

Anna Rebek's GASP! Thesis

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Robert O'Hara visited us our first year during a Visiting Artists class. During his interview with Anne, he told the story of how he wrote his own thesis, and how it became a signature piece for him. All the lights in my head went ON. I knew from then I wanted a non-traditional approach to my thesis, meaning, I knew I didn't want to re-engage a chestnut level piece. So many of our explorations as students fall into the category of new work development, that I wanted badly to see how that could work out with a more non-academic, voluntary team.

I love world building; new worlds with surprising and prismatic features. I love magic and mystery and the feeling of collective fear when you're sitting among hundreds of people. I called it *GASP!* originally because I love our innate, physiological response to horror. I wanted to create my own world and transport the audience somewhere they'd never dreamt of going.

When I was very little, I was fascinated by this VHS video we had of the making of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. This mini-documentary started with the full length music video- but then took you behind the scenes to see the zombies getting into make-up, them learning the choreography, how they cast the female lead and how Michael showed everyone up with his dancing. I was struck with how many strong and *different* feelings I had right next to each other watching this horror unwrap itself. There was humor, there was so much levity on the set. I loved seeing both the "final product" and was fascinated by how it was built. Part of my adventure with my thesis was unpacking horror as a genre and seeing how it fit around moments of grief and laughter during the show internally. Also, part of my effort here in this paper is to give you the thriller esque behind-the scenes version.

There were two articles that helped me define a premise to answer the core questions (both articles are linked in the appendix for reference):

- Can writing horror stories reveal things about ourselves we might not know?
- Once we do know what our stories are telling us, can we learn from them and overcome our fears?
- What does horror look like to us now that our times are harrowing?
- Could there be another dimension hovering right near ours? If so what qualities of ours would it awaken when we met it?
- How do our beliefs change our ability to communicate?

- How do we honor audiences with their own stories to complete the cycle of audience ownership in the piece when they go to the theatre?

Structurally I owe much to Lovecraft for the past sequences. He's a suspicious mentor because of some really nasty personal opinions he had about race and gender, but I didn't know that when I fell in love with him, when I was reading his stories with my dad. All I knew was that he was the perfect blend of my creepy weird creative aesthetic and my father's endless pursuit of scientific discovery. He was a combined frontier for us. So this piece is also an ode to my dad, and our bond over Lovecraft. Structurally, Lovecraft gave early conversations with Martin Murray (playwriting 2020) somewhere to begin.

When I originally was spinning my wheels over what the piece could be, Martin and I had found we had a similar love for Lovecraft and he had agreed to adapt one of Lovecraft's stories for the Abigail timeline of events (this proved to be optimistic; due to his fall internships, he said he had to withdraw from the project). But what we had discussed stayed with me. We had spoken about the tiered nature of Lovecraft's stories, where a new scholar pours into their study until a relic unfolds new realms from a time past, engaging past with present.

Martin originally sent me a handful of "emails" from Abigail. There was a brilliant meta quality to them, Abigail he had cast as my "dramaturg" who was falling into the rabbit hole of research for my "thesis." These periodic check-ins became the basis for the journal entries Abigail includes in the final script. I just needed her portion, by that time, to live not in the present day but in the past, and I was reluctant to be mentioned in my own project. I thought it was too meta so I transferred this idea into journal entries. The specific qualities that drew both Martin and myself to Lovecraft's work (for example, a student falling into obsession with their ancient study), are pretty standard to the cosmic horror genre, which has a set of steps that draw a normal world closer to an abnormal one.

Once I knew the weaving of the stories fell to me alone when the playwrights withdrew in December, I found myself drawing from my own experiences in life; I've heard this is an early writer's burden. Pouring myself into the writing of a play I never really intended to write brings up all kinds of my own experiences and neuroses. I found myself writing out conversations I'd had, then further in, arguments I'd had, then finally, deep cut memories of betrayal

(or what I label as that now). It is an exercise in perseverance to write a show, any show. As an act of self-exploration it snuck up on me. As with writing plays, as I've experienced, we stay haunted by words that float around us in our past. I never wanted the show to just be my demons in a bag, but that was part of my overall exploration. But up there with my nightmares I originally wanted playwrights from the program and did include the actor/writers from the class, to have other voices up on stage with mine. This is the kind of inclusive theatre I believe we need now.

Positioning myself as an authority on the horror genre for the class meant creating a master list of films to watch and books to read so that I would be prepared on the subject. There were recent pop-culture horror movies I needed to see to be able to bring those insights into the room. I also, as a Lovecraft fan, read the nasty racist and sexist letters of his diary, just to make sure I had a complete picture of him when I brought his work into the room. I started the whole process by asking people how they felt about Horror.

Lovecraft and the Weird

I have done more reading and writing during my time at Columbia than I have in a decade. Three plays a week, sometimes a book thrown in for good measure, why not? It has helped fill in my porous knowledge of theatre, and even how my mind functions, too. My belief is that these practices have power to open our minds and hearts to other worlds (I also believe this about theatre, of course). Lovecraft is one author whose language never fails to transport me to a strange and indescribably ancient world. His language is hypnotic in that way.

“I have dwelt ever in realms apart from the visible world; spending my youth and adolescence in ancient and little-known books, and in roaming the fields and groves of the region near my ancestral home. I do not think that what I read in these books or saw in these fields and groves was exactly what other boys read and saw there...” (H.P. Lovecraft).

I've often felt that my imagination is the egress between this world and the next. Being a theatre maker you are conjuring from all the recesses of your experience- but from where does the inspiration come? I've often felt like a conduit between worlds, one being reality, and the other being theatrical worlds, but the shape and color of the world could be tinted by other planes of

reality, how are we to know? “Fantasy is set in worlds that are entirely different from ours...locationally and temporally distant from ours. The weird, by contrast, is notable for the way in which it opens up an *egress* between this world and others”(p.19, see appendix 2). Like Lovecraft and the weird, I wanted the stable, or entry world, to be recognizable- to be very real in contrast to the supernatural elements.

“The genres of horror, gothic, terror, and the uncanny found on screen and in literature can also help us understand uncomfortable truths and deal with fear of the unknown or the scariest monster of all—humans gone bad.” - (Laurie Kaiser, Buffalo State Experts: Horror Speaks to societal Truths, Nov, 2019, see appendix for link). Whatever other uncomfortable truths there are in the stories, this quote touches on one of the biggest fears that was a theme in the script, dealing with the unknown. From there I love that the quote turns the mirror back onto us, can we turn bad as he suggests? Can anyone have that capacity inside of them? Having the final monster be built with the bodies of the 7 actors on stage was an opportunity to ask this question, how did we all build the monster on the other side?

One of the biggest lessons learned from the workshop production was to eliminate “other rooms” and to focus the action completely in the library setting. This choice was very supported by my dramaturg Emily, as it would cut down on transition time, and add to the compelling power of unity of space for the final piece. So we simplified “Bloomingdale campus” down to just the library and the ancient space beneath for the finale/membrane sequences at the end of each act.

“In Siehnel’s research, she has addressed how the nineteenth-century slave plantation is another place of horror, which is reimagined in more contemporary works such as Octavia Butler’s neo-slave narrative sci-fi novel *Kindred*.(Laurie Kaiser, Buffalo State Experts: Horror Speaks to societal Truths, Nov, 2019).

The asylum is a constant in horror literature, being the site of such squandered life and prehistoric medical treatments. So one specific question I was interested in was : *Does an asylum that has become a library still hold its horrifying past underneath? My answer was YES.*

Columbia too has many secrets buried and many voices gone unheard, so therefore, does the Bloomingdale campus.

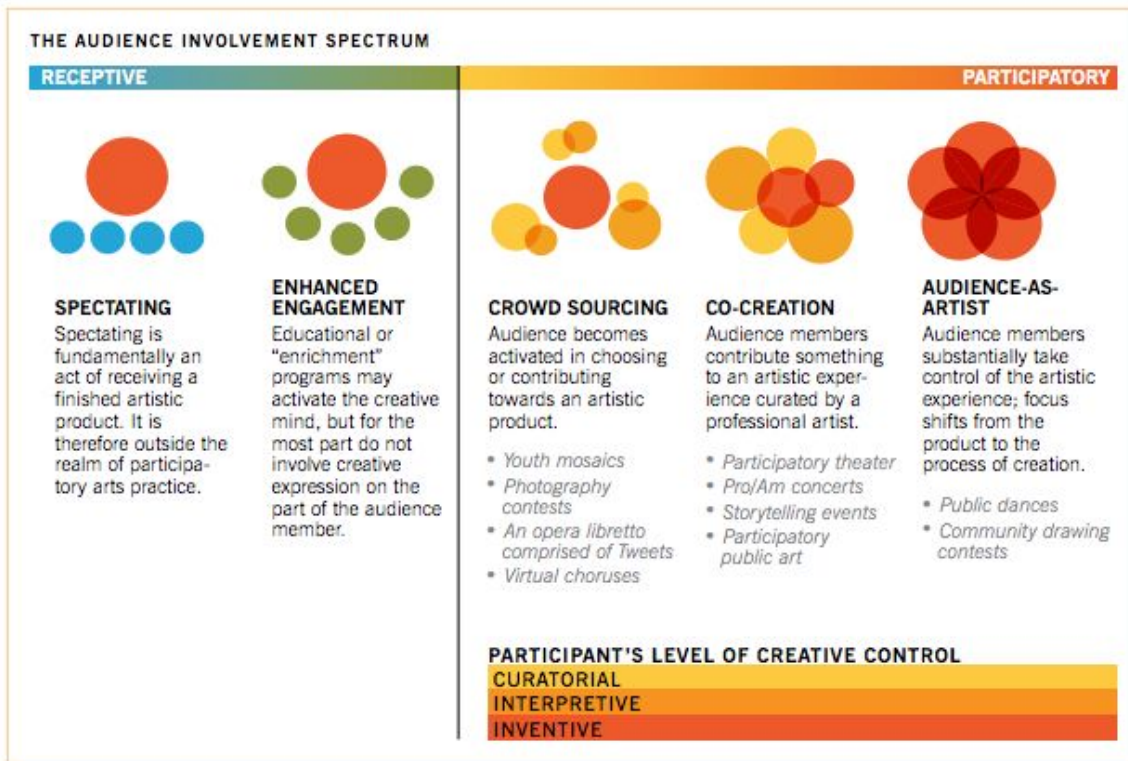
“a new term—neo-horror—which is more intellectual than in the past. In the neo-horror genre, filmmakers address societal problems like racism, he said, pointing to Peele’s 2017 critically acclaimed film *Get Out*.(Laurie Kaiser, Buffalo State Experts: Horror Speaks to societal Truths, Nov, 2019).

