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# Not the Truth We Seek: The Story of a Mime, Fierce Women, Proposals, & Pro Wrestling

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NOT THE TRUTH WE SEEK:  
THE STORY OF A MIME, FIERCE WOMEN, PROPOSALS, & PRO WRESTLING

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1 April 2017

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation with Distinction

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- 1. THE SPARK.....Page 3**
- 2. SPRING 2015.....Page 4**
- 3. SUMMER 2015.....Page 10**
- 4. FALL 2015.....Page 18**
- 5. SPRING 2016.....Page 23**
- 6. SUMMER 2016.....Page 36**
- 7. FALL 2016.....Page 42**
- 8. “LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE” (December 1, 2016).....Page 49**
- 9. REFLECTING.....Page 54**
- 10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....Page 55**
- 11. CAST HISTORY.....Page 55**
- 12. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....Page 58**

## THE SPARK

I have always believed that the best theater comes from a very real and sometimes very painful place. My parents were undergoing a brutal and very open separation and then divorce throughout my junior and senior year of high school. In the middle of the constant war zone that was our home, my brother and I would simply go from one room to the other with our heads down and as quick as possible. The only day we would linger in the living room would be Mondays. On Monday nights, my brother and I owned the living room as we would watch the three hour Monday Night RAW that is presented by the wrestling supergiant, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). This would be the defining thing that my brother and I could use to escape all the pain from the divorce. Little did I know that it would effect everything I do and believe when it comes to theater as an actor, a director, a choreographer, and a writer.

In the summer of 2013, Bray Wyatt, a professional wrestling character, was promoted from the WWE Developmental show, NXT, to the main roster of the WWE and their flagship television programs, *RAW* and *Smackdown*. From the first vignette (a professional wrestling tradition of one minute video packages for new characters), my brother and I were intrigued. Who was this man? What was he saying? Who is Abigail (the woman who taught him everything he knew)? The character of Bray Wyatt is a simple one in pop culture and a relatively fresh concept in the world of professional wrestling: a bearded, charismatic cult leader from the bayou who preys on people's fear, pride, love, and loyalty in order to gain more followers and gain a competitive edge in all of his matches.

*“You have a family? They love you. Support you. They are people who care. But me? It’s different. The world was too busy cleaning me out from underneath their fingernails to pay attention to see if I have any true worth.”*

## SPRING 2015

I was enrolled in Theatre History II for the Spring of 2015. On Day One, Dr. Jessie Glover immediately pointed out the 10-page research paper that was due in early April. The paper had to focus in on a modern aspect of theater (1850s and on). Immediately the topic that meant the most to me and one that I needed to dig deeper in was *Is Professional Wrestling Theater?* As I dug deeper and deeper into professional wrestling's history, I was able to tie everything done in professional wrestling into the concepts of Social Drama and Epic Theater.

Victor Turner, a popular name in the field of performance studies, was an anthropologist known for his concept of "social drama." They are "units of a harmonic process, arising in conflict situations." All events in everyday life, through an act of conflict, can be viewed or taken as a drama. According to Turner, four steps are needed to create drama. The first is the breach, which is when an event breaks regular, norm-governed social relations that threatens the stability of a social unit. The second is the crisis, or crises when multiple, which is an event which leads to "a widening of the breach into increasingly open or public displays." The three is the redressive action, which is an action used in attempts to solve the issue. If it fails, it leads to another crisis. The final step is the reintegration "of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties" (Schechner 75). The most basic example of this in action for professional wrestling is as follows: Wrestler A gets attacked by his rival Wrestler B (the breach), Wrestler A and B have a series of matches in which they trade wins (the crises), Wrestler A finally defeats Wrestler B in their final encounter (the redressive action), and finally, Wrestler A moves on to feud with Wrestler C for a title, while Wrestler B attacks Wrestler D to step up a new feud (the reintegration).

Also crucial to my theorizing of the WWE as theatrical performance was Bertolt Brecht's concept of Epic Theater. Brecht said that his ideal audience would be one that attended boxing matches – where the audience was distant, but engaged and interacting with the material (Gumbrecht 280). The concept of Epic Theater can be boiled down to this poem:

*I'd never have thought it  
That's not the way  
That's extraordinary; hardly believable  
It's got to stop.  
The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are  
unnecessary  
That's great art – nothing obvious in it  
I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (Brecht).*

All wrestling companies must follow this structure in order to get audiences to invest in not only their product, but also their characters. Matches and storylines often play into these principals from the poem.

*I'd never have thought it* (An incredible entrance from Wrestler A utilizing lights, music, pyrotechnics, and choreography)  
*That's not the way* (Wrestler B cheats to be Wrestler A in a match)  
*That's extraordinary; hardly believable* (Wrestler A cheats to beat Wrestler B, becoming the bad guy)  
*It's got to stop.* (Wrestler A bloodies Wrestler B in a match with a chair)  
*The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary* (Wrestler B refuses to be pinned after being bloodied and beaten up by Wrestler A for 15 minutes of their match).

For the first time, I could understand how professional wrestling was related to theater and know how it could work if I tried to adapt it.

I had become a drag queen for Otterdrag that year, which was run by Cap & Dagger, the student-run organization for the Department of Theatre and Dance. It started as a fun thought that I never thought anyone would take seriously. Much to my surprise in October 2014, I was asked to become one of two new drag queens for the remainder of my time at Otterbein. With a little

trepidation and confusion, but mostly excitement, I accepted. Even though my make-up was messed with on the day of show and I didn't look at myself too much in the mirror, putting on the heels, the clothes, the wig, and the make-up immediately made me adopt a character which showed off the flashier part of myself. However, when I sat and reflected, drag made me more in touch with feminine side and it made me feel completely comfortable in my body. It led me to start dating a very talented member of the Department of Theatre and Dance and I started to feel more confident. I started to explore what this meant for me and my own relationships with the women in my life. I also wanted to create a play that just allowed people to feel comfortable in their own skin.

Around the time of my Theater History paper being due, the auditions for the Department of Theatre and Dance's Fall semester's productions were coming up. The previous semester was not a good one considering the amount of women in our department. Our productions were *The Greeks: The Murders* and *Into the Woods*, which totaled just 18 female roles, and all five of the then-Freshman (now junior) BFA Acting major females were left uncast. At that time, I was becoming close to that class and I remember that the common thread of a giant group discussion with those five and individual talks I had with them and other women in the department was a simple one: they wanted not just more female roles, but roles that pushed and challenged them.

Around the same time, I was doing more investigation of what types of plays the department has done because I was looking to direct a cut of a play for a Directing Workshop. I looked back through the production history of The Department of Theatre and Dance and two big things stuck out to me. First, Otterbein's last all-female production during their regular academic season was Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* back in the 1990s. Second, Otterbein had not produced a new play as a part of their academic season (outside of the student-run Festival which started in

2013) since 2000. The words of a few alumni that came back for Common Hours came rushing into my head. They always told us to not wait for permission. If you have a play or an idea, go ahead and make it happen because that's what you are going to have to do when you get out into the theater business.

I wanted to write a play either revolving around the theme of love, power, control, or fear. Luckily, I was following a wrestling character who dealt with all four of these themes. I had a person with an interesting story to investigate, but no container to hold it in. One day in the Spring 2015 semester, my roommate Evan Moore-Coll and I were talking about some of our favorite novels. I kept talking about how much I appreciated the story of *Lord of the Flies*. I told Evan that one day I wanted to direct a play version of *Lord of the Flies* with all women.

“*Why?*”  
“*Because I think it would be interesting.*”  
“*But why?*”  
“*I feel like it needs to be done.*”  
“*...Okay.*”

All signs were leading me to write this play. The hunger and desire of our female actors was inspiring. They were ready to not just do a production, but they wanted to do something new and challenging. I was re-watching one of my favorite movies, *The Dark Knight* and was blown away by The Joker's arc again. It got me thinking. Why are there no female villains with this plot? Why do we automatically give awards and stories to male actors? Wrestling is guilty of this. At the same time that Bray Wyatt was allowed to do these interesting Joker-esque cult messages and have a 22 minute match with the face of the WWE John Cena at Wrestlemania 30, over 12 women were thrown into a match with absolutely no storyline and didn't even get seven minutes of ring time at the very same event. With the build up of their frustration and hunger, I felt that I could contribute positively and give the females a voice. I was bound and determined to create a play

based on a strictly all-female community. I was bound and determined to create a world that would challenge them. I was bound and determined to create female characters who were comfortable in their own skin. I was bound and determined to create “the Female Joker.”

I was one of twelve acting students selected in the country for the 2014 Theatermakers company for the National Theater Institute (NTI) at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut. After deferring the decision due to financial reasons, I received a call in February 2015 for a spot in that summer’s company. On April 21, 2015, I was awarded an Undergraduate Research and Creative Work Summer Stipend from Otterbein University to create a play with the training from the O’Neill. Immediately, it went to pay off the high price tag of studying at The O’Neill. The next day, I began work on my play. I reread the entirety of *Lord of the Flies* in a week. After that, I decided that I needed to get some quotes in writing from Bray Wyatt, so I began transcribing every promo and interview from Bray Wyatt starting from the summer of 2013. Luckily for me, I was able to find footage uploaded on YouTube and look through old episodes of *NXT*, *Raw*, and *Smackdown!* to gather all quotes. I would spend hours at a time and filled up two full legal pads with all of his words. From that, I decided to give myself the goal of writing the whole play out of all the quotes by smashing promos and sentences against one another. By the end of May, I had the first draft of the play.

I was circling around a few titles for this play. I wanted to find something that sounded cool, but meant something to the story. The last three choices that I was circling around included two phrases that are turning points in the actual script: *Run* and *The Monster in You*. However, in my own head, it sounded like a really lame Lionsgate horror film that will come out on Halloween and that was not the vibe I wanted for the play. As I was looking back through all of the transcripts

of Bray Wyatt and I was struggling to find a way to work one of my favorite phrases into the play, but it just didn't fit anywhere. That was until I thought about what this play was about.

