intimate precincts have now been invaded by the coldest force of our time.