Emily Boyd Dahab, my dramaturg, contacted me with an idea that echoed my feeling totally after the project had its run, and it helped me articulate what my intention had been all along- as dramaturgs are *splendid* at doing. She told me about how, in her research for her thesis, theatres are looking for a way to enhance plays they nurture from the community. The problem is, as she told me, that these pieces tend to be beginner material and the programs don’t have the long term development strategies to get them evolved enough for mainstage production. So they remain in community engagement spaces but don’t tie into the regular season. Emily’s suggestion was that I could pitch *GASP!* as a professional level script with the stories as flexible pieces that are contributed anew by different writer’s rooms anywhere.

GASP! Is in many ways my answer to the question of how to engage community artists in a long term plan that cultivates their writing, crafts the script around community performers, and finally weaves it together and upgrades the flow of everything into a professional production. How can we bring out true and shimmering stories from anyone out there and put them in a crown? (The stories being the “jewels of the crown” of *GASP!* came to be one of my favorite analogies, apologies).

Emily’s research for her thesis showed me an article that explained what audiences are most interested in from their theatre experiences.

Here is a graph from the Arts Engagement Research of the James Irvine Foundation from October, 2011 (See appendix 1 for link to full report).



According to this graph my piece *GASP!* would qualify as a co-creative piece, which, referring to the color key at the bottom of the graph is both an inventive and interpretive collaborative pursuit. Having worked for two semesters with other artists to bring their works to life during collaboration, I felt I had a good handle on how to be respectful of the participants as artists in maintaining the integrity of their stories.

According to this comprehensive study, “increasingly, Americans want to meet the people who make our products, share in the work of the makers and make things ourselves...In cities and towns across the United States, participatory arts practice is gaining recognition as an important aspect of quality of life and a means of building civic identity and communal meaning” (p.7).

I’ve found it extremely beneficial that during my education as a director in the program I was introduced to hundreds of young actors in New York City. These actors have given me job opportunities, they’ve supported me in my growth as a director, and they’ve been so dedicated to their craft as we worked together over the years. I wanted to celebrate these people who had given me so much

time and talent, although they're not part of Columbia's generative artists. Although my rooms are always inclusive, these folks still have to pass through doors with my card key, or put their name on a list, or sign in with ID's. Columbia is an insular cell that doesn't always seem welcoming to those who aren't part of it's community. I've experienced this even as a member. So I wanted to keep my doors open for wherever talent to pour in, and trust that my thesis was in their hands somehow.

“If participatory arts practice lies outside of your organization's mission and value system, why is that? Is it intentional, presumed or unintentional? Whatever your answers to these questions, the thought process is healthy. Exciting new partnerships and programs can emerge from a dialogue between professional and community artists, audiences, board members and staff about an organization's place in the arts ecosystem” (p.9). Ecosystem is a wonderful world for Columbia to think about theatrically in relation to its outer spheres in Harlem. There are stigmas that form and elitism can crystallize so fast in these creative hot-bed environments internally, that bridging the gap between those in the school and writers and creatives outside of the school is really an opportunity I craved and was extremely rewarded from.

So what if they're amateurs. “D. Garth Taylor analyzes the correlation between amateur, informal arts practices and neighborhood stability and improvement in Chicago. According to Taylor, “There is a significant correlation between the amount of amateur, informal arts activity and neighborhood stability and/or improvement. This correlation is evidence of magnetization — an increase in the desirability, commitment, social integration and quality of life in a community area” (p.10). It has certainly enhanced my sense of community, and given me a much needed foothold in the theatrical system of NYC at large to adopt a system of values where everyone's voice is treated as important.

For writing my final script I had a huge jump start with all my beautiful stories and a promise to these actors I always knew I'd keep- which was that, no matter what, I would have an original piece that had gone through 6 months of trials so it could be a fully polished thesis.

The Chronology:

From this point forward I'm going to take you step-by-step through the process of making *GASP!* The discussions began May/June of 2019, but the research phase and writing class spanned September/October of 2019.

Why a Horror at Columbia?

There have been times when Horror made its home at Columbia. The size of one individual compared to an institution can be overwhelming. Starting with my dig for when the student voices were up in arms against the institution. This is the scene that introduces Abigail. These historical impressions of racism on campus during the late sixties, right at the peak of the collusion around the Vietnam War, where I felt there was echoing of our times with our current administration. The outright lies disseminated then drowned out the voices of the student body when there was a prospect of building a community center that only let in the surrounding Harlem on the bottom floor.

Knowing and learning about “matress girl” just a few years ago as an undergrad, who took her mattress (on which she had reported a sexual assault to the Columbia authorities) to every class she had when she received no justice. This is also a horror story from Columbia.

How far back does this lineage go? I went to find the oldest building on campus, and the only one that actually held patients back when Columbia was Bloomingdale Asylum; Buell Hall.

“Like all such institutions, its history was a checkered one: on the one hand, some literature hails its humane modern methods, while other writers point to the inevitable abuses that were likely to occur in and around such a facility. Modern and postmodern scholarship has become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which institutions of involuntary incarceration and definitions of mental illness have functioned as expressions of deeper societal and cultural issues, and so it is surprising, perhaps, that the Bloomingdale has not yet been the subject of a contemporary monograph” (Bob Scott, *Breaking the Code*, June 18, 2013, See appendix).



There are now some journalism and french classes and department offices there, and an art gallery that wraps around its first floor. The oldest looking piece that I could find was a ventilation grate that looked ancient and as if it had been painted over a thousand times. I wondered what voices might have echoed through the vent from times past; I put my ear to it.

When I went upstairs to poke around I found a generous office guy he said kindly, “no, no ghosts that I know of...” and that was it. Even though I didn’t feel changed leaving, I did look back while walking away and hope some inspiration stowed away in my handbag at least. Although I didn’t want to call the school “Columbia” in the script, and instead I chose the name of the asylum for the campus in the story “Bloomingdale,” I was hoping some of the audience might know about the history of Columbia as an asylum.

Research of Columbia History

As many of us say we will and never do, I went to see Nancy Friedland, our theatre librarian in Butler Library. I explained I was interested in the history of the Bloomingdale asylum era of Columbia, as well as other eras in which women were potentially maltreated or pushed aside. Nancy led me to the perfect online solution. She told me there was a man named Bob Scott who she’d assisted on this very historical project and who really “fell down the rabbit hole” and created an archive so easy to navigate that my entire curiosity would easily be satisfied by his extended research. She was right.

Here is the site where I was able to get specific about crafting the characters from the deeper past, meaning, the coven.

Another helpful addition to my own reading list came from Emily asking a friend of hers who is deeply entrenched in the horror genre professionally (See Appendix for excerpt from email).

The Tunnel System

Finding out Columbia had a vast system of interweaving tunnels underneath gave me a great idea of how to connect the world of academia “above” to an ancient underworld “below.” I wanted a reliable system of movement (footpath) to lead from one world to the other. In the final show, I used the left passage on the upper level to serve as the physical conduit between the worlds- the track starting on stage in the library, up the ladder, then down around through the audience bank back down into the blue LED world. The anatomy of the flexible space theatre allowed for this to work nicely, if not visible equally to each audience bank, or at least to the majority. The symbolic reference to these two worlds colliding was the Gate structure suspended from the upper level, and also featured on the poster (both design elements will be discussed later).

So why do we need egresses to other worlds now? Visiting another world gives us perspective on our own. During this political administration, I’ve felt like I was watching some other outcome, some alternate nightmare version of reality manifest before my very eyes. As the emergence of climate change continues to be a disaster we remain blinded to, as the rates of hate crimes go up between different factions nationwide, as this administration downplays the destructive and proven dangers of transmission of COVID-19, I wonder which world is closer to fact- this one, or the ones I can create onstage.

The GASP! Writer’s Room

I knew I wanted to somehow feature local writers. I figured a director’s thesis was a good means to try some material and celebrate the act of theatre collaboration. So I decided to host a horror writing class this past fall, and I did. Every week each of the ten writers submitted five pages - dialogue, a myth or even true events - but all under the umbrella of practicing the horror genre

(and our writing overall in the meantime). It was GREAT to have deadlines every week for me also, to start workshopping some character ideas in the room.

Recruiting interested writers began with my actors rolodex. In the end I had about 16 participants that varied from week to week to about 8 present every class with their story assignments written. The stories were due by 5 pm Friday, and I would head over to the library and print copies for all to share at class from 6-10 pm on campus. I did this for 7 weeks.

Here is an example of a Saturday email I sent out every week at midnight (to be creepy) to announce the coming week's assignment.



Anna Rebek <anna.rebek@gmail.com>

Sat, Oct 12, 2019, 11:51 PM

to anna, me, Taeuk, bcc: John, bcc: pawact, bcc: Megan, bcc: Joyce, bcc: Emily, bcc: KATRINA, bcc: Isaac, bcc: Pie, bcc: N

Hello Midnight Saturday Evening Gasplans

A fabulous evening of creepy stories was had last night in the dusky, forgotten corner of Watson.

Truly amazing work you're all doing-adopting stories, adding such **bold twists!**

Now there's now a whole new bushel of places I'll be nervous in forever: creaky old ships, the vet hospital, coffee shops, the subway, contests, inside a mask, camping, my own bedroom. Jeez Louise!

I can't tell you how helpful it is to have you all as **readers** as well. Its wonderful to see these on their feet; amazing how much is conveyed even via cold read. Thanks to you guys.

NEXT WEEK'S Assignment

We can get *everybody* on the same page with this one (our 4th class already, half done? I can't believe it). EVEN if you've never attended, you are still welcome, even if you can't do the writing, you are welcome- but if you want a swing at it- this is a great week to jump in. Full stories, with beginning (strong setting), some dialogue, and a conclusion, between 7 and 10 minutes long. That's it. DO your THING! As always, due by midnight this Thursday.