*Not the Truth We Seek* sounds like a vague phrase that comes off as mysterious and almost just there for its' "Cool Factor." Well, yes. It is cool. However, the drafts of the play until the very first reading fit it perfectly. A group of friends crash-land on a mysterious island after being shot down in the middle of a world war. The friends, Olivia, Clara, Ophelia, and Chloe, are led by the confident and older Audrey. In order to survive the island, they make a pact to stick together to protect each other and keep their humanity. However, their group meets a seemingly off-kilter and charismatic girl named Emma who has dreams of leading her own group of friends and delusions of grandeur. She is taught and trained by Sister Abigail, the God-like figure who controls the island of "Limbo." The girls must pick a side. Do they stick with the morals and hope of Audrey or give into the fear and put their trust in seemingly all-powerful pair of demigods, Sister Abigail and Emma? Which truth will they give into?

This first rendition was built from a very loose interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*, but things some of the devices used in the novel went hand-in-hand with the story I was trying to tell and they seemed the most theatrical. The war that would cause a plane crash was used to ground the characters into a reality and help the actors think about a background story. The island that the women crash land on is foreign to almost every character, which gives every character an obstacle to fight with and gives the play a setting. The conch was used as a signal to bring everyone together, as it does in the novel. My four lead characters was representative of the four big figures in the novel. Audrey was based off of the things Ralph stands for: strength through being human, morality, and a desire for civilization and community. Emma is the antithesis of Audrey and represents Jack: a desire to lead out of chaos, fear, & power and someone who has given into their

primal instincts. Sister Abigail is the most like the figure “The Lord of the Flies” because she is the threatening and all-powerful mental force that controls the world and the psyches of every character. Olivia is the best friend to Audrey and serves as the confidant and comedic relief like Piggy does in the novel.

## **SUMMER 2015**

The week of the big move was a busy one. In between the packing, phone calls, visiting family, and finishing up work at Otterbein Summer Theater, I had made the decision to submit the very first draft to five people that I wanted to share it with and get some feedback. Christina Kirk, current head of the Department of Theatre and Dance, was my advisor for the Summer Stipend part of the process. She gave me three objectives when developing the draft: don’t edit while writing, write from my inspiration, and write from a primal part of my mind. I sent the first draft on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and less than three hours later, I got my first response:

*“This is an awesome first draft! It is great that you plunged right in and went for it. You have some powerful images and very interesting moments. I have some questions for you and some suggestions for you for revisions.*

*First, I think you need to clarify how much of the the Lord of the Flies you want to carry forward and how much you are departing from the book. It has been a long time since I read the book. But, I recall that all of the boys started out as ordinary boys and then through their interaction with one another became beast-like. Part of what makes the book fascinating is what triggers the creation of the beast from within. Some of my questions for you are what triggers the beast in these women, what motivates their actions, and what triggers the significant changes they undergo. This last issue seems to need more flushing out and more development. What, for example, has caused the status quo that begins this piece and how do the changes get triggered?*

*At times you're writing has very unique and powerful imagery. At other times you fall into the trap of the cliché. Something to look for is eliminating clichés in your writing. I had also assumed that you would be weaving mime throughout the piece in a more dynamic and nontraditional way. I think the use of mime throughout the piece could help you to make choices that surprise you and that develop*

*further the stakes.  
I think what you have here is an excellent first draft.”*

Within an hour after receiving Chris’ feedback, I went on to send the draft to four of the students who were going to play very important parts in my staged reading for more feedback from the actors’ perspective and a close friend: Lauren Kent (Sister Abigail – Class of 2017), Sally Clark (Audrey – Class of 2018), Kaylee Barrett (Emma – Class of 2018), Lauren DiMario (Ophelia – Class of 2018), and Natalie Szczerba (Class of 2017). All emails included the 23-page script, links to three Bray Wyatt promos so they had context, a call for their questions and feedback, and my three goals for the piece.

- 1. Legitimize professional wrestling as suitable form of theater by using the dialogue of a wrestling character*
- 2. Create roles for women*
- 3. Prove that women can play roles like the Joker and other such roles that have seemed to be strictly only played by men in our generation*

I threw the script into my backpack on June 11 and headed east to Waterford, Connecticut, hoping for inspiration and even more training. The first day of the O’Neill was a frantic day of hailing a taxi, meeting new faculty, meeting other students from other parts of the country including Georgia, Tennessee, California, New York, New Hampshire, & South Dakota, touring the facilities, moving two travel bags into a dorm, learning a new schedule, trying new food, and to top it all off, try something brand new: Devised Theater. On that Friday afternoon, all of us were thrown into our first class together with The Debate Society, a company I have come to admire and whose work I want to emulate.

The Debate Society is a theater company based in Brooklyn, New York. They are comprised of Oliver Stone, and NTI alums, Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen. The Debate Society

formed in 2004 and consider themselves “Makers of Plays.” Their process is all based around collaboration, devising, and debate. Paul and Hannah handle the writing phase which contains a series of prompts identical to the ones we were given. Through those prompts they pick the most useful to add to their “pot” and begin to shape a world, character, and stories. They will spend anywhere from a few months to a couple years debating all aspects of the script after each draft. Once all three feel great about the script, Oliver takes on the role of director while Paul and Hannah (both highly trained actors) take on acting roles within the production. Since 2004, they have written and premiered nine full-length plays including their most recent production *The Light Years* at Playwrights Horizons in NYC, won an Obie Award, became faculty at NTI, earned three grants, and were the Ars Nova Company in Residence for 2012-2014.

Walking into a hot rehearsal studio, we were met by Paul and Hannah who brought us back to earth quickly: on Monday evening, we were going to premiere four brand new plays. In the next 72 hours, we will write, rewrite, block, tech, and perform our first show at the O’Neill. Before we knew two facts about one another, we were split into groups of 5-6. Beginning with individual etudes, or short ten second movement pieces telling a story with a beginning, middle, and end, we got a feel for the power of what physical theater can do for storytelling. Following everyone’s etudes, we were told to go to a comfortable part of the room with a journal. They took us through a series of writing prompts with only three rules: you have only a certain amount of time (1-5 minutes depending on the prompt), you must write the full time, and almost most importantly, don’t judge anything you write. Among those prompts, my favorites had to be “List four important (made-up) dates and then pick one & explain how it came to be,” “Write a short poem for new born babies,” “Write three words you don’t know the definition of,” and “ Write the worst love letter possible.” All prompts engaged us with conflict, character, location, and story.

From there we were told to get into our groups to share with one another *all* of our prompt responses. We were told very important pieces of advice to consider. You have to give your best self to the group, keep the ego at the door, and figure out the best way to work with everyone in the group. Strive to look and keep details. Everything that we found interesting, we were to write that detail on a post-it note and put it into “The Pot”: where all the ideas go. After that, we gathered all post-it notes and put them on a white board to get a full view. The objective was a simple, yet totally challenging one: create a 30-minute play. We were told to trust in the details, justify every writing choice we were going to make, figure out what is world, and what makes our world full developed and unique from other plays. Our whiteboard contained a plethora of topics and ideas: robots, media & propaganda, an old woman trying to live out her youth again, a suicidal teenage girl, and a curious post-it note that said “The Day Pro Wrestling Died.” Paul came over, saw the post-it, and chuckled.

*“Hannah, look at this.”*

*She chuckles. “Holy shit.”*

*“You guys should do that one.”*

From that, we created a world in which professional wrestling was so massive and so personal to people that a televised funeral was needed for all of us to heal. From the details of character descriptions, character names, invented landmarks, made-up song lyrics, and meaningful lines from our stories, we crafted five completely independent eulogies and five different characters. We blocked and did all acting work on that Saturday and Sunday, we had an hour to tech on Monday afternoon and performed last that evening. It was the first and only time (so far) that I have been shirtless while in performance and I got to be a professional wrestler, so that’s one thing on my bucket list checked off.

During the development process, I discovered that Paul was a huge professional wrestling fan. He grew up in the era of huge wrestling personalities like Hulk Hogan, “Macho Man” Randy Savage, and the Ultimate Warrior where the wrestling quality was not very high, but the stories and over the top characters were the focus. I asked him why he pushed my group to do “The Day Pro Wrestling Died.” He responded by telling me that theater needs more professional wrestling in it. I could only think how fitting this was: my journey with this play was going to start with the death of professional wrestling and by the end, bringing legitimacy to the theatrical elements present in it.

Throughout my six weeks at the O’Neill, I had the opportunity to work with many professionals in the business of theatre and all of them were stressing the importance of creating new work and being true to yourself. During the six weeks of training at The O’Neill, in addition to the classes lasting from 7:30am-10:30pm seven days a week, we were doing weekly performances every Monday. By the end of our time, we had premiered 18 solo pieces, 14 new plays, 5 devised pieces, and 3 new musicals spanning various topics under the tutelage of many theater professionals. At the same time that we were studying at NTI, the O’Neill Center hosted two conferences: The National Playwrights Conference, a four-week event that premieres eight plays in a staged reading format from writers of different backgrounds, and The National Music Theater Conference, a three-week event that premieres three musicals in a staged reading format. The O’Neill strives to help writers develop their work through residency, rehearsals, and performances. As a student of NTI, we were given the opportunities to shadow rehearsals of the plays and musicals for two weeks. During my time, I was in the room for the development of a new musical about the revolution in Cairo, Egypt, a new play from the writer of the Tony Award-winning, *Spring Awakening*, and a new zombie comedy musical from the writers of the Tony

Award-winning, *Urinetown*. I had the opportunity to see firsthand how to not only work as an actor working with a writer in the room, but how a writer works with a director, a dramaturge, a stage manager, and a whole cast of actors in the room.

The lessons learned from the O'Neill are pretty apparent for me and continue to inspire my work to this day. As an actor, you have to “Just read the damn thing” as my voice to text teacher, Nicole Riccardi said to us. Every word that a writer gives an actor is important and you must treat it with respect, because you want to celebrate their work as well as yours with an audience. As a choreographer, I was told to always search and find “the inner truth” of the movement. As a writer, you have to be on your toes and “always be in an inventive rehearsal mood. Explore. Investigate. Invent,” according to my Heightened Realism teacher, Elizabeth Hess. From my time working with my company and witnessing all rehearsals, as a writer, you have to be continuously fielding questions from every place and be able to justify everything. If you can't, it is your job to find a reason to justify a choice. If you can't find one, then you work with the actors to find a reason. I also saw the importance of allowing actors to try to perform your words at least a couple of time before changing lines, so you can get a sense of what sounds right, what needs adjusted, and what needs to be completely changed. I will never forget seeing a rehearsal for the Cairo musical and falling in love with a five page scene and a musical number and then 24 hours, all of that was cut and replaced in order to make the story cleaner and clearer. To be a writer, I would have to be the most collaborative person in the room. I would also have to be willing to change, but also do my work and be ready to justify everything in my script.

