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### Imaginary; a Continuation of Nihilism to Vitality

*Imaginary* is a project that started during the summer of 2017 where I, Corinne Gahan, had the privilege to work under the Oak Park Festival Theatre (OPFT) in Chicago. This opportunity was provided by the University Honors Scholar Grant which provided me the chance to work there as an intern for up to 50 hours a week for the entire summer. While I was there I worked on several different components of two theatrical productions. Some of the jobs included set construction, assistant stage management, house management, and acting. While working on these two shows I learned what it took to put on a professional production. With the assistance of the Honors Scholar Grant I also got to interview several members of the company of OPFT to see what they thought it took to put on a successful production. This gave me the chance to learn from these individuals who were involved in the company's operations along with those who were involved with the creation of one or both of the shows they put on that summer season.

### Interviews

One of the first interviews that I had conducted was with Richard Gilbert who is a well-known Fight Choreographer and Violence Designer in the Chicago, IL area. Through his company R&D Choreography, he was hired at OPFT to do the Violence Design for their first show of the season *Macbeth*. When reflecting in Gilbert's work he asks himself "how high can I make the stakes? ...And if the person I am having a scene with wants to kill me, I think those are pretty high stakes. But as cool as that is, violence design and fight choreography is just a special

skill that actors can have. It's not why people come to the theatre... they come to see two people having a relationship...I think two people on stage trying to kill each other is possibly one of the most interesting relationship two people on stage can have" (Gilbert). When talking to Jhenai Mootz, who is the Managing Director at OPFT, we started to reflect on why arts will continue to stay alive. Mootz states "we are constantly telling the same versions of stories...and the reason why we put so much passion and heart into it is because someone out there in the audience is going to resonate with it and it might be just the thing they needed to see at that moment in their life...Art is food for people, even if they don't know they are getting fed by it" (Mootz).

When asking what makes a theatre production successful Mark Lancaster who is an Artistic Associate of the Oak Park Festival Theatre said "I once hit on a definition of what makes you successful in art as how narrow can you make the gap between conception and execution... So [when] you turn that into broader terms, if you want to put up something that's entertaining, if you want to put up something that's inspirational, if you want to put up something that's provocative; success is defined by how closely you can meet what your [initial] goal was" (Lancaster). Joshua Carroll, a Chicago based actor, stated "one of the most incredible things about theatre; one of the things that adds the most success of a production is a sense of community...In my opinion a successful process is also one that not only enriches the audience...but it's also something that we, as art makers grow, our art develops and we are able to share that" (Carroll).

I also had the chance to take my interviews abroad while I was studying in Moscow, Russia and while interviewing my teacher Misha Milkis opened his opinion on American Theatre, he stated "America is a country of a young theatre tradition, [there aren't as many traditions as we have]. You are like a clear paper, from one side you don't have the tools; but on

the other side you are ready to change your point of view on all the questions that connect with the theatre” (Milkis). So with my clear piece of paper I decided to take what I had learned from these experiences and the interviews from these individuals to create my Honors Capstone project; to create and put up a show of my own.

### The Start

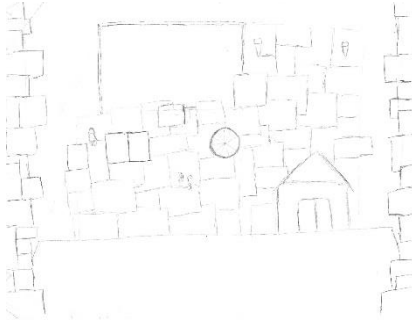
*Imaginary* started on my ride back to Illinois from Nashville, Tennessee where I had just witnessed the solar eclipse. The ride was around 9 hours long so I had plenty of time to just think about different ideas on what I wanted to do for my Honors Capstone project. Personally, I am a fan of horror movies and haunted houses which has always lead me to be intrigued by the concept of horror theatre. “When a horror movie becomes reality,” is a statement that I thought about and later ended up as a part of my poster for the show.

During the car ride I kept asking myself two questions; what is scary? And what is a concept that isn’t typically used? I started with the basics including ghosts, demons, haunted houses, dolls etc. This started to make me think that things involving children were scary. So I started to run with the concept of children and thought what do children do? Then reflecting on my own childhood I remembered recalling that I had an imaginary friend. Children usually have an imaginary friend at some point. What would happen if those imaginary friends didn’t always stay so kind? This was the moment when I started to come up with the idea for *Imaginary*; what happens when you abandon your imaginary friend?

So then I started the journey for the next two months to create a show.