This week's reading is about our last discussion, believing (or not) in **ghosts**. It is maybe my favorite reading for this class. It is *The Show* by Priya Sharma. Because we're experimenting with layers of writing, reading, theatre, etc- this story does an excellent job of those multiple worlds colliding.

I cannot wait to hold these black muffins in my hands next week. Also **Marty** and **Pie** have a wonderful time in China- thank you so much- I'll be in touch!

Enjoy your evening everyone! **Howl at the mooooooon** 🌑

-Anna

Every week, along with the writing prompt, I would include a diverse selection of horror stories. The one I included here by Priya Sharma is attached in the appendix for the reader's reference. I also deeply considered the tone of the emails. As emails for a writing class, I took extra time crafting them, being deliberate with my descriptions and inclusivity, and making them visually engaging with color and emojis. I also included my sincere gratitude often. One

book in particular featured in our readings - an anthology of horror stories written by people of color called Nightmare Magazine (POC Destroy Horror! special issue, see appendix).

Participants:

Adam Parker

Ahkai Franklin

Megan Jeanette Smith ☒

Hannah Kloepfer ☒

Benjamin Dworkin

Carter Horton ☒

Chima Chikazunga ☒

Isaac Beauchamp*

Paul Weissman* ☒

Kimberly David* ☒

Katrina Phillip ☒

Emily Caffery* ☒

Martin Murray

Charlette Renualt

*Appeared in the final production of GASP!

Wrote a story that was featured in the final draft ☒.

These two images give a sense of the kind of adventure we had reading stories in the room every Friday night from 6-10 for 7 weeks. It was a very basic set up, we each had 20 minutes to read and discuss the 5 page stories every week. The writers could cast whoever they wanted to read for their characters and then hang out on one side of the room with myself as we watched the actors on the other side of the room make the story come to life.



Pictured above from Left to Right: Ahkai Franklin, Anna Rebek, Chima Chikazunga, Adam Parker, Emily Caffery, Isaac Beauchamp, Paul Weissman, Benjamin Dworkin.

One of the pre-requisites for the audition process had been that everyone that participated in the class identify as both a writer and an actor, so everyone could bring both talents into the room and be engaged. For myself, I would bring in 5 pages of material developing characters, or using discussions from class and weaving them into dialogue (the formal analysis version of which ended up being a main premise later). The first assignment was 5 pages that created an “atmosphere.” Most of the assignments handed in were prose and had sinister qualities- which were beautiful. Those introductions then went to other writers for week 2’s assignment: to write part 2- which was to be dialogue focused, but follow from the atmosphere and characters created by the original writer. Week three, same deal, a switching of hands- the third person had to “complete” the horror story however they saw fit. This Frankenstein-like exercise really helped bond the class together, as we had to discuss the tone and specific intention of each writer to remain loyal to their work, then carry it forward.

After we had all become pretty bonded by the 4 weeks above, on week five I changed the focus of the assignment slightly to inspire the writers to deliver a more personal story. A brand new one of their own choosing. I asked them (this “assignment” became one in the final script of the class) to write about a personal experience, or memory that they would classify as horrific; something that has stayed with them and haunts them even now. I wanted to see how this changed the voice behind their written stories, to have it come from a place of truth. I also was careful and urged them to choose an event that felt safe for them to relate to the room, or even to an audience of strangers, eventually.

The stories that were yielded that week were extremely powerful. In particular 3 women wrote about their personal experiences; one wrote about rape, another about an early S & M friendship, and one who had been scarred by a school shooting event on her campus. These three stories made it into the final script, they fascinated me. First, because of the bravery of the women who shared them, and second, the psychological nature of fear leaving its imprint and how it stays with us, molding us into different versions of ourselves. This sparked my interest in basing the class in the analysis part of the writing. Why do we write the stories that come out of us, fiction or no? This was a question I found interesting enough to base the modern day class upon; it wasn’t just about writing the stories, but *how* our experiences have shaped us and cause us

to hold onto fears that continue to manifest and potentially keep us from evolving in our current relationships.

In the final class, I brought a bunch of goodies and led the room through some visualization exercises to generate beginnings to other works, perhaps a new play.

Class “recital” in Dixon Place Lounge



I created a program and arrived early to set up the little cabaret seating area for our staged reading of the stories those in the class wanted to read. Many wanted to read their own stories. The small evening was a full house of about 16. This was a nice way to reward the performer side of the writers, especially for those who couldn't continue to commit to the project long term.

From Left to Right, Katrina Phillip, Emily Caffery, Carter Horton, Paul Weissman*
Wrote stories and appeared in the final production of GASP!

Selected Stories for the Final Script

Act 1

“Ice Cream Truck” by Kimberly David

A young boy greedy for ice cream takes the last ride of his life when an ice cream truck girl decides he's her next victim.

“The Demons with Me” by Megan Jeanette Smith

A woman tells the true story of how she was sexually assaulted during her first sexual encounter, which leads her to believe that, without God, she would be overcome by demons.

“Plucked to death” by Hannah Kloepfer

On a sexy fourth date at her place, a young woman discovers an invasion of small black hairs on her chin line, forcing her to panic and battle it out with tweezers in her bathroom secretly.

“Korean Myth of Creation” adapted by Ian Lim & Anna Rebek

The prayers of a bear and a tiger are answered when they’re given a fasting diet to be transformed into humans by the divine king Hwanung. When the tiger fails, it’s the bear that becomes the mother of all people.

Act 2

“Campus nightmare” by Emily Caffery

A young woman is traumatized by an on campus shooting at her school, leading her to always question the safety bubble around her and have nightmares and paranoid thoughts permanently.

“The Easter Dress” by Katrina Phillip

A grown woman reflects on her first childhood “friend”; a fiendish soul named Danny Morton who subjected her to bouts of peeing and bullied her with animal torture until she kicked him in the nuts.

“Francine & Lou” Part 1 by Chima Chikazunga, Part 2 by Carter Horton

A ghostwriter arrives at the home of an illustrious elderly woman to tell her story, but finds out he’s really the next lunch for her female workshop cult.

“My Shitty Life” by Paul Weissman

A middle aged father describes a beautiful life where the family is perfect, then wakes up to his reality; his life is a wreck and he’d rather sew his own mouth shut than keep hurting people by saying the wrong thing.

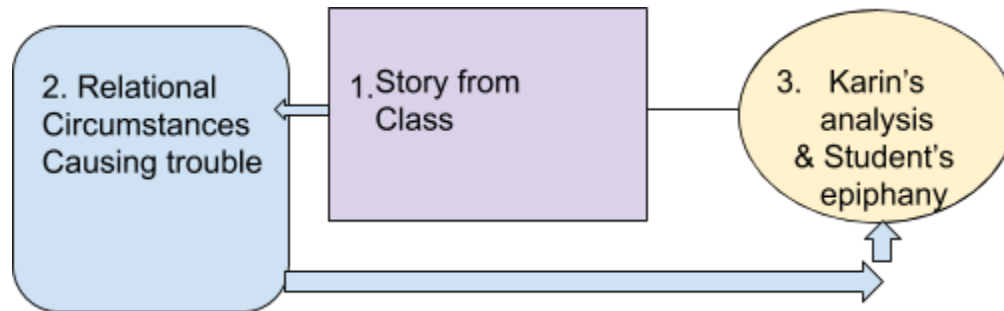
All of the stories retained over 90% of their original shape and form. There were edits that Emily and I felt made some structurally stronger so they were rearranged but even then with deference to the original text.

Sewing the story together

I didn’t want the connective tissue of the story to seem overtly secondary to the stories collected from the writing class, which were indeed the jewels of the crown. I needed the audience to care about nine members of a horror class individually, and how their stories could uncover opportunities for their personal growth. I needed them to care about this question:

Why do we develop the scary stories that come out of us? What desires and fears are encoded into these stories about ourselves?

The basic structure plan for each story to push forward the class agenda in the present was simple from left to right:



However, to create this, I had to retro-fit the circumstances to the stories, because those were the components I decided on first from the class. I decided on circumstances and characters that could be facing big changes, then considered the stories and the voices they needed to belong to (in this case knowing the writers themselves and having spent time with them helped very much define the voices carrying their stories). The third step would be to draft a possible analysis that could fit within a bite-size therapy template and then, finally, run it by my therapist. This was the system, or mechanism of the class. It was the motor. I had to believe our interior selves and uncovering them through horror was interesting enough to hold for 9 stories. At least I knew I'd have to stage the hell out of them.

This way I had to establish the individuals in the room FAST, and lay out their interpersonal dirty laundry right away.

Different ways of using Language as a Theme

The coven speaking in a version of verse, with alliterations and rhymes to keep their triptych feeling like three limbs of the same being.

Language can break down into instinct and our connectedness to our instinctual self is the core of our true power.

Writing for Abigail

Since I had left these “journal entries” free for Martin Murray (playwriting 2020) to write while abroad, I had to hustle to sew something together for Abigail for the workshop production. Emily Caffery who played Abigail had been in the writer’s room from the beginning and had read Martin’s “emails” and as I have worked with her through 3 productions at this point (The fool in my King Lear; Singer from MARAT/SADE; Antonio in The Tempest) I knew she would work hard and grow from this character.

I hatched a plan: Abigail as a college student, we knew that already, but in this version she would be researching the secret history of “Bloomington Campus.”

This gave me an opportunity to dig deep into the historical data about Columbia, and since I knew the Coven would be her foil group, it gave me a chance to see if original music could work as a vehicle for that layer of history in the asylum. I initiated the idea with my composer from MARAT/SADE, a brilliant man named Michael Wysong, and he was interested in writing this one musical number for the project, and potentially being more involved with GASP! for the final thesis production.

Michael wrote a wonderful waltz to introduce the women of the Coven, formerly asylum patients but now ghosts lingering on campus (they were given actual names I had found and matched with entries about their harrowing treatments). In the end this “musical test” was super informative. It showed me that tonally, the musical number didn’t vibe with the rest of the world I had built. But it had given the coven a great introduction to their characters and a sample of how it was to work together with elaborate choreography.