When I came home to Mount Vernon on August 1st, I instinctively busted open my email to check on all the feedback from the students. There were a lot of positive reactions to the fact that it seemed like a fresh concept. There was a lot praise for the all-female aspects of the piece

and the fact that they were dealing with difficult situations and “staring death in the face.” There was also praise for the mystique and mystery that the words of Wyatt added; however, I soon would discover a problem that was highlighted in everyone’s feedback. The mystery naturally made them want to ask more questions and made the readers take a minute to distinguish each character from one another. There were also questions about the relationship between Emma and Sister Abigail. It was also brought up that there seems to be a very quick escalation of the action that came off as too sudden and random. This was summed up perfectly from a part of Lauren DiMario’s feedback:

*“Did Emma always know Sister Abigail? I know she talks about knowing her for a while, but did she follow her here or is it something that possessed her when she got to the island but feels like she has known her her whole life? You mention the shadow of her in the beginning stage directions, but I am still a little unclear. Also, I feel like Sister Abigail’s mention and presence is **very sudden**, and Emma’s turn is almost **random**, but that may be something sensed from reading it and not hearing/seeing it.”*

Natalie would also comment on the escalation as well.

*“I think it escalates very quickly by reading. Like it starts at one level and sky rockets to the next with not many occurrences in between. But **I think the movement piece in between will help with that** and also, the atmosphere and stakes that the actors bring to the stage will also make that not so apparent.”*

In a way, that is a very comforting piece of feedback, knowing that you are on the right track and that movement will only clarify your story. For me though, it highlighted a big insecurity of mine.

I didn’t come into Otterbein with any formal training in theater except for six years of mime training before my Freshman year. From middle school, I have always gravitated towards using my body to not only tell stories, but to make people laugh, act with, and communicate in every day life. I was always a talkative person, but with how I was raised, I never felt super comfortable using words alone to drive a point home. I had plenty of success in high school whether I was

acting in school or in the community. However, I was always an actor who felt comfortable in my body and would often talk with my hands. After my first year as a BFA Acting major, my professors would tell me that I have “mime hands” and advised me to let the words do their work. As a writer, I would often question my choices for fear of not making sense or being judged for my thoughts. I would especially write, rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite again dialogue because I wanted to make sure “it sounded like real people.” Soon I had to realize that people are infinite and can say anything; they just have to justify it. Until then, I would rely on the focus of the physical to inform all of my words and story.

From the beginning of writing this play, I always knew that movement had to be involved somewhere in this play. I desperately needed an outlet to try new things with what I do best. From a practical reason, if I was following the story of *Lord of the Flies*, there was a significant amount of time that has to pass for anyone to converted to their primal instincts. I always knew that my story took place over a span of three weeks, but telling a span of time is difficult on stage. Usually, a passage of time is shown through stage directions on the page and often helped with a blackout or scene change when in performance. In TV and film, there can be a cut to a new scene, text to guide the viewer, or a montage of images or small scenes to show that passage of time. With my experience of mime, I was reminded of a technique known as “metamorphosa” or the transformation of one shape to another. This would bring the montage style from TV/Film to the stage. The next step for the second draft is to transfer all thoughts and shapes in my head to my stage directions.

On August 5, I heard back from the Department of Theatre and Dance Chair Dr. John Stefano and I discovered that a staged reading of my play would be November 13<sup>th</sup> during the weekly Common Hour and take place in the Pit Theatre! I was extremely excited and anxious to

get started. However, I would know the struggle of getting a new work started very quickly. I did not apply for a traditional Directing Workshop that was offered through the Department. A Workshop includes doing a 10-30 minute cut of a play. Since I was focusing on creating my own work and wanting a full production, I focused on preparing it for Distinction. I found myself in new territory. To my knowledge, I was the first one to get funding for a Summer Stipend and this caused the need for more paperwork and a loss in translation. My play was being labeled as an independent project and now, I was required to fill more paperwork as well as have a meeting to “ensure that everyone's time, including [mine], is protected,” as it stated in email from Dr. John. After a confusing couple of weeks at home, I was able to have a meeting with Dr. John and get the department on the same page with what my intentions were again. From there, I did discover that only BFA Performance would be required to attend, which was a little deflating because it had something for every degree in the department. The seeds were planted in me from that meeting: I wanted to change the perception of student work within the department and establish a plan for academic projects.

## **FALL 2015**

The first step to make all of this happen was to assemble a team to submit to the faculty for approval. I wanted to showcase the talent of the underclassmen of our department, so I recruited talent female actors who were either not cast or in ensemble parts. I also wanted to represent all three of the underclassmen BFA Performance classes with my casting. I started by casting all five of the Sophomore BFA Acting majors since they were the ones that I had in mind since the start. In addition to Sally, Kaylee, and Lauren D., Grace Hoover (Olivia) and Daria Redus (Clara) joined the cast. Lauren K. represented the Junior Performance class. I would then recruit incoming Freshman BFA Acting major Kara Jobe (who I met the school year before) to play Chloe, Audrey's

younger sister, because of her interest in doing new work. In addition to their interest, I also tried to cast them in roles that were different from what they had been playing for a more educational experience. Sally and Daria were cast as leaders with a focus on power, Kaylee and Lauren K. needed a sinister role with a heavy focus on dialogue, Grace has a natural comedic talent that needed to be harnessed on stage, and Lauren D. and Kara needed a challenge to play mostly followers.

After a chain of emails and sending the cast the second draft of the script on September 7th, we planned to meet in the afternoon on Sunday, September 20 for the first-ever reading of *Not the Truth We Seek*. Like any nervous writer, I arrived to the location 45 minutes before the reading to set up the chairs in a circle, read scenes over, and tried to pick the best wrestling promo to show the actors. When everyone showed up, I explained what the purpose of the play was, how it started, the schedule for rehearsals and talked about how this will be a staged reading. After that, I showed them the first promo I ever saw in which it talked about family. Immediately, it set the mood that we were going to be doing something unique and new.

Hearing the script out loud for the first time was one of the most exciting and terrifying movements in my life. I sat there with pride knowing that my words were being read by not only my friends, but amazing and capable actors. However, for every three moments or lines that landed well, there was always one that made me cringe. You can clearly hear allowed what lines are too forced, awkwardly phrased, and seemingly not in the world of the play. From there, I knew where the work was and made it a goal to get the quality of my writing up to their level of acting. After the reading, I was met with character based questions, immediately forcing me out of worrying about the editing. Questions and theories flooded about who Sister Abigail was: Is she God? Is she Emma's sister? Lover? Best friend? Is she even real? Is she dead and haunting the island? From

there, how does Emma fit in and how do the others fit in? All of the questions, excitement, and theories gave me a launching point to focus on for the third draft.

After listening to the play read aloud, I went on to focus on small tweaks here and there until the end of the rehearsals for the Department's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. We would then move on to rehearsals with a third draft. In the lead up to the presentation, we took the O'Neill route and really had limited rehearsals, only rehearsing for a total of six hours the week of the presentation. I wanted to test out the traditional staged reading format, but change the blocking up so it didn't become seven people standing behind stands the whole time. We used the rehearsals to pick and choose moments for blocking while also working how to tell the story using only the voice. We decide that every time you speak and are in a scene, the music stand comes up and you stand. When you character exits, you put the stand down and take a seat. We did the first introduction to Audrey and Olivia as normal blocking until every joined to get a sense of the isolation of the forest. Once everyone came on stage, we took away the blocking and began to tell the story from behind the music stands. Lots of time was used to work through what lines meant, character background, and focusing the story. We wanted the story to be entertaining no matter whether there was movement or not.

The most interesting use of blocking and talent was what were doing with Emma and Abigail. For the reading, they were not part of the line with the rest of the characters. They flanked the sides and were brought downstage a little further to show their power over the stage. They read every single one of the stage directions to drive home they are conjuring the world for the others. They treated the stage directions just like dialogue, using the words for more tactics to achieve full power over everything. They would often playfully use the language like a cat toying with a mouse. The only full scene to be blocked was the Abigail and Ophelia scene, a scene that would be

experimented the most. Phil Cunningham was brought in to teach stage combat to Lauren Kent and Lauren DiMario. We were able to block and teach the combat in about 30 minutes. The combat included a couple of punches, kicks on the ground, and one final knife stab. They were also completely off book, which was a completely different feel from the rest of the reading. The final moment that had movement was the final image of everyone's death. Leaving the two sisters alone, Abigail offers them hope if they join her and it ended with Sally walking straight to Lauren Kent as Kara tries to hold her back. With everything blocked, it was time to present this play to its first audience ever.

Ownership is something that I don't think can be taught. Instead, you just have to gradually get better at it. My first reading was a strange mixture of confidence, fear, paranoia, and pride. It was great to know that I worked really hard on this. It was great to know that seven women were going to share the stage by themselves and do it in a staged reading session: an opportunity that wasn't offered during my time at Otterbein. However, I was very worried that my words would make no sense and just be weird. But there was no time to worry too much. November 13<sup>th</sup> arrived and it was time to share the work. I ran around like a mad man preparing the space with the music stands, name cards, chairs, and making sure the lights were in the right position. The mad man mentality is kind of my style. After a brief introduction by myself, I turned off the house lights and went into the booth to run the lights. The actors were great, mixing the action with the text. I was surprised at seeing the the reactions of audience members at the final moments of all the death that had happened. It was a mixture of lightly audible horror and big eyes. The final moment happened with Audrey walking towards Abigail to join her, the lights faded, and in the black the audience was silent for a few moments. I turned the lights back on slowly and finally, applause came and the actors bowed.

It was 5pm and the reading had ended. There was no time for a talk back. There was no time for a picture with my cast as another event was soon after and they needed dinner. I watched as my friends and fellow students filed out of the Pit. The first faculty member to greet me was Stella Kane. After she gave me a compliment and commented on the interesting possibilities that the movement of the piece could provide. At the time, I was her assistant for her sabbatical project, *Dance 2015: Famously Yours...Forever*, which had a mixture of movement and text and featured an acting ensemble with dance counterparts, which was among the same concept I was going for with more text. Within the week, I was sitting in her office and she became one of my advisors for Distinction and to co-teach my independent study for the Spring semester.