### Getting Ready

There were a lot of steps that had to be put into place before the first rehearsal of this show began. The first hurdle was figuring out where and how we were to put on this production. Luckily the best decision to put on this show was through the School of Theatre and Dance's (SOTD) program known as a Third Onion. A Third Onion is a student run production that is facilitated through the SOTD to support student work independently. To apply for this I had to



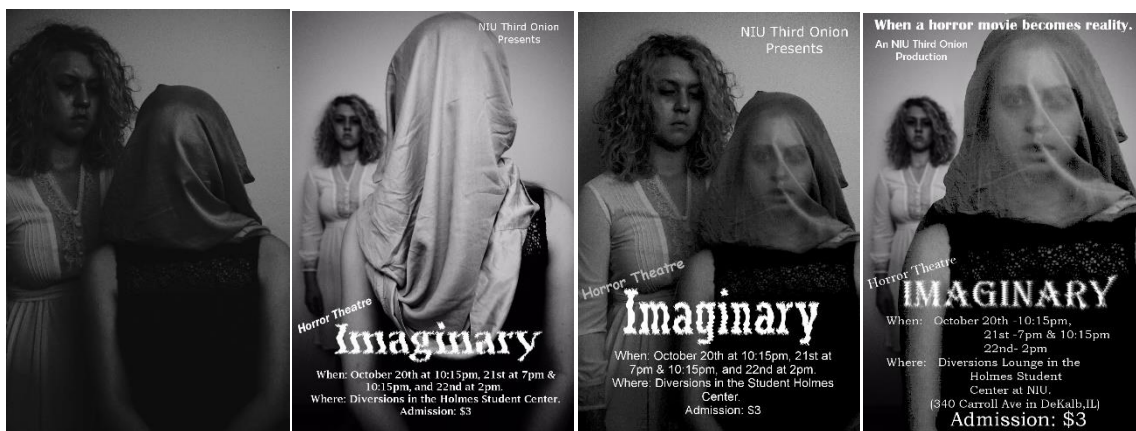
*Original Set Design by Corinne Gahan*

fill out paper work to pitch my idea to show the faculty that it would be a successful one. The paper work included my story, my characters, my lights, my set, and why it would work well for an audience at this date and time. After my project was approved I then had to go through additional paperwork to be

approved for each actor that I wanted to cast in my project.

Once the project started there were several other steps that I took to ensure that my production would happen the way that I wanted it to. With help I wrote a news article to spread the word about my production. This included the time, place, and description of the production.

Other media included posters. There were almost 6 drafts to make the poster that I wanted to share around DeKalb and across campus. This meant that I spent time doing photography session and Photoshop to create the poster. I put up almost 200 posters around campus and local businesses nearby.



*Designer: Joe Cambroni, Photographer: Arielle Zamba, Editor: Corinne Gahan*

**Final Poster**

Another promotional stunt included myself and a cast member who dressed up as clowns in a Halloween theme to pass out flyers to the students on campus. We had passed out an additional 200 flyers to bring in more people.

In preparation for the show I went to nearby businesses and asked if they were interested in buying ad space in the Playbill. I was selling ad space for \$10 for a whole page and \$5 for a half. At that price everyone bought the \$10 page. Looking back, if I were to do something differently I would raise the prices a little more. In total I sold about 5 ads. This money completely paid for all additional pieces that I needed for the show including props, costumes, and printing. Which meant that I made a 100% profit from ticket sales. While I was at these businesses I also asked if they would be willing to donate towards a costume competition. Where I had received \$125 worth of prizes. This made my show have a fun component where if audience members showed up in costume they would also have a chance to win one of the prizes. There were plenty of sleepless nights where I was trying to continually think of ways to bring people in.

### The Creative Process

I had held auditions for my show and asked for everyone to do a movement piece that relates to an imaginary friend, a monologue, and to tell me about the scariest thing that has ever happened to them. It was really great to see the things that people came in with. One of my



*Emily Hudomiet (Left), Ola Staszczynski (Right). Photo by Emma Harvey.*

actors Jaquelyn Shannon came in with a doll that was evil and caused her neck to bleed. My other actor Emily Hudomiet played like a Super Hero while using a blanket. I also got to see what made people scared, and what they found to be true terror. It was a great

way to look into the way they view a scary situation and how they instinctively handled the situation. My cast included Jaquelyn Shannon as Italy (the imaginary friend), Ola Staszczynski as Italy's stunt double, Emily Hudomiet as Sarah, and Loren Jones as Sarah's Dad.

After choosing my cast and crew I had everyone come in to discuss the show and figure out what was the story line. This was going to be a devised theatre piece which meant that we were going to write and create the show together. So for our first rehearsal I gathered everyone and we just talked about what an imaginary friend is. Is it a good thing, is it bad, is it demonic. What is the family dynamic? Does the character Sarah have a good or bad relationship to her father?

We spent the first two hours of this rehearsal thinking about ideas and coming up with a possible outline of events to be followed. The outline consisted of these events:

- Sarah starting in the insane asylum (pre-show)
- Family moves in
- Things are moved/ missing – Dad starts to look bad as his irritation with these events grows
- The Imaginary friend does not get the recognition it wants
- The Imaginary friend turns evil
- The father dies
- We find Sarah back in the insane asylum



*Loren Jones (Left), Emily Hudomiet (Right). Photo by Emma Harvey.*

Looking at this scarce list made me very nervous in thinking that I wasn't going to be able to do a show in such a short period of time if we didn't use our small amount of time very strategically.