GASP! Workshop Production CAST

Faith Connor	Karin*
Emily Caffery	Abigail*
Mayelin Geraldino	Gina*
Jumaane Askew	Ace*
Rachael Biddle	Brooke
Stephanie Litchfield	Peyton*
Rebecca Werner	Coven*
Maureen O'Boyle	Coven*
John DeFillipo	Julius Chambers
Paul Weissman	Doug*
Azad Fakhari	Reza*
Kimberly David	Tracy*
Marina Mikhailovna	Tunde/Coven*
Jessica Chang	Naomi*
Ian Lim	Miles*



**These actors returned to play these roles in the final show as well as the workshop.*

The very first thing I required of the actors for this piece was an understanding that the project was a long haul. From the opening auditions in September, for the class full of writers/actors, up to the rehearsal at Nash, there were about 6 months of partial or full commitment to the project. I had already secured the recital space at Dixon, and the mainstage for our December 18th show, so the actors were aware of the timelines I had to work within.

Although I had sent a list of my favorite stories from the class every week, I ended up having to cast with a very bare bones script. At that time, the playwrights were in China and I wasn't receiving pages, so I had to rely on studying the people that came through my door.

During the course of this program I've worked with hundreds of mostly young actors with varying levels of craft, but beautiful levels of talent. I admire their tenacity and their willingness to dive deep into new scary choices without overthinking, without grace, and their humanity and bravery inspire me. I wanted to give many actors some thick roles, some serious text to wrestle with and push forward. My writing needed their input as specific character voices, and they needed me to make their story arc solid. I believe that my

fundamental impulse to showcase the specific strengths of an actor creates a healthy place for them to grow from. They've helped me carve the story.

I spent time recruiting a cast that was representative of a world I'd like to live in, where everyone gets a voice. I feel very strongly about being open and affirming and including people with all levels of ability.

Social and political relationships between Peyton and Abigail: Although they are from different eras, they display some similar characteristics as we get to know them. They are both activists of their time, forward thinking, and deeply impacted by the pain they see in the suffering around the world. They're woke. They are dealing with being misunderstood and unheard.

With Peyton in the modern world, she aligns herself with the struggles of women in the world through reading.

Race in GASP!

The modern day includes people of color, whereas the scenes from the past have only all white women. I wanted to draw attention to the fact that such environments were scarcely populated even by white women back then.

The modern day room has mostly people of color. I cast one american-taiwanese woman, a Korean man, two black women, an Iranian man, and a black man who identifies as gay. I wanted to show the diverse world we live in - in all of its inclusive glory! Race wasn't a topic that came up in the dialogue, but it was a concept I felt very strongly and intentionally about when it came to casting.

Discerning qualities Necessary in the Actors

Although this was a non-traditional casting process, in that I had only sketches of the characters outlined when I hosted people to audition, I am still able to discern the qualities that would create a diverse and hard-working cast. Here is a graph of the qualities I most prized in each character, and what performative qualities would fit those needs. I also was particular to the vocal

quality of each actor, knowing that Lenfest is a space that doesn't feature the human voice kindly.

CHARACTER/ Name	ACTING NEEDS	QUALITIES THEY SHOWED AUDITIONING
Abigail 1969 Academic Emily Caffery	Versatile, physically flexible advanced, sensitive, classy, academic, strong and expressive vocal qualities	*worked with her before Very hardworking Delicate nature Is a singer, and has strong vocal carry
Karin+(more below) Classroom Teacher Faith Connor	Generous, composed, great in confrontation, strong leader, engaging vocal instrument, has internal motor/fire	Educated, formal, extremely gracious, graceful, lovely. Needed more <i>fire</i> - thought I could blow on it
Peyton The chosen One from Modern Day Stephanie Litchfield	Physical transformation into an awkward high schooler, deep sensitivity, masked frustration with sister/father	*worked with her before Kindness, versatility, great monologue technique, groundedness in her truth
Brooke The Bitchy sister Nadia Diamond	Beautiful, "popular", uninhibited speech and movement, free to crush whatever she sees as underfoot, competitive	Recommended by the actress playing Peyton, Strong vocal and physical capabilities, Scathing nonchalance
Doug The Tongue-tied Dad Paul Weissman	Well meaning, sincere, unselfconscious above being long-winded, a poor story teller/communicator	*worked with him before in writer's room Sweet intentioned, protective as a father, desperate for action in his life
Gina	Sense of surprise and wonder, engaging, fully	*worked with her before Polished performer,

<p>The church-going sister Maylein Geraldino</p>	<p>believes demons are real, clings to beliefs, sees miracles too</p>	<p>great sense of humor, throws herself 100% into every choice</p>
<p>Ace The ghostwriter brother Jumaane Askew</p>	<p>More discerning than his sister, clinical in his passions, open to parties and sex, not a church fan</p>	<p>Extremely available to taking the notes, new to the craft, eager and sweet, open about his sexuality, team player</p>
<p>Naomi The newly single lady Jessica Chang</p>	<p>Deep groundedness but not emotionally, overcompensates socially, a hyperfast talker, analytical</p>	<p>Ease in her body, connectedness to the ground. Good vocal work when supporting breath</p>
<p>Tracy The reticent wife & model Kimberly David</p>	<p>Confident, but also fragile. Has decided on a stock character "bitch" to play with her husband, because she's a queen</p>	<p>*worked with her before in the writer's room Graceful in movement, protective of herself somehow. Great sense of humor.</p>
<p>Reza The happy hour husband Azad Fakhari</p>	<p>Not self conscious, completely at ease with himself and his attitudes, confident, assertive, successful</p>	<p>*worked with him before Understood the type of guy I was going for, great storytelling, expressive upper body</p>
<p>Miles The frustrated teacher Ian (SaeHwan) Lim</p>	<p>Someone on the brink, a man struggling to keep his emotions at bay. Works in an environment where he feels disrespected</p>	<p>Beautiful sense of physical movement, heavy Korean accent, holds tension and ease both emotionally, has craft</p>
<p>Coven-Head: Maureen O'Boyle</p>	<p>Used to running things, incisive, engaging on another level, marvellous vocal quality</p>	<p>*worked with her before Shape shifting voice, has authority in her movement to be leader</p>
<p>Coven-Shoulder: Rebecca Werner</p>	<p>Nay-sayer, cynical, always just over your shoulder to tell you what's wrong</p>	<p>Great physical variation, long limbs that add lots of angles, kind, eager to get to work</p>

Coven-Toe: Marina Mikhailovna	Sweet and naive, relies on her intuition, easily lead by the other two coven	A little russian/jersey accent, very petite, great attitude and warm personality
The Monster: Isaac Beauchamp	Specificity of movement, strong enough to support the costume, sense of rhythm	*worked with him before Lots of mask work experience and great physical specimen

+Extremely educated, engaging teacher with much psychological experience. Coherent, to an exercised, professional degree. Lovely RANGE in vocal quality (she speaks for much of the piece, so she needs an expressive register in speech and clear tone). If I had to do it all over again I would have cast a woman of color for this part as well.

Producer George Anthony Yoakim

George Yaokim had already signed on to produce my thesis so he started coming by to see what the project was about and helped sort things out the day of the show @ Dixon Place on December 18th. That was very helpful, he also took the production photos for me that day. Also Taeuk Kang had agreed to stage manage the workshop production and was with me for that day, this was a great opportunity for him to get to see the story early on and be familiar with some of its challenges. Other than their help on the day of, and the wonderful lighting board operator from Dixon Place who does a 3 hour tech with Taeuk and myself, I did costumes, designed make-up and props.



*These photos were promotional photos I took as we geared up for our one night Workshop @ Dixon Place on December 18th. Here our group is rehearsing in Riverside Church enjoying our creepy horror theme. Photo on right: from left, Ian Lim*as Miles, Jumaane Askew* as Ace, Jessica Chang* as Naomi, and Azad Fakhari*as Reza. *All returned for their roles in the final production.*

Inclusivity: Working with Non-traditional Actors

One of the challenges I wanted to face head on was that Ian Lim, a brilliant Korean actor, had some challenges with his English. I worked with him during rehearsals to re-write the character of Miles to be in his own vernacular. We first discussed each nuance of the scene, then I had him say the lines to me in his own words. I recorded some of these rehearsals so I could easily type up these adjustments later. In this first production I didn't have a horror story that could fit him so he had a monologue- but in the final version of GASP!, we found a Korean myth and adapted it together the same way we had the original dialogue. This became his story. I was so glad we found a common language. Gestures helped tremendously.

Another one of my actors was a woman with a disability and leukemia. She is a lovely woman, and has great energy in the room- but there were specific hurdles when it came to her learning blocking and staying in rhythm with some of the dances. I tried all the strategies I have from years of teaching and many of them were useful. For the final production she fell ill during the process, non-covid, and I knew the result of her missing a few rehearsals would be a strained experience for us both. It turned out as I'd thought, she was only just familiar with her part and unfortunately it put some strain on her scene partners to have to adapt live to any small mishaps in her blocking. I'm

still glad she was in it and since I believe in inclusivity that's the trade I'm willing to make.

Developing Movement for the Characters

During the workshop production I used a piece of music to introduce the large modern day cast to the audience. The song was very digital in its elements, which I thought pushed forward from the supporting music from the past. This



concept was continued forward when working with Michael Wysong for the final show. The acoustic world of Abigail contrasted nicely with the synthesized sounds that lead into the modern day sequences for transitions. Using viewpoint strategies and vocabulary, I walked all the actors around the room, had them distill their walks focusing on the awareness of the senses. Each actor had to develop a routine of their own on a day

when they're late. Where are they headed? What positions do their bodies assume when they get where they're going? Then during the song I had them "activate" meaning turn on their volume during their mini-improv scenes and "deactivate" back into mute mode. This number didn't make it into the final cut, but it did give the actors opportunities for character building and awareness of their physical selves in space.

Early costume Design work for Abigail



A simple but effective plan I used gave her only one or two costume changes and involved some knee socks and a middle part in her hair. She already owned some skirts that hit above the knee and we added a tweed blazer to suggest the brisk fall weather of a new England campus. This look was inspired by the movie Love Story which for some reason I watch often on VHS growing up. I always thought the female lead looked

smart and classy in this look. It also offered Emily lots of expressivity with her feet.

Early Make-Up Design for The Coven



For this first draft at a ghoulish look, I got some highlighter and some dark brown eyebrow pencils for texture and texted them a photo idea of what I wanted. They took it from there! I couldn't focus on their costumes or hair for this round, so we agreed they would wear blacks, and came up with their own hair-dos. It was still great to get this draft

in so I could see how it looked from the audience. So much texture washes out that I knew I needed a more specific design for the final piece.