I had made sure to personally invite Dr. Jessie Glover to the reading since it was only made known to the students and faculty required to attend the Common Hour. Her expertise in both dramaturgy and theater history were essential to me as a playwright. I remembered back to the O'Neill rehearsals and the dramaturges were attached to the writers' hips. They were there to give advice on historical context, social theory, and the dramatic structure of the play. I have written plays before, but I had to teach myself how to write plays based on where I grew up. I would be ridiculous to not take a chance to work with a literal doctor to gain skill that would not only take this play to the next level, but make me a better theater maker. After asking her the same questions I asked Stella, I was given the task to email both advisors goals and objectives for the independent study before getting a full agreement.

I took a couple weeks to truly ask myself what I wanted from the independent study. It forced me to really go from the broad goal of "make this play better" to ten very specific goals that was sent to my advisors the first day of December.

1. *Gain a better knowledge of dramaturgy and the dramaturgy required for a new play through work with an actual dramaturg.*

2. *Work with text in terms of how to incorporate mime and movement through the help of a mentor (Not unlike Dance Concert)*
3. *Rewrite the play to figure out what text is needed, how to incorporate movement, what is the message behind the play.*
4. *Learn more about the ramifications of a male playwright writing material for females which include topics of violence, sexuality, etc.*
5. *Develop movement for the entire script.*
6. *Develop a final "working" draft of the script in preparation for Fall 2017's fully realized production.*
7. *Enter at least two movements of choreography into the Spring 2016 Dance Workshop and have time for feedback.*
8. *Host a voluntary staged reading of the play towards the end of the semester (after Fiddler on the Roof closes), with time after a talk back.*
9. *Utilize women not cast or cast in ensembles for the reading.*
10. *Utilize female Dance Minors as the movement actresses (The Shadows of the actresses)"*

After an okay from both advisors, Dr. Stefano signed off on the independent study and everything was all set. My final meeting before the Christmas Break was a meeting I had with Dr. Glover following my exam for her Counterculture INST class. I will never forget the words that she opened up the meeting up with.

*"I could tell you that your play is good, but I won't until it is **great**."*

## **SPRING 2016**

The day after Christmas 2015, I submitted the first working draft of the semester and it was a doozy. I added over 20 pages of stage directions including weeks two and three, a new introduction, a revamped ending, and more dialogue for Abigail to make her a more central part

of the whole play, not just one scene. This was probably the second most fun draft that I got to write, because I had the time to really focus on the story and I had no deadlines to make yet. I could take my time, explore with the characters, and just settle in the world rather than be a visitor in the world. In addition to the draft, Dr. Glover also assigned that I provide three questions that I wanted her to answer:

1. *From reading the script, what is the world that you see?*
2. *What takes you out of that world/What doesn't seem justified?*  
*(Language especially)*
3. *What is the strongest scene and the weakest scene and why?*

When coming up with character names, I am heavily inspired by the meanings of those names. That is a fact I usually don't talk about because I never thought that it would benefit anyone else because I just thought it was a technique to choose names. Much to my surprise, my second piece of feedback from Dr. Glover was to look at how I structured the character descriptions. The version from the fourth draft looked like this:

*EMMA, 18 years old and the first to visit the forest, dynamic and charismatic.*

*SISTER ABIGAIL, 20 years old, knows the forest.*

*AUDREY, 18 years old, a leader.*

*OLIVIA, 18 years old, the kind soul, Audrey's best friend.*

*CLARA, 18 years old, independent, but loves her best friend, Ophelia.*

*OPHELIA, 17 years old, dependent and in love with her best friend, Clara.*

*CHLOE, 16 years old, Audrey's younger sister.*

That type of character description gives nothing to the actor other than who knows certain people and their age. It leaves the actors in the middle of the ocean with nothing really to grasp on to before they even read it. I told Dr. Glover about how I picked the names and she said I should think about making the meanings the character descriptions. So a day after the meeting, the character description page looked like this:

*EMMA, 18 years old*

- *German name meaning "Whole or Universal"*

*ABIGAIL, 20 years old*

- *Hebrew name meaning "Father's joy/gives joy"*

*AUDREY, 18 years old*

- *English name meaning "Noble and Strength"*

*OLIVIA, 18 years old*

- *English name meaning "Olive Tree of Heaven"*

*CLARA, 18 years old*

- *Latin name meaning "Bright or Clear"*

*OPHELIA, 18 years old*

- *Greek name meaning "Help"*

*CHLOE, 16 years old*

- *Greek name meaning "Fresh blooming"*

These meanings now gave the actors some strong personality traits in order to use to justify choices and come up with their backstory. This would be the first time that the importance of research directly impacted the creative product.

A week after receiving feedback on the fourth draft, my advisors and I worked together to create a syllabus for the independent study. We entitled it "New Play Workshop" because we were going to do it all: writing, directing, and choreography. Everything about this semester was set up perfectly. We were going to focus on the journey. Yes, there were going to be performance aspects

to the semester, but we were focusing on not only how a play is developed, but how a *good* play is developed.

***Objectives***

*\*The creation of a new play workshop focusing on the development of script and movement with an emphasis on the balance of text and choreography*

*\*The exploration of a new form of communication to a theatre audience outside the norm of traditional theatre presentation*

*\*Exploration of spoken text and choreography/movement as equal and reinforcing story telling in a singular script.*

***Requirements and Grading***

*Course grade will be determined by instructors' evaluations of:*

*\*required draft updates/deadlines*

*\*required readings as supplements to text development*

*\*Discussion and synthesis of the text*

*\*Cast reading of the play*

*\*Choreography rehearsal sessions*

*\*weekly meetings to evaluate and discuss script/choreography development*

*\*Presentation of script/choreography selections in the Otterbein Spring Dance Workshop*

As much as we worked through the creative aspects, there was a ton of research involved in order to know whose shoulders I was standing upon.

I am of the the opinion that creative projects and “art” are all academic endeavors whether or not people see that or the creators even notice it. From the start, Dr. Glover and I were adamant that we have a research component with this play. It’s important to recognize where you come from, whose shoulders you are starting on, and how to take these concepts and transform them. The three biggest concepts came in short succession of one another and made a lasting impact, not only on this play, but on me as a theater maker: Morality plays, Charles Mee, and Young Jean Lee.

First, the way that I described my setting and plot sounded like a medieval morality play. Morality plays were often done in the round, so audiences can watch and judge from all angles. Most simply a morality play is an allegorical play that has the protagonist meeting different

personifications or various moral attributes as they try to sway them to either to “light side” or the “dark side” if we use *Star Wars* terms. With help from a great book, *Women’s Inhumanity to Women*, I began to see how each character would fit into a morality play structure, personifying virtues, and vices. Audrey was justice. Ophelia was pity. Paige, then Olivia, was perseverance. Clara was contemplation. Emma was freewill. Chloe was judgement. Abigail was imagination. It was so interesting to think about how this original concept that I thought was so new was one that was being told centuries upon centuries ago.

According to Charles Mee, however, that was okay. The second biggest concept that I learned was that “There is no such thing as an original play.” Charles Mee, an American playwright is of the theory that writers steal other writer’s work including stories, dreams, conversations, interviews, and life details and spin them to make them original and that is completely okay. All stories have been written and that is okay, if you remake them into some different. People remake Shakespeare every single year. *Frost/Nixon* was literally a play made out of the infamous Frost/Nixon interviews after the Nixon presidency. Mee is known for taking existing text and hammering them up to change phrases, sentences, and speeches to make full scenes and plays out of them. This showed me that it was okay to take pre-existing material. You are paying homage to it. You are transforming it. Also, it was only a matter of time before someone else did it. However, I was still struggling the ethical dilemma of being a straight, male, Puerto Rican writer writing an all-female piece.

Young Jean Lee tore down the doors of what it meant to be a writer. Her entire mission was to tell stories she didn’t have the right to tell. A Korean-American playwright who insisted that she tell whatever story that she wanted wrote plays about straight white men (*Straight White Men*), a group of African-Americans (*The Shipment*), among other concepts. She is fueled by her

own past, memories, and family history and simply puts that into her work. Those feelings, memories, and history are in every single family and immediately unites a lot of our experiences together. She didn't worry about the consequences for writing something that was "foreign" to her. She wrote about the human experience. She dives in to the work of writing about "foreign" things both because of and in spite of her distance from them. Her words were enough. She had made it okay for me to feel like I had a voice in making my work.

At the beginning of the independent study, Dr. Glover and myself were planning on doing two readings during the semester. The plan was for the first one to be an invited group of students and faculty and the second to be open to anyone who wanted to attend. Looking at the schedules of all the theater spaces, all spaces were going to be used or I would only have an hour to try and do a reading with a talkback. Needing to get creative, I thought about alternative spaces that would have seats, be open, and could be adjusted. I emailed the Chaplain and got a meeting to discuss using the university's Chapel for the reading. I met with her for a very brief 10-minute period and got approved for a reading scheduled for Monday, February 22<sup>nd</sup> for an hour and a half after all acting classes were finished. Finding readers who were interested wasn't very difficult, but finding actors who were available was. However, by the end of a week long search, two weeks beforehand, I had three members of the Class of 2018 (Sally Clark, Kaylee Barrett, & Grace Hoover) and four members of the Class of 2019 (Kara Jobe, Elise Woods, Kat Lee, & Michaella Waickman) to read roles as well as Class of 2019 member Alissa Dellork to read the stage directions. With the reading and cast set, all I had left to do was finish my fifth draft.

On February 22, three days after the fifth draft was finished, I sprinted after my acting class ended in order to make it to the reading early, so I could set the space before anyone else got there. I got there with about 15 minutes to spare and I had to completely alter the room to my liking. I

moved chairs into a circle as my cast trickled in. I had to also set up the computer and projector. I was able to get a great cast to come in to read about a week before the actual reading. The cast received the scripts then and were told of the general structure: all stage directions were to be read, the actors were to bring in some feedback, a video of one scene will be shown to demonstrate how the movement will blend with the text, and a talk-back led by Dr. Glover would immediately follow. A small group made up of a few professors from the Department of Theatre and Dance, as well as the English Department, were joined by a small group of BFA performance majors and Dance minors.

