



ARTIST Q&A

# Take 5: At Bridge Street Theatre, Carl Holder's solo show, 'Out of Order' is a play disguised as a parlor game

3 hrs ago

## Jeffrey Borak

Jeffrey Borak is The Eagle's theater critic.



Dressed in a white hoodie, white sweatpants, white sweat socks and white shoes, Carl Holder selects a card from a small basket that contains 50 index cards. He then performs whatever the card says as part of "Out of Order."

PHOTO PROVIDED BY BRIDGE STREET THEATRE

CATSKILL, N.Y. — Bridge Street Theatre Artistic Director John Sowle freely acknowledges that Carl Holder’s solo show, “Out of Order,” is “not anything we’ve done before.” Holder considers it “a play disguised as a parlor game.”

Dressed in a white hoodie, white sweatpants, white sweat socks and white shoes — Holder appears holding a small basket that contains 50 index cards. Written on each card is some instruction, some phrase, some observation. Holder sets the basket down and one by one, pulls a card from the basket, completely at random. He reads and then performs whatever is written on the card. The night I saw the skillfully performed, cannily titled “Out of Order,” Holder drew a card that said “Curtain call” about five or so minutes into his performance.

“Whew!” he remarked to the audience of 20 who were seated at cafe tables or in chairs and couches scattered around the Speakeasy lobby of Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge St., where “Out of Order” runs through Sept. 8. Tickets, which can be purchased by calling 518-943-3818 or by visiting [bridgest.org](http://bridgest.org), are \$28 in advance and \$30 at the door.

“Good,” Holder said. “We can get this over right away.” He darted to one end of the room and disappeared behind some curtains he pulled together. He quickly reappeared, taking his bows to an enthusiastic audience that was only just adjusting to this quirky, occasionally self-indulgent, work of performance art that thoroughly engaged and captivated his audience, which rewarded him with an enthusiastic response at a second curtain call at the end of the evening.

“There is a core deck of cards that are part of every performance,” Holder said by email. “The cards are evolving ... as different audience contributions have been absorbed into the bowl. Everything I say is either purely me or a blend of me and the voice of someone who saw the show and shared something I felt resonated powerfully with the themes of the play.”

“Out of Order” is interactive. Individually and in aggregate, the audience often is invited to participate. It’s all safe and reassuring. Among other things, Holder’s nearly 90-minute evening is about trust.

“I don’t force anyone to do anything,” Holder said, “but there are opportunities to join in, should you choose to.”

Holder — who has a bachelor’s degree in acting from SUNY Purchase and an MFA in dramatic writing from New York University/Tisch, where he now teaches dramatic writing — started this project in December 2023 while at an artists residency in Los Angeles. He has since performed “Out of Order” across seven states in 14 different venues, mostly living rooms. Indeed, a living room was where Bridge Street Associate Artist and dramaturg Steven Patterson saw “Out of Order.”

“He loved it and thought it deserved an outing at our theater,” Sowle said. “So far everyone seems very positive about it.”

*Following the performance, Holder answered The Eagle’s questions by email. His answers, which follow, are lightly edited for length and clarity.*

## **1 How would you describe “Out Of Order?”**

[It’s] a play disguised as a party game. It’s about accepting your life’s purpose and allowing that to guide you toward some kind of joy/fulfillment despite the many ways the world will deflate/challenge dreamers and their dreams. Through ‘play-ing’ together the performer and audience unlock a new understanding of themselves.

## **2 What led you to create this piece?**

A close friend turned a piece of family property into an artists residency and invited me for a stay to work on something. At the time, I was feeling rather directionless with my writing. I did however have an idea for a play that could be divided over index cards then pulled out of a bowl and performed at random.

Why make something like this? What would the cards or this play even say? I had no clue. I figured if it all goes horribly wrong, I’ll never have to do it again and no one in New York will ever know about it. ... The first time I workshopped the material on its feet was for an audience of one [in Los Angeles]. They suggested that I should

write something that had a clear structure/order and then let that be truly disrupted by dividing it across cards and tossing it all in a bowl. This was the first big click.

They also encouraged me to let the material be more personal, which admittedly I was avoiding. ... Nonetheless, I took this advice and wrote about where I was at the time — nearly 40 and having spent most of my life making theater without achieving any kind of conventional fame, fortune, or stability. ... After more workshopping and two small showings in the home, I had a rough sense of what the evening could be. I also knew something about performing in a living room which felt uniquely right for this play. When I got back to NYC, I spent more time teasing out the ideas I wanted to explore and found ways of dramatizing them that mirrored the party/parlor game nature of pulling cards from a deck/bowl that prompted some kind of activity.

Then, thanks to the generosity of some close friends, I workshopped the show around living rooms in Brooklyn. Pretty instantly, I knew that I wanted to keep doing the show in as many living rooms as I could get access to.

In the same way, the bowl of scrambled index cards mirrors my mixed emotional state, something about an ambitious self-produced tour of living rooms playfully challenges the notions of what theater is supposed to be and what "success" in the theater can mean. I made the piece because someone gave me time and space to mess around. Now the play has become something beyond me. It is a literal journey I've forced myself to go on where I have to constantly ask myself these big questions about who I am and why I do what I do — and it's not about finding definitive answers! It's about if I want to keep asking the questions. Right now, I do.

### **3 What is the reward you get from performing?**

A thing I say to people is "Theater is my first language, it's how I want to talk to you." I'm much more comfortable rolling around on a carpet and eating carrots off the floor than I am making small talk at a party. I started working in the theater when I was 5. Performing is where I feel happy and safe.

Nothing bad can happen to me there. I think another component of this play/project is about me creating this safe space for myself, wherever I can find it. Then, hopefully, by the end of the play, it becomes about giving that same safe space back to the audience.

### **4 What have you learned about audiences/human interaction over the time you've been performing "Out of Order?"**

I think people are braver than they realize.

As you know, the show is gently interactive. I don't force anyone to do anything but there are opportunities to join in, should you choose to. At almost every performance I see audiences surprise themselves by what they're willing to do. Very often the ones who seemed more reserved at the beginning of the evening are the most outgoing participants by the end. Some of my favorite contributions have come from more soft-spoken folks who share the most devastating and beautiful things when given the floor.

I also think the show's unusual structure makes the play sound stranger than it actually is. I've performed all over for people of many different backgrounds and ages, from 12 to 90, most of whom I'm sure don't consider their taste to be very experimental. Regardless of that, everyone who's attended has engaged with the material/form.

It's a bit like solving a puzzle or mystery but every answer is correct and true to that individual viewer.

### **5 What have you learned about yourself over the time you've been performing the show?**

A mentor of mine used to say when it comes to working in the theater "you're either a lifer or you're not, and if you are a lifer, get over it ... there's no way out." I think this past year has been about me accepting that I am a lifer.

No matter what happens, I am going to find a way to do this, to make theater. Even against all logic and reason! This play/tour has helped me put that truth into action in a way that helps me love and celebrate this part of myself. I like to be busy doing what I love. I think I come most alive in motion.