Configuration of the classroom furniture

To keep 9 bodies open and available to their teacher and to the audience proved to be a staging challenge. Here you can see my 15\$ set design for the Dixon Place show. They have a proscenium space and it's much wider than deep. So, in this regard, I was not getting a good draft of what it would be like later, but it got the wheels of geometry turning for later.



Writing after the Workshop Production

Heading into rewrites in DC during January, Emily Dahab, my dramaturg, sent me a proposed story structure with a simple shape (rising and falling action) very much the Freytag triangle to help declutter the overall action in the modern day class here:

[Emily's Freytag Triangle Graph](#)

[Anna's Extended Story Structure Graph](#)

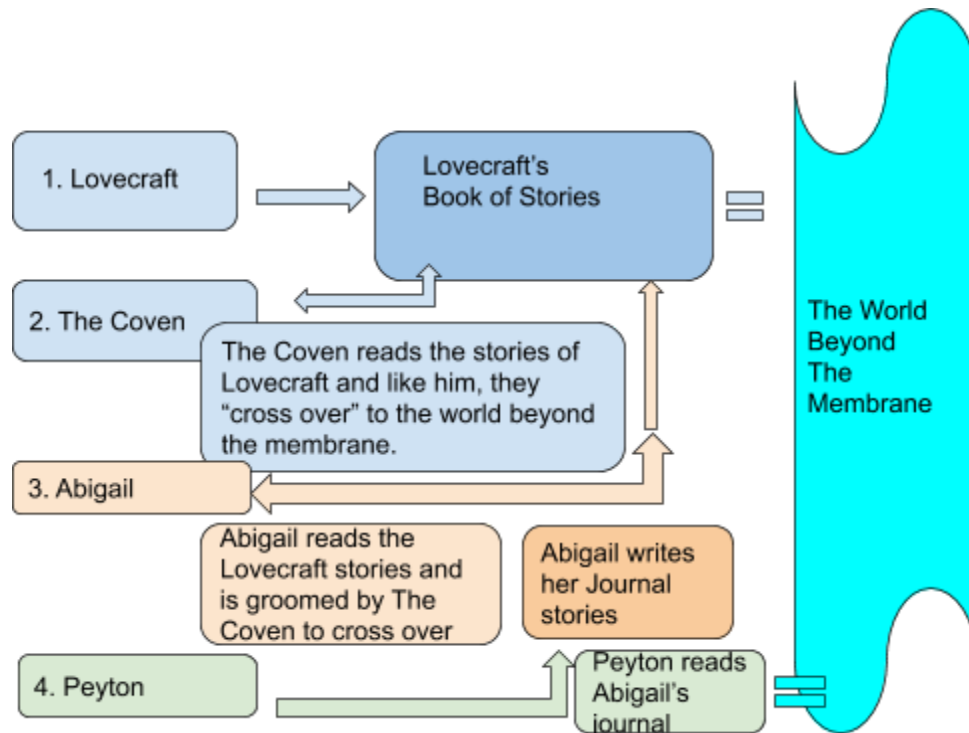
I admit mine is sprawling and hard to read. I thought color could hold for rising action in my graph but found the graph more in line with how to jump around in time. Working on this graph as an exercise, again supported by Emily, did help me pinpoint where the writing needed to carry the momentum of the therapy sessions forward. It identified every weak part of the structure that I had to fill in.

The Graph of Ancient Selection

The nature of many Lovecraft stories structurally involves a generational system of induction. There are a few very vivid horror movies that explore this same generational selection process that might be familiar, *Midsommar* (2019 folk horror film) and *Hereditary* (2018 American supernatural horror film, both films written and directed by visionary Ari Aster). In these films there's a driving force motoring through, particularly during *Midsommar*, where the cult gathering is engaging in its yearly summer rituals while selecting a "May Queen" for the festival that decides who can live or die at the end. In *Hereditary*, the recently passed maternal grandmother had been the head of a following whose ancient god is looking to step into the soul of a young person. Both of these plots are based in an elaborate selection process of who will become The One?

This selection motor appealed to me as a plot device for creating a cyclical nature to the crossing over of the membrane as the "chosen one." In the graph below I've tried to outline the generation of crossing over as I laid them out in *GASP!* We only fully witness part 3 and 4 of this outline during the play, but I thought it was important to have the ritual stretch back into history to the

actual time of Lovecraft and have him be the first who would have crossed over because of his ability to write about the other side in his stories.



Abigail before she meets the Membrane (The academic from 1969)

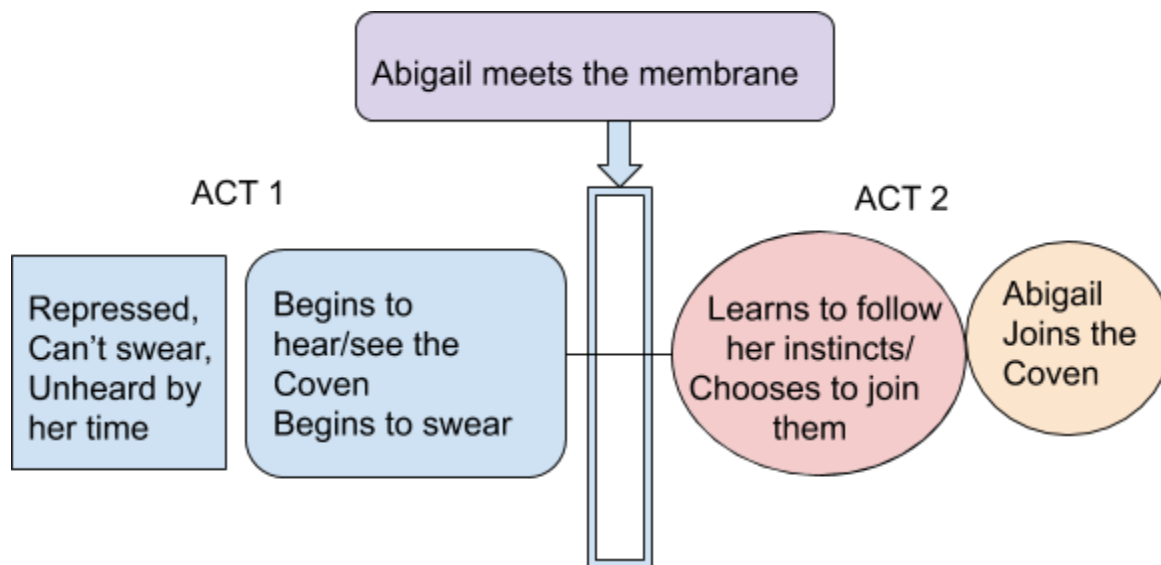
Originally Abigail's plot structure was taken from the Lovecraft story *Dreams in the Witch House* (see appendix for full version of this story). Martin and I had discussed the tiered nature of studied history that runs through Lovecraft's stories. One ambitious young learner stumbles upon a relic, which unlocks both mania and the compulsion to dig deeper into the past. Further and further the student goes until sleepless nights, visions, and sounds of scratching in the walls become unbearable. Finally a breach between this world and another rips open to great destruction, with elaborate beasts holding us under their awesome power.

This, in a broad nutshell, is how a Lovecraftian story works. Abigail would be my student, a student of ancient anthropology, already primed for relics of our past and their scientific significance. To enhance this relationship of her to these magical books around her, during the Abigail sequences, the audience is situated to listen as Abigail's journal (this I received a note about establishing more firmly, and earlier, by Anne and I did implement that note in future performances).

During the Abigail sequences, the audience is situated in the role of Abigail's journal (this I received a note about establishing more firmly, and earlier, by Anne and I did implement that note in future performances).

I added to this structure a time and place for Abigail to inhabit that I feel echoes with our own now. I wanted the audience to care about this question overall with Abigail: **When our time does not find our voice necessary, does it force us to unleash?**

Abigail, unheard by her generation- not equipped to help in the struggle for equality, not able to help overseas in My Lai. Abigail is a holder for everyone who felt awe and shame when looking around at their own time. This suppression forces her to sink deeper into her relationship with the past, with the ghosts of the Coven. Her objective becomes how to scientifically reconcile her new underworld knowledge with the surface world and the mix goes terribly.



Abigail after the Membrane:

- How does our language change when we become animate?
- How does our logical mind try to wrap itself around the unknowable?
What happens when it can't?

- How does our language break down over things we can't explain? How does Lovecraft manage to bridge the language gap between the two worlds and carry us over the bridge?
- Can we find ourselves more drawn to an era of evolved post-mortal ooze where sentience is more shared? Would this make us feel less alone?
- Would we surrender to this ooze if it called to us from the beyond?
- How does being "chosen" open a person up to their possibilities?
- How are our instinctual selves tied to our body and its movement? How does it change our voices when we become unfiltered in our speech?

After Abigail visits the membrane she's asked by the Coven how she feels and she lets out a primal, "More ALIVE!" as she leaps from this platform. In a continuation of her training as the next "one" who will pass over, the Coven shows Abigail how to get into her hips in this scene. I had the other actors from modern times behind and echoing the hip movement in this scene, a hopefully clever use of conflating time and space with similar movement.

Overall, Abigail's story arc starts with her implied voicelessness, sidelined personality, repressed in her physical self, and ends with her doing uninhibited movement, violent gestures and taking command of her space, joining the "other side."

The Coven (3 Witches from the Past)

1869

The Coven are the three spirits of women who were held in captivity among the "highly disturbed" patients in the cellar when the Bloomingdale campus was, as Columbia used to be, a mental institution. As an audience we only travel back in time to visit this era for a moment when the Coven re-enact their discovery of the Lovecraft book in the library.

Once I knew how the Coven were situated in history, and that I didn't want them to be written in musical numbers, I switched my thinking of the writing for them into a kind of verse. I tried to follow the rules of the tercet for certain scenes when they're speaking over each other and of the same mind. I also needed the Coven to use chanting to invoke the power of the membrane, just as if it were their religion.

“Theos An-air Gay go-nay”

I reached out to Emily Dahab about getting me some ancient language. I needed the Coven to have some sounds we wouldn't recognize, sounds that were around far before we were. I had dug deep enough into the archeo-anthropology to learn that the first four words created were the sounds for God, Earth, Man, and Woman. When reaching out, Emily was able to specifically ask for these four words in ancient languages.