I realized quickly that this play doesn't do well in a reading session. The amount of movement text was so dense and so specific that it could become easy to either tune out or get very lost in. The actors were doing a great job with finding completely new and interesting character choices that inspired me to go back and truly think about their journey. The addition of the video seemed to be helpful, but the audio was not the best and the set up really stalled the flow of the reading even though it was only a few seconds. The last scene was met with the same looks of confusion, shock, and horror that happened at the first reading a few months ago. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

At the conclusion of the reading, the majority of all who came to watch had to leave, so by the time we started a talk-back, we had the full cast and about four other people including Melissa Lusher, a faculty member of the Department of Theatre and Dance. There were three big things that I took away from those conversations. The first point was they thought that when someone said "I love you" in the play, that it sounded foreign, strange, and unjustified. This even applied to when the two sisters would say it to each other. This spoke to a need for more joy in the play. The second was a comment that is seemingly small, but ended up helping people in future iterations of

the play. There were so many names that ended in the “-ee” and “-ah” sounds and it made it hard for some people to really distinguish each individual person’s name and character when most of them sounded the same. This led to Olivia’s name changing to Paige, meaning “young helper.” The third and perhaps biggest feedback I got was regarding the structure of the show. I asked a very simple, yet very loaded question: “Who is Abigail?” The responses were drastically different.

- *The evil that every woman has inside of them.*
- *A conjured up thing that people have to keep their humanity.*
- *She is the dark side personified.*
- *The twisted version of female power.*
- *A God source (light or dark) meant to guide, lead, and protect us.*
- *An idol, something recognizable (one element/aspect of humanity).*
- *In danger of being one-dimensional*

In the middle of the discussion, I took time to be happy that there was a lengthy and intellectual conversation about something I write, but there were so many opinions about the character and I needed to focus the conversation on the next draft. One of thoughts thrown out was that everyone could be an extension of Abigail. In my notebook, I wrote simply, “Potentially.” However, that idea would grow and grow and be impossible to not find appealing.

The very next day I heard back from two creative writing professors: Terry Hermsen, one of my favorite professors, and Candy Canzoneri, a long time theatre supporter. Their critiques rounded out the most important feedback I had received. After a little bit of praise for the all female element and intriguing text and character work with Emma and Abigail, I was called out for uninteresting opening that didn’t make the audience connect to the group. This lack of connection

caused them to react very negatively to the death that happens at the end of the play. To them, it seemed unearned, random, unnecessary, and uncomfortable. I could handle uncomfortable. I could not allow anything to feel unearned and I could not let the characters down. This really focused my writing. The structure was clear to me now and from that, I could truly shape and flesh out every relationship.

The other half of my independent study was the choreography aspect. I had an ambitious goal of choreographing the full play, but after realizing my own scheduling, how packed the department's schedule was, and how dense the play was, I had to make an adjustment. I had decided to focus on four scenes that I viewed as the most important to figure out now before going into a production: The opening of the play, Week 1, Clara & Ophelia meeting in the woods, and the confrontation between Ophelia & Abigail. These scenes were a mixture of text and words, action and acting, and quick changes and consistent stops and pauses. After gathering some dancers and actors, the goal was set. Brand new choreography was due every other week. With every time that I stepped into the studio, I began to grow more and more confident and I could identify what was needed for each individual piece.

I drew a lot of inspiration from professional wrestling for all of my choreography for this play. Wrestling is a hybrid of theater and professional sport. Physicality is key. The second most important thing to wrestling is connection with a partner. If you don't have a good connection with your partner, then you won't have a good match and you lose the audience. In dance, it is the same. If your choreography doesn't click with not only the dancers, but with the story you are trying to tell, you lose the audience. Each one of the scenes that I choreographed this semester had a different theme to them. Ophelia and Clara's scene dealt with the idea of tethering and going back and forth when it came to human contact. Eye contact was key, tension was built up through a lack

of touch and distance, and that is where the heartbeat motif came from as an unifying symbol for every character. Week One focused on how a full group of people can move all at once and flow from one image to the next. The beginning of the play was inspired by professional wrestling hype packages: a mysterious voice/character who delivers a monologue spelling out the main theme and/or conflict, introduction of the participants, a cliffhanger that hooks the audience into trying to figure out what is going to happen, and clips of movement. The scene of Abigail and Ophelia was the most directly inspired by wrestling. The ballet of violence, playing to the crowd, the underdog trying to last against a powerful “enemy,” the use of a group to trap one person from leaving, and the iconic image of a fallen opponent trying to get themselves to their feet by trying to climb up the other opponent. These different focuses began to shape the show and give each scene new colors. Based on what the dancers were giving me, edits were needed.

The sixth draft may have been the biggest shift to the script throughout the entire play. This is draft where the story transformed from a strictly *Lord of the Flies*-esque clone to a realized character study with an overarching plot device to tie everything together. Abigail went from a God-like figure to a prisoner of war currently battling her PTSD with a story about a group of friends trying to coexist in a foreign land after crash landing. Once I had thought of the Prisoner of War storyline, I immediately became drawn to it. The military was always a touchy subject for me at home. My father served in the Army throughout much of the late 1980s and early 1990s, serving in Operation Desert Storm and garnering a good military career before his Honorable Discharge in the mid-1990s. Every so often in my house, my dad would talk about his PTSD and the feeling that it will never quite go away despite it dulling in time. He would often share with my brother and I that he felt like he couldn't ask for a therapist or friend's help because they wouldn't understand the pain and frustration that is associated with it. We would often hear him

shifting and talking in his sleep about some war and we would be careful with loud noises. We never knew, and thankfully never saw, if anything would set him off. I thought if I wrote this play, with Abigail like my father and the audience being the friends that could understand, that it would bring him solace. I could only hope it would.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a very scary and life-altering thing. After looking into more and more, the amount of symptoms that are associated was staggering and painted a better picture of why my dad was so stubborn about certain things and really identified with every single character in this play.

*SYMPTOMS:*

*BEHAVIORAL: Agitation, irritability, hostility, hyper vigilance, self-destruction, or social isolation*

*PSYCHOLOGICAL: Flashback, fear, severe anxiety, or mistrust*

*MOOD: Inability to feel pleasure, guilt, or loneliness*

*SLEEP: Insomnia or nightmares*

*ALSO COMMON: Emotional detachment or unwanted thoughts.*

The play still had Abigail in control of the world, literally snapping her fingers and people would create a new scenario that she wanted, but now, everyone who wasn't Abigail represented a different part of Abigail. In addition to that, in 2017, I have realized that they all fall into at least one category of PTSD symptoms. Abigail was hostile, hyper vigilant, self-destructive, and suffered from fear, flashbacks, and unwanted thoughts. Audrey was her courage and strength and prone to hyper vigilance and unwanted thoughts. Emma was her subconscious mind and her anger over her situation representing many things including agitation, irritability, hostility, self-destruction, social isolation, emotional detachment, and nightmares. Chloe was the curiosity and mistrust representative of the group. Clara was often agitated, hostile, and had an inability to feel pleasure,

guilt, or loneliness. Paige was the hope of the group, but still suffered from anxiety. Ophelia was the fear within Abigail representing so many of the symptoms: unwanted thoughts, fear, insomnia, nightmares, severe anxiety, and mistrust. These internal struggles gave us a world for the women and gave Abigail an overarching journey that made her part of the story and made her more human.

In late March, after the encouragement of my advisors, I asked the Department for permission to present this play in the Fall of 2017. I made sure to mention that this was going to be my Distinction Project, if approved. The Department rallied around me and promised me a spot on the calendar for the Fall 2017. I would quickly realize that it would be a challenge for me. I didn't do a workshop presentation, which meant that I couldn't do the Advanced Directing project or a Classroom Project, which could have potentially given me a little more priority in casting than just an independent project. I realized that immediately when I emailed the co-head of the performance area in the Department of Theatre and Dance Melissa Lusher on April 11<sup>th</sup> to see if we could have a brief meeting to discuss how we could cast the play. Instead of a meeting, I got this email and I knew that casting for my play was going to be a challenge:

*Hi Steven,*

*If your play is going up at the end of the semester, it seems to me that you would have to wait until Dance Concert casting is complete and then cast whomever is not involved in that project. When would your rehearsals start? If they were to start during AF or Crucible, you obviously wouldn't be able to cast anyone involved in those productions. And, obviously, if you are in either of those productions, you really shouldn't be working on your play at the same time. What happens if you are cast in the Dance Concert?*

*Melissa*

I became scared that without funding or the Distinction label, this production would become lost in the shuffle. Honestly, I was worried of this looking like a vanity project that was going to just benefit me. In no way was I going to let that happen. I would need to get creative, but before I

could think about that, I needed to present the first round of choreography at that semester's Dance Workshop.

After a rehearsal the day before, it was time to debut choreography for the play for the first time. Once again, nerves played a part in all of this. I have debuted choreography in front of people before, whether it was a funny solo, a cute duet, or a melodramatic group piece, but I have never done anything extremely "serious" and I have never choreographed to exclusively words, especially my own. I was up first in the evening and I decided to test out the opening, Week 1, and the scene between Abigail and Ophelia. I also wanted to test out my concept of putting everything in the round, so I set up a series of chairs along the back wall of the stage. I was tasked by Stella to open the Dance Workshop with an introduction and get people to fill up the chairs on stage. I explained what was going to happen, invited members to join people on stage, turned off the house lights, and ran to the light board. The 12 minutes went by in a very quick blur. I did remember one thing very clearly: the energy between Olivia Crawford, Abigail, Dana, and Kat was absolutely magnetic. They found many different levels and layers to the scene that night. The movement was crisp, the acting was motivated, and most importantly, the story was being told and the audience was engaging with it. Afterwards, I didn't hear much feedback on the piece. I had another funny, all-male piece later in the evening which took some focus away. I did hear some praise for the last scene and people seemed to be interested in how a full production would look.

After the Dance Workshop, the readings, rewrites, and rehearsals, I decided that it was time to put the full play together. With no clear direction on how to get it produced, I went the direction of applying for the Student Research Fund, something that I would guarantee that most theater majors don't know about. The proposal centered around answering the lack of new work and leading female roles in the department. The main objectives of the project were to do a full

production of the play (movement, text, sound, lights, and costume), have the company of nearly twenty be over 60% female, and to give every student involved the opportunity to work on a new work and really push themselves to test their craft. It would also be an opportunity to get a huge project under my belt to take to New York! We could also have documentation to put on our websites without worry of copyright. For the \$400 budget, it included printing materials, props, costume pieces, sound design, and any gels. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, I received an email from Diane Nance informing me that my proposal for *Not the Truth We Seek* was approved. I had done it. I found a way to make sure that this play got produced. The students were going to have a chance to work on a new play and for the first time in nearly four years, I was going to have an opportunity to work on a mime piece longer than ten minutes.

