

Jakob Cansler
Rising Fourth-Year Arts Award Application
Faculty Mentor: Dave Dalton

The Cocktail Party: Directing a Full-Length Play

“Two people who know they do not understand each other, / breeding children whom they do not understand / and who will never understand them.... In a world of lunacy, / violence, stupidity, greed...it is a good life.”

T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* is simultaneously a parody and a drama. It parodies the British drawing-room comedies of the twentieth century while also drawing from the tragedies of the same era. It deals with themes of Christian existentialism while at the same time manages to be wickedly funny. It was how paradoxical these descriptions seemed that drew me to the play in the first place. When I first read the play, I was struck by how it managed to be suspenseful and hilarious while also making me question if my entire concept of reality was a lie. So, when I set out to find a play to direct my fourth-year, I entertained many options, but could not get *The Cocktail Party* out of my head. Now, I intend to direct a fully-realized production of the show.

Over the past two years, I have focused my studies within my drama major on theatrical directing. My second-year, I directed two full-length productions: *A View from the Bridge* with Spectrum Theatre in the Fall and then *Constellations* through Virginia Players' Lab Series in the Spring. Then, last summer, I had the chance to assistant direct a production of *Steel Magnolias* as part of Heritage Theatre Festival's season. Finally, this past Fall I assistant directed the Department of Drama's production of *Lungs*. In addition, I've taken both Directing I and II as part of my studies. All of this has been in preparation for a career as a theatre director after I graduate. So far, though, I have not had the chance to direct a fully-realized production. Doing so, I believe, will greatly help me prepare for a career in the theatre industry.

This Fall, through Virginia Players (the student wing of the Department of Drama), I will be directing a fully-realized, full-length production of *The Cocktail Party*. Although exact dates have not been confirmed, the final performance will take place in a Department of Drama space sometime this Fall and will be open to the University community. Auditions will likely take place at the beginning of the Fall semester and rehearsals will take place in the six weeks preceding performances. The show has a cast size of nine people and will require at least three designers and one stage manager. For all of these positions, I plan on working with other students who also intend on pursuing a career in the arts after graduation. I plan on reaching out to my fellow Arts Scholars for many positions. This way, I can work with students who are fully committed to their craft in order to give myself and everyone working on this production an experience that is closer to a professional setting than other student-theatre productions at UVA might be able to offer. The final product will be a fully-realized, entirely student-created production that will perform for one weekend in the Department of Drama.

In terms of what the final production will look like, I intend to reimagine *The Cocktail Party* for modern audiences. I have always been very interested in the reconceptualization of older

dramatic works. What that essentially entails is interpreting this work without looking to previous productions for inspiration, and often includes updating it to a contemporary period and using design elements to present the show in a way that is not in any way traditional. My curiosity for this type of directing has only grown as recent productions of *The Crucible*, *Oklahoma!*, and *West Side Story* have completely reconceptualized these shows for modern audiences. In that vein, and inspired partially by the work of director Ivo van Hove, I am interested in not just mounting a production of *The Cocktail Party*, but also reimagining it in a way that feels much more contemporary and makes the sometimes complicated themes of this play accessible to the University and Charlottesville community. *The Cocktail Party* was very much written for the time it was first produced, and I will be the first to admit that it is flawed in more ways than one. However, its themes of alienation, guilt, disillusionment, and happiness are still very relevant. As a result, I believe that the most effective way to present this work is to minimize the elements that distract from these themes and maximize the elements that can speak to a modern audience. I plan on having many discussions with designers and the cast about these concepts and how they can best translate to the audience. For example, some ways in which this work can be modernized include changing it to a contemporary setting and having the actors use American accents rather than British ones. Overall, I believe that pursuing a production that is not a carbon-copy of the original, but rather a reimagination, will be a creative challenge, and that's what interests me about it. It will challenge myself and everybody involved in this production to be bold and take artistic risks and, as a result, help us grow as artists.