So the rest of the rehearsal process followed a similar pattern. I told the cast what I wanted to happen in the scene, gave them a few guidelines, then told them to improvise. Using my phone I recorded these sessions and would tell them what worked and what didn't. They would do it again and once I was happy with the direction it was going we would move on to the next set of events. We generally got through a scene and a half each rehearsal. Keep in mind that rehearsal only happened for two hours every Friday morning.

I would then go home and listen to the recordings and type out everything they said. From the recordings I then started to create a script. The amount I added or changed was very minimal and generally stuck with what my actors provided me with in rehearsals. After I typed up the script I would send it to them to be worked on for the next rehearsal.

Another huge component to a show is the sound and lighting. Which for a horror production was extremely essential in this case. Luckily I was able to receive assistance in sound design from Chris Zimmerman who taught me how to use Qlab; which is a program that is commonly used for theatrical productions. For lighting, I was getting slightly worried that I wasn't going to find anyone, when suddenly I received interest from William Richardson, who is a MFA Lighting Designer at NIU. When I met with Richardson we had discussed what the play was about and a few visions that I had; he then told me how we could make the lighting to appear fluorescent as if the character Sarah was in an insane asylum and



*Emily Hudomiet. Photo by Emma Harvey.*

when she goes into the flashback the lights will appear warm and comforting but when things start to turn for the worst the lights will slowly go back to the eerie fluorescent lighting. It was moments like this one where I find devised theatre to be astounding. Here we were creating a story where one individual's vision made my concept a hundred times better.

### Performances

When we were getting down to the performances, it felt as though things were finally coming together. I was able to have my set which included an ungodly amount of boxes and a plastic tarp that hung on the other side. The lights were magnificent, they flickered when the imaginary friend arrived, they turned blood red when the father died, and they were able to turn on and off all around the stage to create a disorienting effect. The sound worked perfectly and helped to set the mood on the entire piece.

While doing the runs of the show, we did run into a few problems. A few times an actor forgot to set a prop that was essential for the story line so I would have to sneak around the space to set it. The tarp ripped down on both the opening show and the closing show which luckily didn't ruin the show. There is a scene where the imaginary friend and Sarah play ball and during one show the ball went out into the audience and couldn't be retrieved. All in all, the actors did their jobs, stayed focused, and kept moving the story along. It was a successful production and I was able to raise around \$230 in ticket sales.



*Jaquelyn Shannon. Photo by Emma Harvey*





*Ola Staszczynski. Photo by Emma Harvey.*

If I were to go back and do anything differently I would have had more rehearsals; had time allowed us to. More importantly I would have modified a few props to make the actions more solidified rather than leaving it up to chance (like the use of the ball). If there was more time it would have been great to advertise the event a little bit more; possibly with radio ads or getting more local businesses involved. Also it would have been nice to not have had to share the space. In my case I was sharing the space with another Third Onion and rehearsals for another show. This meant that I had to clear 50 boxes off the stage and roll up the wall of tarp after every show. Last but not least, I would have liked more time to change the ending of the play along with the use of blood. Every night there was a new recipe of blood and either the color didn't work or it didn't splatter nicely on the tarp.

Overall, I think the show was a success. People laughed, people screamed, and people showed up in costume. It was a great Halloween experience and it was a project that I learned a lot about. This gave me the chance to learn about what makes me excited through the process of a production and what things I wanted to just skip over. This Capstone project helped me become a writer, a director, a producer, and a stage manager. After doing this Honors Capstone project I feel as though I can take on any job or even more importantly, I can understand how crucial everyone's job is.

### Archiving

To follow my next discussion on archiving, you can watch the show on YouTube by searching "Imaginary- Horror Theatre" or by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htJd2LCbUSM&t=183s>

The following semester I continued the development of this project by archiving the video footage I had taken during the run of the show. I had recorded the show a total of three times, from three different angles. These included Up Stage Right, Down Stage Right, and close ups from Stage Left. Unfortunately, one of the angles ended up being blurry during the entire run and couldn't be used. While I was bummed that I couldn't use that footage it made switching between the other two much easier.

Live theatre is much harder to capture on film than I originally anticipated. It was most difficult to transfer between shots because there is a lack of continuity in theatre. Continuity in film refers to someone doing the exact same thing so when you switch between angles the motion is consistent. Sometimes actors (in a live production) do things a little bit differently from night to night. The biggest example that you will see is that my actress Emily has her hair half up half down in the wide shots and then all the way up in the close-ups. I cut the film to my best ability to also avoid the moments that I had mentioned earlier such as: the lost ball, the tarp falling, and other little mistakes. Overall, I am very proud of the archival video that I have put together and it showcases our work nicely. The biggest difference is the lack of atmosphere, you most likely won't be on edge like my live audience since you are behind the safety of your own screen. You don't have to worry about boxes flying out towards you or being splattered by blood. The only thing that you should worry about is where your imaginary friend is.

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