## **SUMMER 2016**

In the summer, my brother and I were hired by Otterbein Summer Theatre: Shawn as a Box Office and Front of House employee and myself as an actor and Office Assistant. We were excited about the prospect of spending a summer together outside of our house. In addition to professional wrestling helping my brother and I during our family's breakup, video games were a powerful form of coping for both of us. We would get kicks out of playing our PlayStation and Nintendo consoles whether it be together or someone watching the other play. This summer, we invested in a popular PlayStation 4 video game named *Life is Strange*. The game plays like an interactive, choose your own adventure book following the story of a teenage girl named Max, who reconnects with her childhood friend named Chloe after saving her from death after discovering her ability to stop and rewind time. From that moment on, they uncover a massive mystery involving disappearing and murdered girls at their school. The story, acting, and visuals had my brother and

I sitting on the edge of our seats. However, at the start and end of every chapter of the story, we would always remark the same thing:

*“The music in this game is amazing.”*

The soundtrack of *Life is Strange* fits a unique balance of calming, playful, and suspenseful with a blend of an orchestral score and indie pop rock songs. With every cut scene, the music would overtake and shape the scenes beautifully. I was beginning to hear the soundtrack as the inspiration for my play with the songs acting as a bridge from a movement section to the next, allowing the audience to hear what’s happening to the group as well as see it. With the soundtrack bouncing around in my head, I asked Trey, who had experience with piano and creating short tunes, to create a quick piano piece for the trio between Abigail, Audrey, and Chloe. The movement component was telling the story of the beauty of the sister relationship between Audrey and Chloe. When Abigail takes Audrey’s place, we see that Chloe is Abigail’s sister and Audrey is the direct representation of Abigail in this mysterious world. Before the piece can come to a peaceful conclusion, the sounds of sirens blare. Trey’s piece acts as a lullaby that ties all three women together. The piece balances on calming, playful, and an ominous tone that allows the characters and audience to breathe, but remind them that they are still in danger. The music was starting to inform the choreography.

The seventh draft had very few changes, but it was needed as I starting to see how to identify details that needed to be cleaned up. I would make small grammatical changes throughout and would clean up more staged directions. The three biggest additions were smaller changes in the middle of the script. On page 25, there was the addition of a showdown between Emma and Abigail to showcase that they were at odds. There was the addition of the two-page scene between Chloe and Ophelia that solidified the group’s mistrust in Emma. It was also another scene to

showcase another fear of Ophelia's. Chloe knows of Ophelia's affections for Clara and that scares Ophelia enough that she shoves Chloe to the ground that then triggers the big group fight a lot better than previous drafts. The last addition was a trio dance between Abigail, Chloe, and Audrey to layer in another wrinkle to the relationship between Audrey and Abigail and subtly show a sister connection between Abigail and Chloe.

As the summer went on, I needed to start looking at a potential cast. I was still a little disheartened by the email I received in April, but I was sure that if I presented my case, we could work something out. I was getting contacted by a number of students as well as making contacts of my own. I was getting interest from all degrees in the Department and some Dance minors. It was an interesting time. One day I would have two people say they were interested and then a few days later, they would be out due to their schedules. What was shaping up was a mixture of all different classes, all different majors, some people who have been involved since the beginning, some who just joined the journey, and people who wanted to join now. I would have to table the interest for a month as I would begin work on a new production.

Coming at a time when I was started to get burned out when it came to acting, *Invention of Theater* was the first new work that Otterbein Summer Theatre did. I got cast as Avery, the sleazy producer who may or may not be the devil in the flesh. The best part about this production was that I was in front and behind the table. I was an actor and also the show's choreographer. Even though, our playwright lived in New York, he was working daily with our director via email and he would Skype in once, if not twice, a week to witness the read-through and multiple rehearsals. I was getting the experience of knowing how to work as an actor in this environment. Acting in a new play is exhilarating and scary at the same time because you are the first person to play this role which means you have a limitless amount of options at your disposal. What was so amazing

to see was the playwright Sean Murphy's drive to edit the script to make the story better, his security in what his story was about, and his ability to let us play. He didn't want to hold our hand when it came to developing character. He asked us questions and if we had questions, he would almost always answer with possibilities. He would tell us his intentions, but never let feelings get in the way. From that, we were able to flesh out our own backgrounds and form more developed relationships with each other, creating a fully fleshed out world and a great premiere of this play. From his example, I understood the importance of allowing actors to make choices for themselves. Once again, know everything while writing, but give the actors only the possibilities.

Heading into the Fall of 2016, only one thing was for certain: I was going to premiere this show. I had no performance date. I had no rehearsals on the calendar. I had no cast. I had no crew. I had a script and was completely at the mercy of the Department of Theatre and Dance. On June 16, opening night of *Invention of Theater*, I received my first email regarding the play from Kristen and Chris.

*"Hi Steven,*

*We're finally able to get back to you regarding your Distinction Project this fall! We've scheduled a performance on Thursday, December 1 at 7:30p in the Pit Theatre. We've also rehearsal times scheduled for you and I've got them reserved in Towers for you:*

*Sunday, November 6 from 12p-5p  
Sunday, November 13 from 12p-5p  
Sunday, November 20 from 12p-5p  
Tuesday, November 29 from 4:45p-6:15p  
Thursday, December 1 from 4:45p-6:15p*

*There also needs to be the stipulation that any involved with Dance Concert can't be involved with your project too. Chris can speak to that guideline a bit more if you have any questions.*

*Please let me know if you have any questions regarding scheduling!*

*thanks,*

*Kristen”*

My mind went into a little bit of a freak-out. First, I didn't get the two performances I worked into my SRF proposal, but that worry quickly faded because at least I had a performance date, especially one that was not in the middle of any other production's rehearsals. What scared me the most was only getting five rehearsals to try and stage a full hour of text, blocking, and choreography. Amplifying that worry was that none of the rehearsals would be in the final performance location, making it impossible to do any spacing before the performance. I was also thrown off by the stipulation of no one involved in Dance Concert can be in my play because we haven't even discussed anyone who was interested and I needed good dancers for this project. I will admit that this was a step up from the vague email I received in April. The very next day, I met with Stella and emailed Jessie the day after. The plan was to write a proposal with a well-thought out calendar and a list of interested actors. After *Invention* closed, I received an email from Chris asking her to send in the proposal before July 11<sup>th</sup>, so the faculty could review it as they went through the semester's calendar.

For a while, I was struggling to find the words that sounded professional and asserted myself as an equal. I didn't want this to be looked at as just another student project. I wanted this to be way more than that. I took three weeks to flesh out this proposal. On the morning of July 11<sup>th</sup>, I sent an email to Chris, Melissa, Stella, Kristen, and Jessie. Included the email was my SRF proposal and a four-page document that restated the purpose of doing this project, a full tentative rehearsal schedule with dates, times, locations, and goals, a list of interested students, a list of students I wouldn't ask to be in the project after looking at their commitments for the Fall 2016 term, and my own personal schedule to show my requirements to show how this would fit in and what I promised to do to lighten my own load. I stressed the importance of student work and the

fact that this could serve as a template for future student projects that would ensure opportunities for the students and quality of work and cooperation with the faculty. I asked for five additional rehearsals including changes in the space to accommodate fourteen actors and make sure we get time in the performance space. I also supplied a full list of people who expressed interest to get their reactions on certain students on who I may or may not be able to use. Most importantly, I took the time to thank them. When you want to work so badly on a project, you may think that so-called “roadblocks” are being placed in your way maliciously, but I knew that the Department was only doing things to protect their schedule, the students’ well-being, and my own well-being. No matter what, you thank the people who give you the opportunity to do what you love.

Needless to say, I have always been a person who gets the most out of education and life by doing multiple things at the same time. My acting training is very important to me. Just as important to me are all of my endeavors: dance, choreography, writing, comedy, Mainstage Improv, Drag Show, teaching assistant for acting classes and acting coaching for Westerville South High School. As you can imagine, with the schedule of a BFA student with liberal arts requirements on top of that, there is a concern about my well-being and rest every semester and every semester I am alive, breathing, and thriving off the pressure. I was shocked when the response to my proposal came back the way it was. A mostly positive experience, I was approved for most things. I was called in to meet with Kristen and was able to get ten full rehearsals including at least five in the performance space. I had to provide a cast list the day after the casting of the Dance Concert. I was told that Nick Hahn wasn’t allowed to participate. Nick Hahn still did, because he is a stubborn young man. The general excitement from their response was very nice as I was beginning to feel a little tired because I thought we were tugging and pulling for everything. The only thing that shocked me was their recommendation that I quit one of the activities I do for

their fear of not “successfully honoring my commitments.” I was advised that maybe I consider dropping Mainstage Improv (which I was the President and longest running member) or Drag Show (which I was one of the oldest queens and catered to a very specific thing I needed in my life). I decided to not drop either and do it all. I was going to take ownership of education and do what I wanted to do and do what I can handle, but I always thank the Department for their caring nature. Even if we disagree on some things, there is always respect and it truly means a lot to me.

## **FALL 2016**

I was now on the same page with the faculty, but still felt that I was walking on eggshells because I am a student and they are my superiors in the academia food chain. I had to make casting choices that made sense and would cause the least amount of stress to the Department. Over the summer, I had a myriad of people drop out of the potential cast list due to feeling like the show would add too much stress. All choices including Abigail Isom, Lauren Heberling, & Jessica Metcalf (Class of 2019) and Aubree Tally, Natalie Szczerba, & Lauren Kent (Class of 2017) would have made amazing choices. After having a quarter of my cast list drop, a full list of female actors that I wasn't allowed to ask, and a restriction that kept me from asking any Freshman actors, I needed to think outside the box. I wasn't only just going to place people into roles that they could play well, I needed to push some members and give them an opportunity to grow as performers. With as many people that were dropping, there were people who were jumping at the chance to do it. Over the summer, I was able to secure original cast members Sally Clark, Kara Jobe, and Grace Hoover, as well as performers from the Spring Workshop including Dana Cullinane, Olivia Crawford, and Olivia Crago. I was also able to get dance minors Amanda Sibert and Nicole Gaydos to commit. Natalie Love agreed to be my stage manager due to her upcoming (and awesome) honors project. Nick Hahn agreed to be my assistant director before he became one of the busiest

people in the department and Trey Plutnicki stayed on with assisting me in choreography. I was lucky enough to have Gunnar Schmidt and Allison Mogle to design their first show with me. Once the start of the year came around Kaylee Barrett, Daria Redus, and Lauren DiMario returned to the show, while Caroline Kane (Class of 2018) and Claire Sinard (Class of 2019) joined the cast. During a common hour, I handed out printed copies of the eight draft which I finished a week before classes to every single one of them and the journey began.