The words she gave us specifically in response were these words:

In (transliterated) Ancient Greek, those words are:

god = θεός (pronounced "theOS")
earth = γῆ (pronounced "GAY")
man = ἀνὴρ (pronounced "an-AIR")
woman = γυνή (pronounced "goo-NAY")

In Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs, they are (and here I'm just going to transliterate, because I don't have hieroglyphs on this keyboard):

god = *nfr* (pronounced "NETCH-er")
earth = *t3* (pronounced "TA")
man = *s* (pronounced "SE")
woman = *s.t* (pronounced "SET")

We never translated these sounds for the audience, although that might be interesting in a rewrite because I had a handful of people who wanted to know the chant for themselves after the show.

Breakdown of Therapeutic Analysis by Character in *GASP!* Class

This table is important to show the final green column of analysis for the circumstances set up in the piece. These were the nuggets I ran by my therapist to make sure they were responsibly linked to their respective owners.

I didn't want to give any psychological professionals the opportunity to check out of the production because the analysis was cheap or unconsidered or implausible, so I enlisted the help of my psychiatrist, Dr. Judith Braun, in the analysis & adaptation portion of the stories.

Character + Relational Issue = Story ∴ Analysis & Adaptation

			(by Karin)	(Suggested by Karin)
Reza	Drinks to much, and when he does he ignores his wife	Ice Cream Truck	He's anti-kid and its manifesting in immature behavior to show his wife is but he's not ready for a family	The drinking is costing him closeness with his wife. If he revises his drinking behavior during the weekend (Act 2), some healing can begin.
Gina	Angry at her brother Ace for not participating in her church lifestyle	The Demons with Me	Once her brother Ace knows about the assault, he and Gina can be there for eachother even if he's not part of her faith	Gina and Ace must find a new language of respect, during the weekend they're tasked with only giving each other compliments
Brooke	Focuses so much on her appearance and being desirable; it's taking her whole focus	Plucked to Death	Her ambition to be perfect is causing competitive and nasty tendencies	Brooke must post a photo where she might not look perfect, but happy with her family
Miles	Can't hold back his anger in front of his students	Korean Myth of Creation	The tiger cannot restrain itself, just like Miles	Karin suggests he see the boys with "new eyes" because he's lost respect for them
Tracy	Wants to start a family but Reza is acting irresponsible with his drinking	Campus Nightmare	She is missing her sense of safety at home, due to Reza's college like behavior	Her early traumas are playing out again- recognition of a pattern
Naomi	Struggles to maintain healthy relationships	The Easter Dress	Her early "friendship" was actually an S&M dynamic	Insight: Being submissive in relationships won't help her establish new healthy ones
Doug	Can't communicate with his daughters effectively	My Shitty Life	The perfect life will elude him because of his foot-in-mouth syndrome	He must reach deep and find the best words before the ending ensues!

In order they appeared in the script, here is a charted breakdown of the analysis of each story based on their circumstances and relational issues.

One thing I have learned during my time at Columbia is a deeper understanding of the nature of human behavior, and how to discover that when digging into the text. I wanted to incorporate those understandings about our humanity:

- We hide things from ourselves
- We have attachment issues from our early relationships
- We reveal ourselves in our creative pursuits

So much of the work as a director that I've focused on the past three years deals with the reasons *why* people do what they do. It is not a cause and effect equation- there are so many variable factors - jealousy, rage, lust, insecurity. I was handed many scenes to work on where the first stage was always to read, and to *analyse* the behavior. What kind of person makes these choices? What kind of person says what they know isn't true? Do they mean well or ill? So many of our behaviors are a radical divergence from our real intentions and wants. These analytical interests and the art of articulating them has been a lifelong pursuit of mine both on and off the stage, but the muscles were defined through those dozens of exercises with text at Columbia.

Using these guidelines, I constructed multiple peripeteia throughout the class. With the final column of analysis came recognition as theatrical turning points which helped keep the momentum of the play moving forward- but braiding them together in time over the 2 hours and 15 minutes was another challenge. The stakes of each story had to somehow grow collectively and ride the tide of instincts taking over that Abigail's scenes were pushing forward.

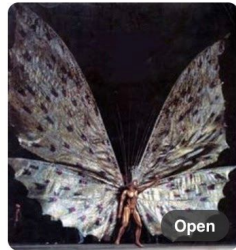
The Construction and Movement of a 7 person puppet, The Monster:

I'd wanted to challenge myself with the use of a large puppet a very long time ago, long before I began my Columbia career. I was fascinated by how they change the human scale. Part of my great theatrical lament has been that it evaporates; that people are all relatively the same size, and wouldn't it be wonderful if we could fill the space differently somehow! So why not try with a

large scale puppet when I have all this fabulous technical and artistic staff behind me? There was no good reason not to go all in.



NEW PRICE! Art Doll. Sculpture of Valeria Dalmon. Only for



ZYYON



Heron puppet- The head and neck are operated by your right



Janni Younge - The Firebird



Elements - China - michaelcurrydesign



Belinda Leduc-Pollard on Instagram: "SAGI. Tsuwano, Shimane



Elements - China - michaelcurrydesign



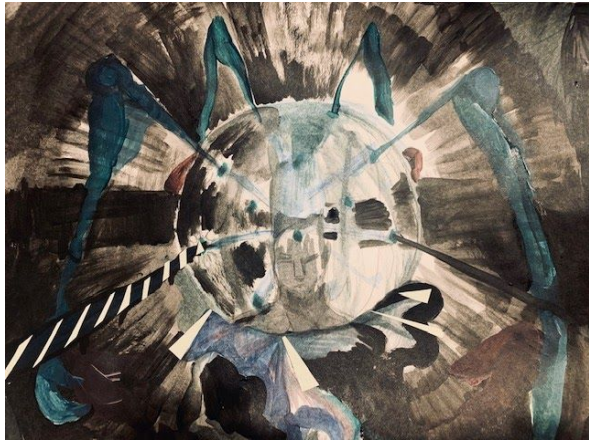
puppetTOPICmuseum on Instagram



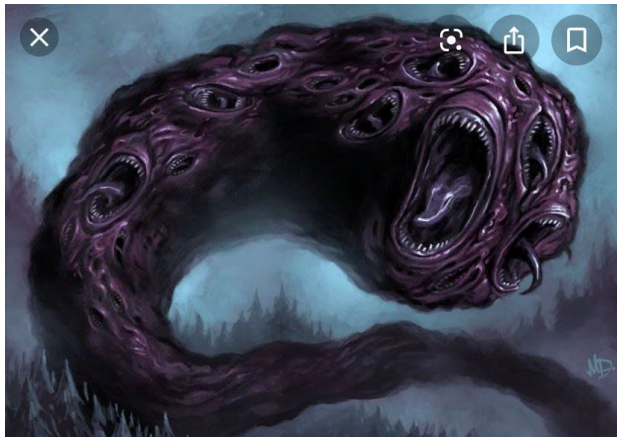
Here are some of the early research images I sourced to open up the possibilities and imagination when it comes to the construction of large scale puppets.

Concept for The Monster

CB suggested I select a person of contact for all questions about the monster. Since I had the clearest understanding of what I wanted, my oversight as Props Master worked out very well. I was able to have separate meetings with all departments and make sure we were all on the same page and schedule.



I submitted these two paintings above to one of our earliest meetings about The Monster. The one on the left is a torso shot of him inside the head globe, and showing how I wanted the legs to extend upwards after they emerge. One the right is a profile view showing the fully intended costume- a swirl of crustacean bodice and in one hand a claw mechanism. I was able to secure the basic building elements for the monster very early in our rehearsal period so all construction conversations could begin.



The scenic designer Megan and I agreed that this multi-mouthed head orb on the left had a horrifying/other dimension quality. I began to look for inflatable objects that could be suspended that had the same 100 mouths that could house a human safely.

Here is an image of the inflatable head I found on amazon and purchased (in black not blue) for the head of The Monster. It's original use is for whole body soccer bumping so I knew it was durable and meant to be supported by one human. The challenge was I wanted it higher, to rest on his shoulders. It was on one of the message boards dealing with puppets that I found out tent poles make sturdy supporting rods. 6 x 12' tent poles were purchased in my very first order for the puppet, along with the element for the "head" of the monster

(below). The basic pieces for the fabrication of the puppet were the legs (12 ft tent poles with a curved suspension built in).



John Trevellini proved an excellent resource both in problem solving the monster, and helping us make it feasible financially. During the first fitting with the legs and the head together, it became clear we needed a sturdy skeletal frame to distribute the weight evenly over an actor's shoulders. We all brainstormed together but he eventually solved the problem - he would buy some football pads for the program and a utility belt also (why didn't we have these already he wondered - a

great attitude) to create a secure rigging for the heavy head and for the legs to lock into at Isaac's waist. You can see the utility belt in action in the rehearsal pic below.



Another challenge in rehearsing the monster movement was that it was so large it was only useful to rehearse it in the space itself. This meant mostly scheduling extra time during tech rehearsals to *safely* work on its lightning fast build with the crew, and with just the legs to solidify all of its movement on stage.



I asked for a piece of music that was heavily drum-based from Michael, something ancient, something with a firm beat for the actors to move together in sync. Once we had that piece of music we discovered a rowing motion with the legs made them seem the most animate. See the rowing arms moving in large circles together in the image above (from the final show).

The final touches for the monster included a bodysuit from Lydia instead of anything constructed (this was important for his safety, weight distribution, and movement) and the pincers for his hands. I had given her two hand-painted masks which she wrapped around “extending-arm-reachers”. This gave the Monster some expressivity in his movement when showing both his aggression for Doug and Karin, and his taste for Peyton in the final scene. The legs were fabric covered by Lydia and her team to have a complex texture mixing two fabrics and blistered stuffing throughout to create the “knee joints.” I was very impressed with the final look.

Overall I learned so much from this collaborative effort from all the Lenfest staff on this part of our project. Once they knew I had specific needs and a plan, they filled in every gap that came up. I felt this scene as a finale was a great peak of everyone’s abilities in this production, and it was felt onstage.

Range of use of bodies and design: Telling the GASP! Stories

I have had many opportunities to play with bodies throughout my work at Columbia. I have used them to lift people into the air, I've used them slithering on the floor in bogs. I often recall this storytelling rule set out early by Anne, that "even in another language the storytelling should be there". When I saw *The Birds*, a play in Greek at St. Anne's Warehouse (my first visit to the space), I understood what she meant.

