

THE EMOTIONAL EFFECT OF MUSICAL UNDERSCORING IN THE PLAY COLUMBINUS

by

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## **Abstract**

One of the most debated political topics in today's media is the prominence of school shootings. During a time of discourse, artists typically use this energy to enhance their work and create emotional pieces of art that cause audiences to think about these events. I chose to work with the play *columbinus* because I felt the story of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre is important and should still be told, but I also felt this story needed to be emotionally enhanced to reach a younger audience 19 years later. As a musical theatre major, I have a clear understanding of how music is able to impact a large group of people when used in the appropriate manner. Therefore, I felt as though musical underscoring would be a compelling vehicle to heighten the emotional impact of the show. I was able to test how musical underscoring at selected points felt in the context of the show through case study readings, where the results provided me with the final underscoring track list to be used in conjunction with a full production of the show at East Carolina University.

## **Artist's Statement**

I am a child of emergency services. My mother was an EMT before I was born, and my dad was a firefighter before he became the Associate Director of Emergency Services in Nash County. Tragedies, both natural and manmade, were not only normal to talk about in my home, but were common topics of interest. At age 12, I attended my first terrorism class taught by my dad and learned about events such as 9/11, the Oklahoma City Bombing, and school shootings. At that young age, I wondered how someone my age could get to a point where they were emotionally and physically able to kill people who were also my age. This has always been a

psychological curiosity of mine, so when the play *columbinus* by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli showed up in my search engine sophomore year, I was intrigued by the idea of a play that addresses the before, during, after, and reasoning of the Columbine High School massacre. After reading the play for the first time, I knew I wanted to be the person to bring this piece of art to Greenville.

Though this play is already emotionally impactful, I knew I could find a way to use my talents and knowledge to increase what has already been given to the show. However, I am not a professional acting major, and I have not taken a collegiate level directing class. Therefore, I had to look a little deeper to understand how I would be able to personally enhance this work. As a musical theatre major, I spend my school days analyzing musical numbers to clearly identify emotional cues that I can give to an audience in order to transport them into a theatrical world. Using the expanded idea of musical mapping, I realized that I could take songs and put them underneath scenes and action to create a heightened emotional impact. This would create underscoring, which is any type of music that plays underneath another event. This is how the entire conceptual idea of my senior honors project came to be.

### **Background: Theatrical Principles and Musical Mapping**

The impact of music in theatrical productions is seen in multiple ways; but in order to understand how music can affect theatre, a person must understand what makes theatre unique to begin with. Sanford Meisner, creator of the Meisner technique used by many actors, identifies theatre as the art of creating “the reality of doing” (Meisner 16). The “reality of doing” is a practice indicating that the purpose of theatre is not to act, but instead to live

realistically in the moment of the character. This is done by creating truthful moments that are believable not only by an audience, but also to the actors themselves. In order to create these moments, the actors must believe in the importance of what they are doing and how it fits in the world around them (Whyman 44). In order to create the importance and believability, an actor must understand the world around his or her character and grasp a sense of who their character is. This is where music can help guide an actor on the journey to creating a character. Music creates a sense of time and emotion that is understood by both the actor and the audience. As this atmosphere is established and presented, the emotional impact created as a mutual bond between actor and audience member increases due to a shared connection.

Once the basic principle of theatre is understood, one has to explore how music is able to enhance the general effects innately created through theatrical art. When studying musical theatre, an actor is given the training to help them understand that no part of music is wasted in a musical theatre show or song. Joe Deer talks about the idea of musical mapping, which is being able to find small moments in songs that give clues to the character's personality and movement (Deer 61). This is the idea that is expanded during the course of this project. By being able to find underscoring that coincide with the intended emotional response of the moment, we are able to not only help the actors to create a realistic world to live in and perform, but also draw the audience into the story in an emotionally visceral way.

### **Background: Columbine High School and *columbinus***

On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Dylan Bennet Klebold and Eric David Harris entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and began shooting at their classmates and teachers. They killed

twelve students and one teacher before killing themselves. This event was the first mass-media covered school shooting in America, and sparked the national epidemic of school shootings (Cullen 40-55). Because of the complexity of factors associated with the case (including bullying, video games, music, gun control loopholes, etc.), a lack of action was taken in preventing school shootings at the time, which continues to be a running theme in the present day. As of April 2018, there have been 20 school shootings in America since January 1st, 2018 that resulted in death or injury of multiple people (Mass Shootings). It is hard to argue that something needs to be done in order to prevent these types of tragedies from happening again, but it is hard for people to agree on what exactly needs to be done. The first step to change, however, is knowledge.

*columbinus* was written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli and made its world premiere on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005 through the United States Theatre Project. This play presents itself as a “theatrical discussion” of the events before, during, and after the Columbine High School massacre (Karam 3-5). The concept of the show is the idea of using various formats of scene work in order to tell a story about a high school. The beauty of this particular show is the fact that it highlights the idea that the event at Columbine High School could have happened at any high school in America. In act one, the show presents characters as stereotypes rather than named characters. These stereotypes, such as Jock, Perfect, and Rebel, are the types of teenagers seen in high schools. The story starts general, and as it progresses, takes a sharp turn for the specific as the two main characters shift from “Loner” and “Freak” into Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, respectively. The show not only tackles the problems and events of the shooting, but also common high school events, such as young love, bullying, and sexual assault.

Using a mix of vague concepts with hard reality, this show provides a well-rounded look into high schools and how quickly tragic events can occur in them.