There were two main components to directing this play: rehearsals and individual work sessions. I would say that I am a very fast worker, blocking all 60 pages in only two rehearsals. However, we would take the time to really drill the movement because it is so specific. In the first six rehearsals, scripts were in hand by everyone, so I had to adjust to where they were and give simple acting directives, while I focused on the staging. Putting it in the round was going to be difficult, especially with up to 14 different bodies on stage at the same time. Sight lines became my best friend and mortal enemy, but it was so important to get it right. The movement was just as important as the text. I was performing a balancing act of structure and freedom. Some people thrive in that. Others do not.

The focus of rehearsals for me is time to merge what the actors bring into the room and my ideas of staging and storytelling. I put a lot of trust in my actors. I don't find full acting rehearsals to be the best use of time because it keeps us from getting a flow of how a show can go. I also expect the actors to do the work outside of the room and then bring it into the room. If the chemistry or flow isn't there, then I will work with the actors individually and remedy the situation. For much of this process, I stressed doing the homework outside of the room and be ready to go once rehearsal time started. Of course, throughout the semester, I had a very stressed and tired cast with every single person in the class either participating in one of the three mainstage productions: *The*

*Addams Family*, *The Crucible*, and Dance 2016: *The Goddess* or participating in required zoo visits for their majors. So sometimes I would have people anywhere from 30 seconds to 15 minutes late and people who would be sick or tired, but the thing is, they kept showing up. Unfortunately, it would take them an hour to “warm up,” but once they were on, they were on. I became a very confident and competent leader throughout. I grew with every rehearsal and found my own style.

Throughout the three months of working on this play with a cast of fourteen, the time for acting rehearsals that would give every single person equal time to focus on them was going to be hard, if not, impossible to find. To counteract that, I had heard that Melissa Lusher would do individual meetings with the cast of Otterbein’s production of *Spring Awakening* to discuss character, motive and how each of them fit into the story of the show. This sounded like an interesting idea and with the concept of this show being so open-ended yet specific yet confusing, I would have 2-3 individual sessions with every single actor throughout the process. The sessions would range from character discussions, story questions, or just making sure they felt happy and healthy with life. I began to see that people were taking this seriously because it was a time that they could ask me anything. People recorded sessions and they ranged anywhere from 10 minutes to 35 minutes. I found that I really enjoyed talking about the show and characters with everyone and the work would be significantly better with every session.

The most progress I saw that was directly linked to these segments was in the two people playing Emma: Olivia Crago and Kara Jobe. Olivia was someone whose dance ability was not questioned: effortless, unique, and technically clean. She had always wanted to get involved with the acting side and every single meeting she would be there on time, with a notebook, and say yes to everything. She was hungry and determined and in the rehearsal room, she was impossible to take your eyes off of. She commanded the stage with her presence and her acting choices made

her compelling. Kara Jobe, on the other hand, had the tough task of making the “villain” likeable. Kara is one of my best friends and one of the most creative people I have ever encountered. She will admit, however, that she is a person that is prone to think and overthink about everything. There was a disconnect between the words, her actions, and what I was asking for. We had four individual sessions: 25 minutes, 30 minutes, 15 minutes, and an hour and 15 minutes. We discussed everything. Our last session lasted over an hour and just when she seemed at the end of her rope, I calmly walked her through every moment of the show; beat by beat until she finally said at the end: “I can work with that.” She had the biggest growth of anyone, going from someone trying at a character to someone who *was* the character. She commanded attention, found humanity, and brought humor into the play. She brought choices I never even thought about. Crago and Jobe made this play work.

Halfway through the semester, a huge discovery was made. The second half of the show was clicking together and running very smoothly. The first 15 pages, just like the previous semesters, were my trouble spot. How do you create a world, introduce conflict, and establish characters all at the same time? Also, how do we balance the play? If it ends in the murder of many people and everyone gathering around Abigail, what does the beginning need? The answer hit me. Dr. Glover agreed to meet with me on short notice and I said that I was going to completely change the beginning and do a final sweep of every line to cut down on what doesn’t work. She asked me why. I simply said that I wanted to make the script better for the people in my cast. I wanted to make sure that they had clear motives in every line and didn’t have to worry about battling weird syntax. The beginning was going to completely change and it was going to give Abigail all of the power.

The final draft of this semester brought more change than an executive order signed by President Trump. Edits piled up and when I sent them out to the cast, the list was over five pages long. There were small grammatical changes. There were additions to the lines. There were cuts within lines. There were lines that were completely cut. All of this was to make the memorization of the lines a lot easier for the actors. Well, that, and to make sure that they all had good material to say and to reduce any clunky spots. In addition to this list of edits, two big structural changes were made to clarify the beginning and get the actors to focus on the story rather than the concept. The beginning was completely changed to show Abigail giving “life” to every single character except Emma to show that they were all a part of Abigail. The second change was viewing Emma as a part of Abigail rather than an “outsider” or the other. For our purposes, Emma became all of the grief that Abigail felt due to the death of her sister in the POW camp they are in. If the play were to continue without the introduction of the other characters, ten minutes in, Abigail’s sister, Chloe, would have died. Ten minutes into the play, Emma is introduced. It made her immediately part of the world and caused everyone to just focus on acting with each other, not with the concept of the world.

I can objectively say that the next-to-last rehearsal before our tech was the absolute worst rehearsal, not only of the process, but the worst rehearsal I have ever seen. As a director, I truly realized the importance of balancing empathy with requiring discipline. Yes, you may have friends in the room, but there comes a time when you can’t continue to feel frustrated. During the final Sunday rehearsal before tech rehearsal, I was trying to work through sections that the actors decided what they wanted to work. However, it was a brutal rehearsal of start and stops with people forgetting entrances, completely forgetting lines, and trying to laugh off their mistakes as if it didn’t matter. The rehearsal was only three hours that day due to a scheduling conflict, so after

hour two, I had enough. I called everyone to gather. I immediately asked who felt tired and stressed and every single person, even on the production team, raised their hands. What came next was a 10-minute “Come to Jesus” speech that was a mixture of empathy, passion, and frustration that was meant to give them something to fight for and let them know what all of this means to me.

Here is an excerpt:

*“I completely understand. I know you are tired and stressed out and you know that I am so thankful for you all, but you have two more rehearsals. I love you all, but I need you guys to remember the blocking. I know. This rehearsal process is brutal. They made it as hard as possible to put it on, but we have this time to make something special...It feels like I have to drag you guys up to my level. Don't fall to a lesser level. Join me. Make me be better everyday because you bring something new to the table. You are too talented to not have this be great. It feels like sometimes I am being taken advantage of – I know I'm not – but that's how it feels because this isn't a mainstage. We have only two weeks. You have only two weeks. You are the ones going on stage and putting yourselves out there. Want to do a good job...I love you all and I know it's going to be a great show because it will be. This isn't student work. Treat this like a mainstage... and just learn my words. Please? Just learn my words.”*

The following day, I noticed a significant change. People apologized to me and I would just say, “You don't need to apologize. Just come prepared tomorrow.” Led by the most consistent member of the group, Caroline, they figured out the show in the span of 24 hours. We had a full run and it was a completely different cast. There was only one long lull due to a miscommunication. No one called line. No one laughed. Everyone was tired, stressed, but working extremely hard. I began to finally feel electricity with certain interactions. I had over six-and-a-half pages of notes because they were giving so much and I could react to what they were giving me. I was starting to see the actual play. I was starting to see why they loved theatre and their hearts through their work. I was starting to see the power that this play could have.

Everyone returned a day early from Thanksgiving Break full, a little tired from the travel, and with a seemingly renewed energy. Everything was coming together, except for a very weird sound issue that kept us from using the sound system, so instead we used a giant speaker that Gunnar was giving to Natalie Love as a Secret Santa gift. If that is not dedication, then I don't know what is. We would then move on to the costume parade, ran by Allison Mogle. The costumes really put everything together and I believe that was the final piece that could help the actors get into characters. With everything ready, we did a brief thirty-minute cue-to-cue, running only lighting and sound cues. After that, we moved on to the first dress rehearsal, which was even better than the previous run of the show. After that, we did brief notes before doing a second run where I was genuinely moved to near tears as the final moments of the play played out in front of me. In the span of seven days, a group of people went from being consumed by stress to channeling all their energy into a piece of theater and it was genuinely moving. I forgot for long periods of time that I even wrote the play. They had finally took ownership, made the words and movements their own, and transformed the piece into something I couldn't imagine.

The final rehearsal actually brought tears to me in a whole new way. Due to headset issues, I now was running lights for the third straight performance of my play, so I watched from the booth as the fourteen women who had ran from their classes to jump straight into a rehearsal before a round of auditions was truly inspiring. Fourteen badass women who just never stop working. They put their egos at the door to tell stories and they do it with professionalism and a smile. The beats were nearly perfect. The play was completely alive and new. They were breathing together and for the first time this semester, they were enjoying their time together. They focused on giving each other everything they had and focused on wanting to make their partners better. One of the final images of all of the women giving their colors to Abigail and then breathing as one full unit with

her as a way saying we are together and we are here for you gave me the most intense chills of my life. And with that, rehearsals were done. I had to let my baby walk into the world and see what happened. Did I have what it takes to make it as a writer? Was this good enough? With this cast, anything was going to be possible.