The challenges of the individual stories was for each to have a beginning, middle and end spatially, mood wise, with an event somewhere tucked in there and polarity everywhere.

I've included two contrasting examples of how I used bodies and collaborated with the designers to tell stories onstage. I had promised both Ian Walls, my projectionist, and Andrew Carr, my lighting designer, some free range when it came to color and the use of projections. Besides atmospheric sound all the supporting sounds were made by the ensemble live.

Brooke's Story (Written by Hannah Kloepfer):

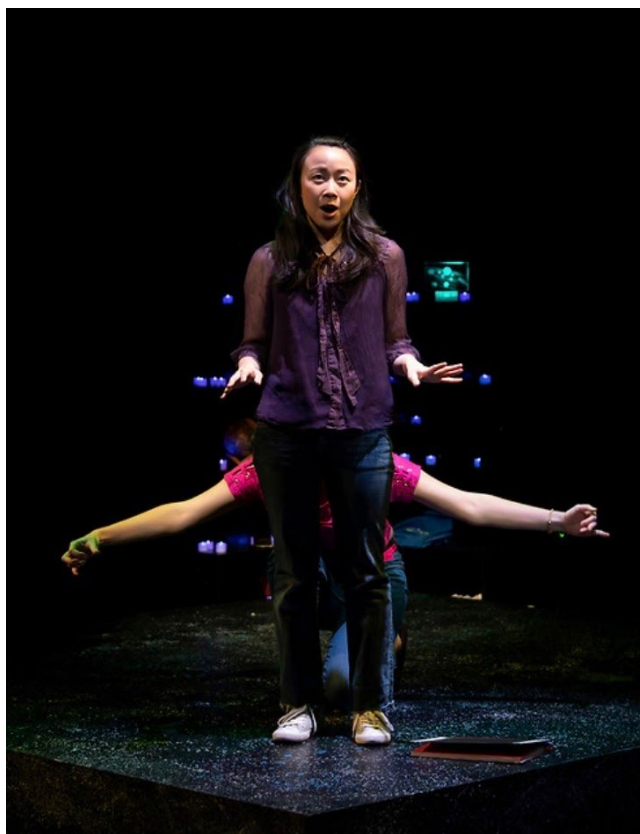


As I read it, this story had a film noir sense of time in the writing. There were these incredible places for punctuating the words with gesture, just after the line. That was the beginning, finding that one moment after the line with potential for more. Then I enlisted the full ensemble behind Brooke for these moments, having

them descend from upstage while they enacted her date in four couples. Here you can see the inner stage couples in their frozen gestures between moments of movement together. All was washed in a hot pink layer of romance thanks to Andrew Carr, and some abstract painting projections began at the discovery of

the black hair thanks to Ian Walls. Brooke was a powerhouse of movement and timed her gestures to contrast with the ensemble timing. This series of gestures and choreography was coordinated and clean, and I think helped with the anxiety of finding a hair on one's chin. Eventually, the bodies became the hairs at the end, circling the stage like a militant jawline before Brooke runs out of ideas and we cut to another moment. I was very excited by this story, I kept it delivered outside of class as she's writing it, so we could watch it be generated in real time to show the magical process of writing.

Naomi's Story (Written by Katrina Phillip):



In act 2 the prompts for the stories were different, in that Karin assigned *teams* to put the story presentations together. This story focused around a woman's memory of a confrontation with her childhood friend who used to pee on her and one day, ruined her brand new homemade easter dress. In this *team* effort, Brooke has taken the liberty of "acting out" Naomi's story as she talks, mostly with expressive gestures (see skirt-of-dress gesture pictured left). There is an innate charm to watching two strangers work together, and the contrast between Naomi's grounded, casual delivery, and Brookes obsessive and frantic moving was a great paradox to watch.

The Membrane

Since my *King Lear*, I have had a projectionist, and I really lucked out finding Ian Walls for the final thesis. We started with his biggest contribution, the



surface of the membrane. For research, I went to an exhibit that was entirely creating atmospheres from projections happening in NYC called *Zerospace*. There I found a surface that had a camera attached to it so you could interact with your own form. This was the original idea for the membrane interaction with Peyton and Abigail- so that they could perform with freedom and their “shadow on the membrane could react to them in real time. Unfortunately, the cable we needed to accomplish this live video feedback wasn’t long enough to give us a good picture from the camera, so we ended up videotaping Peyton dancing *behind* the membrane to form her own shadow dance, and then she followed mirror exercise rules to match her movements on the other side during performances.

Cassie Marie Cushing: ASM present

Having an ASM present for all the rehearsals was an enormous blessing. Not only did Cassie work very hard to secure our props and keep us organized during our shifts into multiple locations, she also was able to be “revising on book.” During the rehearsal process, I wanted to continue with the feeling in the room I’d created during the workshop production, which meant there was still wiggle room for the language to shift. Having Cassie in the room on our master Google Doc of the script meant all changes were updated live for all to have electronically and for Taeuk to print once we had script lock. Cassie was overall a very valuable member of the *GASP!* Team, keeping the whole backstage organized and efficient.

Kevin Gozales: AD present and how he was included

Kevin Gonzales was a very positive and helpful presence during the production process of *GASP!* Initially I was curious how I’d use another mind in the room, because from my own personal experience assisting, just watching sometimes isn’t the most exciting way to learn. I ended up assigning Kevin one of the 8 stories to shape his way for the first 3 weeks of rehearsal. He directed Ace’s story, the ghost writer who gets eaten by the lady mob in Act 2. In the last week his schedule had some difficulties so we discussed the key points of tightening together in a meeting, then I shaped the final work. Overall I believe in always giving the assistant directors a task for their learning.

Creating “magical moments” on stage

The most influential show I saw in trying to create the moments of magic was Harry Potter on Broadway. Even though we had such a microcosm of the budget and personnel, I knew there were moments of magic to be had where the tech could fully support the jumps in time onstage. I tried to find interesting ways to give GASP! The feel of a high budget piece, with the coordination of effects for magical moments being one way to build atmosphere and give the audience a sense of wonder at this strange world.

It became brutally obvious that the timing of lights and sound together could signal magical moments, but there was no room for error on cueing. The difference between the Coven entering before creepy lights and sound after is huge, but nuance was sometimes just beyond my reach. So I would jump in more than I ever planned to during the tech process to make sure those cues matched the on-stage moments’ needs.

Design Preparation

To achieve an overall visual appeal and symmetry to the piece, I often drew out stage compositions and movement ideas (this was something encouraged by our tableau exercises in Brian’s Moliere class, and by Stephen Wadsworth in our Opera preparation blocking assignments).

Early Concept: The Final Battle: Environment

I found this image and loved how the light source is coming through the jagged layers of ice. The surface looks like a completely different planet. This image was the inspiration for putting the audience “inside” the jagged blue light banks on the seats. To give them the personal experience of having been



transported beneath the earth's surface to a deeper, older, and more sinister plane.

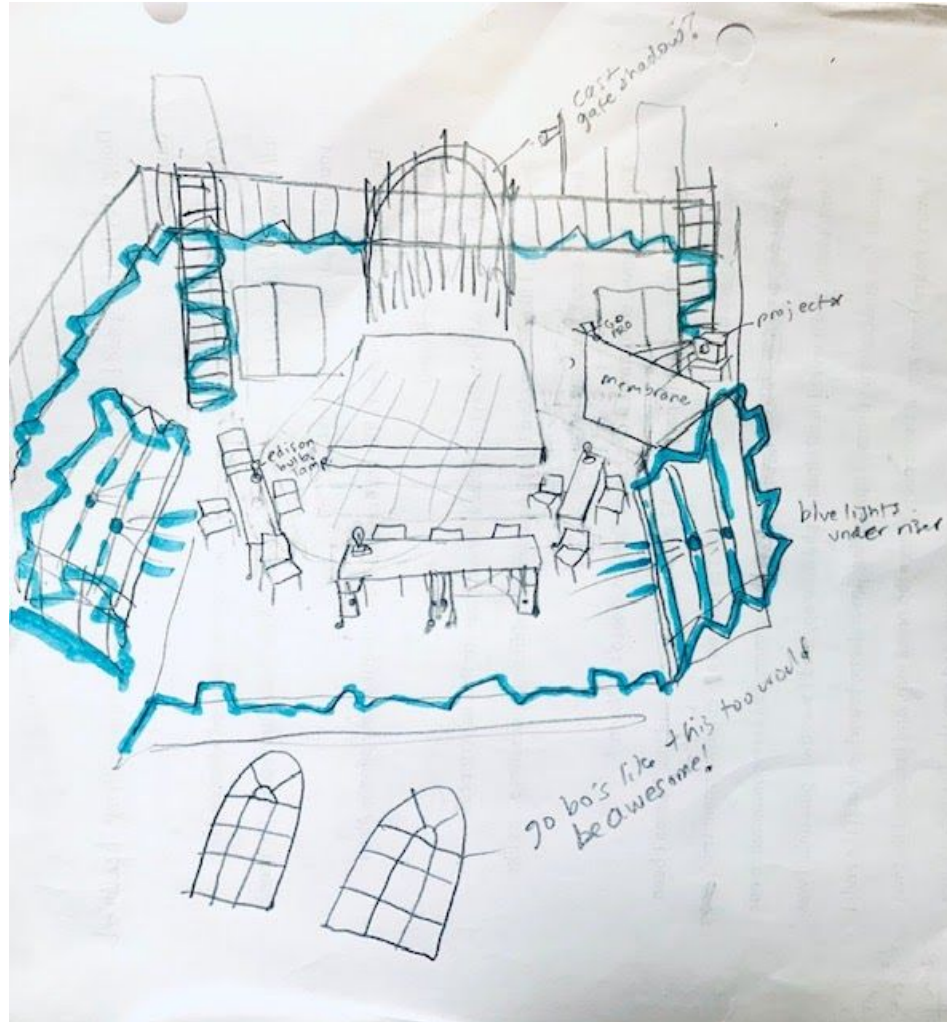
With the input of Emily Boyd Dahab, my invaluable dramaturg, I was encouraged to create the piece with a unity of space overall, a library. We jump around in time often in this piece, so this was such a helpful note. Now the transitions can stay simple and elegant, rather than spending time morphing the space between sequences.