The goal of this project on a personal level is to give myself and the other students working on this project experience creating a fully-realized theatrical production. Personally, I believe that directing a full-length play on my own will give me vast amounts of experience as I transition from undergraduate studies into a post-graduation career. By directing a show with a heightened production value from the conceptual stage all the way to performances, I will gain important experience working in a more professional environment. This will only be helped by working with other talented student-artists at the University. They too, will gain valuable experience by working on a production like this one, surrounded by peers who are just as committed to the craft as they are.

In conclusion, this project is a big undertaking. In preparation, I've spent the past two years studying theatrical directing and working on projects that would prepare me for a more substantial project like this one. The process, though, will provide me, the cast, and the designers with extremely valuable experience working on a fully-realized production from beginning to end. The final product will be a welcome addition to UVA's arts community: a fully student-led theatrical production that will be performed free of charge for the University community.

Timeline

April/May 2020

- Reach out to potential designers
- Analysis of the script and dramaturgical research

Summer 2020

- Working with designers to make design choices
 - Communicate with Dept. of Drama to determine scope of available technical elements and space availability
 - Finalize designs
 - Make itemized technical budgets
- Reach out to potential cast members
- Continued analysis and initial staging plan

August 2020

- Auditions

September/October 2020

- 6 weeks of rehearsals
- Purchase set pieces/props/costumes/other technical items

October/November 2020

- Publicize performances
- Tech week
 - Move-in technical elements (Sunday)
 - Dress rehearsals (Mon/Tues/Wed)
- Performances (Thurs/Fri/Sat)
- Move out (Saturday night/Sunday morning)

Budget

Item	Est. Cost	Details/Notes
Technical Elements		
Set	\$1,500	Backdrop, Flooring, etc.
Furniture	\$500	
Props	\$200	
Costumes	\$1,000	
Dry-Cleaning for Costumes	\$450	
Hair & Make-Up	\$100	
Lighting	\$100	
Sound	\$100	
Truck Rental	\$100	For moving set pieces in and out of the theatre
Subtotal	\$4,050	
Other Costs		
Performance Licensing	\$300	For 3 performances. Provided by Concord Theatricals .
Scripts	\$200	Includes cost of 16 scripts and shipping.
Publicity	\$100	
Photographer	\$500	
Subtotal	\$1,100	
TOTAL	\$5,150	
Estimated Income		
Arts Scholars Arts Award	\$3,000	
REMAINING TOTAL	\$2,150*	

*I am also applying for the Undergraduate Award for Arts Projects to cover the remaining cost. If I do not receive that award, I will find an alternative funding source or will curb the overall

budget to fit within the Arts Scholar Award.

15 APRIL UPDATE:

I am pleased to have been awarded the Undergraduate Award for Arts Projects, which will cover \$3,000 of the production's costs. As a result of receiving this award, I would like to amend my budget and request only the remaining total (\$2,150) from the Arts Scholar Arts Award.

Arts Participation

Over my past three years at UVA, I have participated extensively in the arts. In the Arts Scholars program, I served as Public Relations Chair last semester and worked to expand the program's recognition around grounds. I also took the Arts Scholar seminar/discussion in Fall and Spring of my second year. Within the Department of Drama, I am a drama major and assistant directed the department's production of *Lungs*. I was also one of the department's publicity managers in Spring 2019 and acted in the New Works Festival in Spring 2018. Furthermore, I have been heavily involved in student theatre. For Spectrum Theatre, I directed a production of *A View from the Bridge* and a staged reading *Collected Stories*. For Virginia Players, I directed a Lab Series production of *Constellations* in Spring 2019. For Shakespeare on the Lawn, I have acted in a production of *Julius Caesar*, set designed a production of *Macbeth*, and served on the exec board for two years. For First Year Players, I set designed their production of *The Music Man* and served on their exec board. Finally, for the past year, I have been a member of Student Council's Arts Committee.