## **“LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE” (DECEMBER 1, 2016)**

The phrase that it takes a village to make a person is no joke, but you have to put in the work. For this show, I was transported back to my high school days. As a committee member for the longest theater company, I was able to do many incredible productions such as *The Laramie Project* and *Rebel without a Cause* and premiere not only my own work, *The Average High School Play & The Average High School Romance*, but helped produced other high school students' work, including a new play called *Lady of the Night*. However, in order to make these productions work, I did all promotion (excluding poster design), directed, ran front of house, scheduled the space, scheduled radio and news interviews, acquired the rights, worked as producer, handled money and concessions, sent all emails that a stage manager would, set up the house, gathered the majority of props and set dressings, casted by myself, paid for random expenses out of pocket, costume designed, ran the light board, and sometimes had to act in the productions to make them go. In order to make *Not the Truth We Seek* go, I made purchases, directed, choreographed, and wrote it, designed and made the program, set out the house for the show, and ran the light board during the performance. I even set up the video camera beforehand and got a memory card delivered so I could record the show for anyone who wanted it. For this production, I was thankful to learn to delegate other positions to amazing people and give myself somewhat of a break.

An hour and 20 minutes before go was a pretty high stress time. We did a very fast fight and lift call run by Olivia Crawford and did a very fast run of the show in order to just review lines

and blocking. The focus of a speed-through isn't on the acting, it's on being precise with the movement and lines. The speed-through was clicking along well until Emma's entrance. Kara Jobe had been sick for the last few weeks starting with a mild cold and now she had full blown bronchitis, that had her coughing and getting generally disorientated, during the speed-through. At one point, she even uttered:

*"I hate this (Cough)."*

She would make it through. When we got to the end, the amount of snaps and timing came into question, which left lots of people trying to yell over one another with their opinions. After setting for the final time and talking with an actor who felt like she was being yelled at, I was able to smooth it all over and everyone felt good going in. Everyone left except Dana who asked if she could do the meditation written into the script even though we hadn't discussed it since the first rehearsal.

*"We'll do it if you think it helps you."*

*"It's going to help me. **I want to do it.**"*

With that, Dana went back to change and Natalie and I made sure that we wouldn't open the doors until she was ready to go, even if that meant the doors opened a little late. I didn't think of this until writing this paper, but Dana's commitment to wanting to do the full script and doing it with a smile and genuine excitement put me at ease and let me know that we were in for something special.

The house opened at 7:05pm. Dana was in position, meditating and transforming the Pit from a dark theater to Limbo. The next 25 minutes were the most surprising rush of people I have ever seen. My blasts on Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and posters on campus had worked. I saw members of all four degrees from the Department of Theatre and Dance represented as well

as Dance minors. The entirety of the Performance faculty was there. I saw a mix of the cast member's friends and family, students looking for an INST event credit, my family, outside professors, and even friends I hadn't seen in over a year flood through the door. Within 15 minutes, the stage seating was full. After receiving a conch shell and flowers from my cast, I went to the light board to take a breath before the show. When I looked out to the crowd with a minute to go, I was left in awe. I had heard that when one cast member went to places and saw the sheer size of the crowd, she said:

*"Wow. I thought there would only be 20 people here."*

Honestly, so did I. Instead, I was looking out and when I faded the house lights down, there were almost 200 people in the theater.

I turned the house lights down after a signal and made my way to the lighting booth as the audience hushed. As my assistants hit the stage to do an introduction, my stomach started dancing with nerves. Fight or flight was kicking in hardcore for me. It's interesting. I have never been more nervous than waiting to hear my words and see my choreography in front of a packed crowd after nearly a year of buildup. After the house speech, Dana began. Calmly, methodically, and slowly building the delicate world that we had all found together. Then one by one everyone started filling the stage, waiting to be "given life" in the play. I cut the lights out at the proper time and when they came back on, I proceeded to spend the next 20-30 minutes doing a mixture of watching very, very, very carefully and not looking at all so I can listen to the dialogue like a radio play. The biggest concern I had was would the dialogue flow. After the initial scenes and listening to everyone flowing together, I could watch again and really feel the pulse of the room. People were breathing with the actors, leaning on the edge of their seats, and at certain moments, you can hear them audibly gasp. I also feared that a mime knife would get a laugh if someone had to pretend,

but the first stab between Abigail and Ophelia was met with several gasps and people moving to the edge of their seats. I felt the tears again as everyone gathered around Dana, putting the colors on and breathing. I felt like I could take a breath now. I had done it. People were clapping and standing for my best friends. They were the stars.

Walking out in front of a crowd completely standing up for the production was one of the most emotionally overwhelming moments of my life. I was near tears until I was quickly reminded that I needed to be ready for the talk back run by Dr. Glover. Taking my seat, we began and the most important visual for me was every single person was on the edge of their seat, raising their hands and agreeing or thinking about each and every single point that was being thrown out by other students, adults, and teachers. There were only two big questions that were answered in a thirty-minute time span and that made me happy because the discussion was so rich, alive, and had countering points. *Everyone* had an opinion. The first question was “Which moments captured your attention?”

*- The use of the movement counterparts*

*- Dana’s opening and closing monologue (both the movement and it symbolizes the vicious cycle that happens)*

*-When Olivia Crawford turned away from Dana (How we turn away from ourselves)*

*-When the two sisters (Claire and Nicole) fell (A part of Audrey and Chloe died)*

*-Tearing each other apart*

*-Emma twisting Abigail’s own words*

*-Audrey being accused for the first time (questioning if you are making the right choice)*

The most comforting thing about all of this was that all parts of the script (beginning, middle, and end) were found to have moments that captured their attentions. I had done my job. Every part was engaging. This was solidified by the majority of people chiming in and nodding yes when someone said that the story “commanded the audience to pay attention the whole time.”

The second question was always going to be my biggest fear. It’s a very vague question, but with this play, it was needed. “What is this play about?” What followed when Dr. Glover ask the question was chuckles from the majority of the audience. However, the chuckles quickly disappeared and everyone sat in contemplation. Dr. Glover invited the audience and the cast to speak on the question. The answers were varying, deep, well-articulated, and fascinating to digest for months after.

- *Abigail and how she is dealing with her emotions.*
- *What happens when you let fear creep in*
- *Be weary of the people who are supposed to help you (What’s really helping you?)*
- *No matter how unified you are, once something creeps in, it can tear everything apart.*
- *That everyone is tied together or tethered*
- *Difficulties that cause us to try and control our dreams (every character was a part of Abigail)*
- *Inside Out-esque, part of you can “ruin who you are”*
- *The power of corruption of the mind. “Everything can twist on itself.” “What can we actually control?”*
- *Fear as control.*
- *Do you have to act like a man to save the world?*
- *Do you have to be a superhero to save the world?*

*- Scrutiny of women because of everyone sitting in the round to face them.*

*- Abigail's dream and her lack of control over it (Mixture of very distinct and very ambiguous parts)*

*- When you scramble to keep/engineer a community of support.*

*- "It ties to the political world we live in." (Bowling/Surrendering to the machine)*

*- The different ways to give and receive love.*

After answering one final question and letting people know that this was inspired by a professional wrestler and seeing some jaws open, the talk back was over and I was swarmed by the whole crowd rushing to see me and my cast. I have never felt this type of love before. I have never felt like my words meant a lot, until that moment. 45 minutes later, everyone was gone. The only people left were Sally and myself. We stood there and I gave her a kiss on the cheek as I turned the lights off and walked into the Pit Lobby. Straight into another rehearsal.

## **REFLECTING**

I look back on the nearly two years of working on this play with immense pride. I was able to take a thought, go out, and actually do it. I had spent many late nights, revising, reading, revising again, choreographing, thinking, and dreaming about this show. I am now in New York City and I have written a tenth draft to clarify the relationship between Abigail, Emma, Audrey, and Chloe. I am trying to figure out ways to share this story with more people around the country and hopefully one day the world. This show gives me so much immense pride because we did something that was difficult. We balanced three mainstage performances, improv, Drag Show, classes, and other commitments to tell a powerful story that still has people talking. It was the first play in a while to feature only women and give everyone a chance to shine including Dance minors hungry for an opportunity to act. I am excited to see what this play will look like in five years. Will Abigail

escape her prison? Will Audrey have a happy ending? Who is Emma? I am hoping that this project and written component will serve as a template for future theatre students to create their own work within the Department. As I continue to submit my work to various theaters, universities, and festivals, nothing will ever replace the feeling of lightning in a bottle. I can now say I truly appreciate where I came from and who has taught me. By the time of this defense, I will have made my New York City debut as a playwright with the Manhattan Repertory Theatre on March 1<sup>st</sup>. The most important thing is I'm no longer afraid of my words. I am so excited to finally *use* them.

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## **PRODUCTION HISTORY**

### *FIRST READING in Campus Center Theatre (November 13, 2015)*

Sister Abigail – Lauren Kent  
Audrey – Sally Clark  
Emma – Kaylee Barrett  
Olivia – Grace Hoover  
Clara – Daria Redus  
Ophelia – Lauren DiMario  
Chloe – Kara Jobe

Photography – Evan Moore-Coll

### *SECOND READING in The Chapel (February 22, 2016)*

Abigail – Elise Woods  
Audrey – Kaylee Barrett  
Emma – Kara Jobe  
Olivia – Sally Clark  
Clara – Grace Hoover  
Ophelia – Kat Lee  
Chloe – Michaella Waickman

### *SPRING 2016 DANCE WORKSHOP in Campus Center Theatre (April 25, 2016)*

Abigail – Olivia Crawford and Kara Jobe (Spoken Word) & Dana Cullinane (Spoken Word)  
Audrey – Jenna Clark  
Emma – Rebecca Miklos  
Paige – Lauren Kent  
Clara – Michaella Waickman  
Ophelia – Abigail Isom & Kat Lee (Spoken Word)  
Chloe – Olivia Crago

Assistant Choreographer – Trey Plutnicki  
Photography – Evan Moore-Coll

### *PREMIERE in Campus Center Theatre (December 1, 2016)*

Abigail – Dana Cullinane (Spoken Word) & Olivia Crawford (Dance)  
Audrey – Caroline Kane (Spoken Word) & Nicole Gaydos (Dance)  
Emma – Kara Jobe (Spoken Word) & Olivia Crago (Dance)  
Paige – Sally Clark (Spoken Word) & Kaylee Barrett (Dance)  
Clara – Grace Hoover (Spoken Word) & Daria Redus (Dance)

Ophelia – Kat Lee (Spoken Word) & Amanda Sibert (Dance)  
Chloe – Lauren DiMario (Spoken Word) & Claire Sinard (Dance)

Stage Manager – Natalie Love  
Assistant Director – Nick Hahn  
Assistant Choreographer – Trey Plutnicki  
Costume Design – Allison Mogle  
Sound Design – Gunnar Schmidt  
Poster Design – Benjamin Folts  
Photography – Evan Moore-Coll

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