Deep thrust

The challenges of the flexible space were considered early. Having seen multiple configurations and uses of the deep thrust, I knew I would be shooting myself in the foot if I didn't focus on the diagonal spaces as prime real estate.

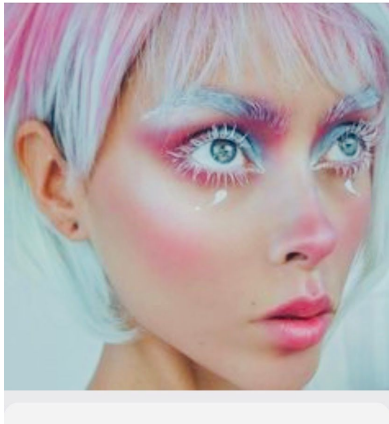


Here's an early drawing version of how I thought I wanted the furniture and the seats configured for the class. The seats really hug the diagonal rule for maximum visibility. Once I found out bent desks weren't an option financially, the configuration changed to the one below.



With this drawing I presented many lighting and set ideas to the Lenfest team and my designers. For lighting, I was interested in lighting the gate from behind so we could cast a gate shadow below. On the very bottom of the picture there are some suggested gobos I was interested in that appeared in the final piece like magic (see classroom photo below). The furniture position varied slightly from this draft, I ended up angling the front two tables upstage into a reverse V. This suited the space better and did not cut off the visual momentum leading into the space so abruptly. On this drawing there is also the projector and the membrane set up with the GoPro camera clamped above. There is the final position and relative proportion of the Gate, and there are the three table lamps that served as lanterns as a revelation of light only to the Coven.

The Coven Make-Up Final



I bumped around on Pinterest to find a make-up look that struck me as both “otherworldly” and could also feature the LED theme blue as its pastel base color. It seemed that masking the eyebrow had an alluring effect, so I tried it at home with a

concealer and some pastel lavender I had on hand (I’ll spare you that photo). Here’s the final look on the right, I was thrilled. If I had to do it again I’d dye the nightgowns variations on black and add textural flowing gauze elements.



Final Costumes Looks:

The reality of my being in D.C. during some of my designer meetings led to some hasty choices on my part. Because we had not really intertwined with designers in the program, and because I usually function as my own costume/props designer, I was at a disadvantage as to how to assess some of the skills necessary for some designers. I now have a better idea of key questions I would ask earlier in the interview phase to determine compatibility. Luckily, Lydia Witt from the Lenfest Department was able to help fill in the gaps for the detailed costumes Abigail needed, and also oversee the fabrication of the leg coverings of the Monster.

Abigail Final Look: Working with Lydia Witt



Although the knee sock solution worked for the workshop, Lydia Witt found herself drawn to the challenge of costuming Abigail. Lydia had already attached to the world of the Past in the project. She had a particular sense of the passage of time in the script that I had encrypted; that Abigail's scenes happen over the course of an entire semester. Lydia was up for the challenge, and we split the costuming tasks with Lisa Cassidy to allow her to do so. Abigail needed 6 different looks from that time period. Here on the left is the image of how we met Abigail, at her most "prim and proper." Lydia continued telling the story with the warm lighting as a guide to delicious fabrics which set off her autumnal tones. Down to the textured tights, Lydia adopted Abigail and was in contact with me about all the looks regularly. I also assured her that if there was anything she couldn't find I would help, like eyeliner and curlers. I think these costumes made such a huge difference in the legibility of the time frame shifting. Through Lydia's eyes and efforts, I have gained a new respect for the art of costuming.

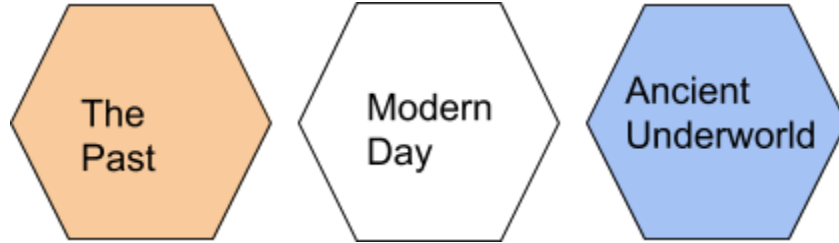
Final classroom Looks & Configuration:



Above you can see the final orientation of the desks to create a dynamic stage picture and robust diagonals, also the beautiful handiwork of costume designer Lisa Cassidy. Because we had agreed on a clean crisp white for the modern day scenes (see lighting below), Lisa and I had agreed that rich jewel tones and saturated solids would work best for differentiating characters. I was very pleased with how this bouquet contrasted with the Past sequences with Abigail and the Coven.

Lighting: Working with Andrew Carr

Toggling between the two worlds frequently meant it was best to have a consistent color temperature to distinguish between the eras onstage. We went with this basic color lighting palette to anchor characters in their own time, also as a guide for pulling characters into a time that is not native to them.



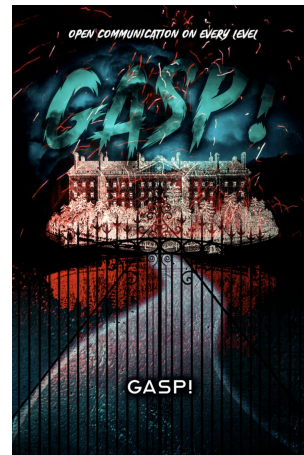
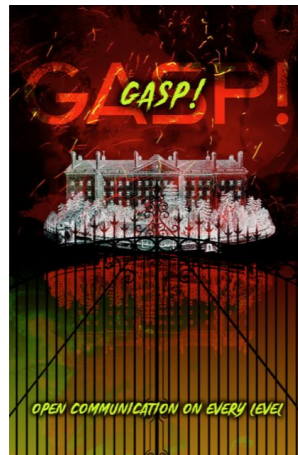
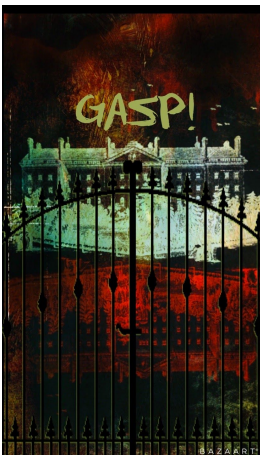
This decision was then communicated to the costume department, so that the colors worn during the piece would befit their color environments. The “ancient underworld” blue was the blue of the LED lights that rimmed the audience banks, an idea that came to me in D.C. It took some convincing, but that I was very satisfied with it in the end.

The Poster



Working with Annie Wang to produce a fine poster took several drafts, but I was extremely happy with the final product and felt it looked advanced. Here on the left is an early example I sent to the marketing group for reference. I loved the looming atmospheric presence above, and the gothic structure below. Horror is tricky tonally, especially when, as mine did, it contains plenty of jokes.

Once she had created the main Bloomingdale structure from a historical photograph I had given her, but with inverted and expressive color, like a negative of a photograph, I was excited. It was my idea to add the gate structure in front, then Annie added the glowing path beneath (awesome) and some texture/color and pathway curving adjustment and tada! *From left*



to right: the first mock up I made to show how the gate could be layered on top of Annies' awesome building, and successive stages of the design to the final GASP! Official poster, on right.

Conclusion

I use an analogy sometimes to help with a specific point about how carefully we choose our words: Why throw mud at a dart board when you can throw darts? Your body has to settle and prepare and aim and balance and release to throw a dart, but almost zero intention is needed to throw mud. It's a mess. So really it's all a matter of the intention put behind the words that float them out. I wanted to be able to use so many forms of language and communication in this piece and still have it feel like I threw darts. As Karin says of the power of words in the script, "they can build whole heavens, and they can tear us down." I know specifically the power of words to transform, and I wanted to feature all of them somehow in the final script- mantras, chants, negative self-talk, words we hold in because we care, words we let out before they're ready. It's this spirit of intentionality with language that made me fascinated by Lovecraft to begin with, and I wanted to generate and investigate a new world of my own making, and with it I hope I was able to hit the specific target I was aiming for. Sure there were waverings along the way, but in the end I hit the damn board at least, got some points up there. After all the research and experience, I would dub this script a cosmic, neo-horror anthology. Thank you for the opportunity to choose my own investigation and make what I wanted- I've waited a lifetime for this freedom and it was a wonderful gift to create *GASP!* I'm so glad it allowed me to use the cumulative gems of wisdom I've learned from my time at Columbia.

APPENDIX

1. *Getting In on the Act, Arts Engagement Research Study*. Alan S. Brown and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard, in partnership with Shelly Gilbride, Ph.D. James Irvine Foundation (October 2011). Link to fully downloadable study here: [Getting In On The Act Research Study](#)
2. *The Weird and The Eerie* by Mark Fisher. Repeater Books, © 2016.
3. Bob Scott: Historian and Librarian Authority on Bloomingdale Campus References
[Bob Scott, Breaking the Code, Columbia University Libraries, 2013](#)
 - a. List of patients at Bloomingdale Asylum:
 - i. <https://mhdh.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/bloomingdaleasylum/thepatients>
 - b. Accusations of abuse:
 - i. <https://mhdh.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/bloomingdaleasylum/accusations-of-abuse>
4. Link: ["The Show" by Priya Sharma, one of our GASP! Writer's room reading assignments.](#)
5. Nightmare Magazine, October 2016 (POC Destroy Horror! special issue) (Volume 48) [Link to book on amazon](#)
6. Dramaturgy Google doc made by Anna between the Dixon Place run and the Thesis Production
7. H.P. Lovecraft, 1933. *Dreams in the Witch House* ([Link to full text available online here](#)).

8. Email excerpt from Kim Douthit forwarded to me by Emily to expand my knowledge of the specific genre of cosmic/anthology horror.

Cosmic Horror:

In the Mouth of Madness (VUDU)
Annihilation (Hulu)

The Endless (Netflix)
Resolution (Same director as The Endless and takes place in sort of the same world, which plays into the cosmicness of it)
Spring

Absentia (Tubi)
Pontypool

The Void (Streams on Shudder, happy to provide my login if access is needed)

Anthology film:

Now for these...the ones I'm recommending aren't necessarily the best films, but what I think is more important is looking at how they structured the story sharing and then the overarching story.

Tales of the Darkside
Nightmare Cinema (Shudder)
V/H/S
Trick 'r Treat