### **Investigation Stage**

Once I decided to use music as underscoring to create a new and powerful emotional impact on the audience, I needed to decide where in the production underscoring would make the most sense. In order to accomplish this, I needed to meet with my team. My team consisted of myself, faculty mentor Aimee Radics from the School of Theatre and Dance, and fellow senior Theatre Arts major Matthew Reda, who I recruited as student director. As a team, we sat together, read the play, and looked for scenes and moments in the script that would benefit from musical underscoring. In this process, we looked for three key signs.

The first sign was a lack of dialogue in a scene. When a large amount of dialogue is present, this typically indicates that the scene contains a large amount of exposition, and therefore the audience needs to be focused on the words and messages coming from the actors. However, if dialogue is lacking, some additional aspect needs to be included in order to keep an audience's attention. The second sign we identified was a large amount of action. There are numerous scenes in theatre that provide an intimate setting where two characters are simply sitting and talking. These scenes do not require the addition of material in order for audiences to be engaged. However, when large amounts of action are present, actors typically need a driving force in order to motivate their doings. The final sign we looked for was the entering of another reality. In television and film, it is easy to recognize a shift into a dream world or the mind of a character due to the skills of editors. But in theatre, creative artists do

not have the option of editing, so the use of lighting and sound is combined in order to indicate to an audience that the show has entered into another reality.

After reading the script and looking for these three key factors, we were able to find eleven points in the show that were solid candidates for musical underscoring. This number later became twelve, as we found more effectiveness in splitting a particular music cue into two different sections. Once this process concluded, we began looking for songs that would compliment these moments in the show. To do this, we each compiled Spotify and YouTube playlists using our knowledge of particular genres to create a pool of music from which we could pick. Some categories included 90's Pop, Songs Written For/About Columbine, Tension Music, and Public Domain Theme Music. Once my team and I compiled these songs, we began to pick the music that we felt fit each scene and moment most appropriately.

In order to test our findings, we used theatrical readings based on a case study format. Every three weeks during the investigation process, we gathered a group of actors together to read the play while my team played the musical underscoring we picked for that reading. The participants were all student actors at East Carolina University between the ages of 18 and 24. Most actors were new to each reading; however, we did allow two participants to read a second time due to limitations in our pull of possible participants. Each reading contained eight actors who were each assigned one of the characters from the show ahead of time.

Once the two hour reading concluded, the participants were given a survey to complete before leaving the room. This survey asked the participants to rate each underscoring on a scale of one to six in two categories: appropriateness and emotional impact. Our control for this



investigation was the use of the Columbine 911 call as one of the underscorings. Our reasoning behind this choice was the fact that this particular underscoring would always create a perfect score from the audience. It was perfectly appropriate because it was written in the script for it to exist, but it was also the most emotionally impactful because it was the one underscoring that blurred the lines of theatricality and reality for the actors. Because of this, actors would be able to gauge the rest of their scores based on how they felt compared to a perfect score.

Once these surveys were collected, I averaged the scores separately from the two categories, and then averaged the two master scores together to give each underscoring a “final score.” These scores, as well as the comments left by the actors, were compiled into a single document that was presented to the research team the following Tuesday after a reading (Appendix A). This process was completed a total of three times over the course of the Fall 2017 semester, and the results created a completed underscoring list taken from the highest scoring musical excerpts from all three readings (Appendix B).

### **Production Stage**

From the beginning of my time with *columbinus*, I knew I wanted to stage a production of the show at East Carolina University. Once we completed investigation on our study, we felt as though this would be the perfect time to move forward with a production in the spring of 2018. I applied to 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players, a student-run theatre organization on campus, for them to assist me in producing this show on campus through location and technical assistance. I also applied to and received an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Award to financially support the show. Combined with 5<sup>th</sup> Street Players and my student director, we held auditions

for the show on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018. We had a total of 18 actors audition for the 8 roles in the show. One of the fascinating parts of our casting was the ratio of theatre majors to non-theatre majors. Out of the 8 actors chosen, 3 of them were non-theatre majors with majors ranging from Biology to Information Technology. This provided a chance to work with new and untrained actors who were able to give a raw approach to raw characters.

Rehearsals began after spring break on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018. We ran into a few challenges on this production from the very beginning. Our rehearsal space was almost half the size of the space of our assigned performance space. This caused spacing issues due to discrepancies between areas. We were also sharing an actor with another production that took a slight precedence over ours. Though he came back into rehearsals prepared, his absence prevented us from being able to advance scenes early in the process. During the final weeks, our production team realized we were behind schedule and had to fight with various deadlines such as Amazon deliveries and the closing of other shows in the School of Theatre and Dance.

However, our cast and team worked through the difficulties and created a beautiful show that captivated audiences. This was able to happen because of dedicated actors who were ready to tackle the harsh subject matter for the purposes of education. The show was performed on April 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Messick Theatre Arts Center (Appendix C).

### **Closing**

There are many stories in this world that deserve to be told in any form available. I personally believe that theatre is one of the most impactful means of educating an audience and bringing them into a story. In order for a story to be effectively told, however, an audience

has to be emotionally invited into a production. Through this research, I learned how music is able to create a heightened emotional response, and used this information to create a qualitative method of sound design. I have been able to show this 19-year-old story to a group of college students and parents who are impacted by the aftermath of the Columbine High School massacre each day. Though my research is not world changing, my work did change the lives of the audience members who were left impacted by the story presented, and I feel honored that my research was able to leave that type of visceral impact on any amount of people.

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