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Arts Scholar Fourth-Year Award Outcome Report
Faculty Mentor: Dave Dalton

Directing a Full-Length Play

In the spring of 2021, I was making plans to direct a full-length production of *The Cocktail Party* by T. S. Eliot, which is what I received this grant to do. The COVID-19 pandemic began in late spring, after the production had already been confirmed and funding secured. I got as far as working with designers on the set and costumes before realizing that the University would not be in a place to be completing in-person theatrical productions. I briefly considered shifting the production to a digital format before accepting that *The Cocktail Party* simply would not be effective as an online production. Determined to direct a full-length theatrical production with the same goals in mind, I went back to the drawing board.

The main goals of directing *The Cocktail Party* had been to give myself and the other students involved experience working on a student-made large-scale production, which would help my personal goals as I transition into a postgraduate career. I wanted to learn what it is like to direct a show all the way from conceptual stages to the finished product. I kept those same goals in mind as I worked with my mentor — Dave Dalton, professor of directing in the Drama Department — to pick a new show that could be safely done during the pandemic. We had a few different options for styles of shows that could be produced following UVA's health guidelines. The first would be to film a show with a small cast where everyone can be socially-distanced. Then there's always the option of a live zoom production. And finally, Dave suggested I look into monologue-based plays that could be filmed ahead of time. I was more keen to direct a pre-filmed production of some kind, because I'd seen how much of a struggle it had been for other directors to keep an audience's attention over zoom.

I eventually settled on the play *Natives* by Glenn Waldron, which consists of overlapping monologues from three characters, so it could be filmed socially-distanced and safely. The play is particularly timely as it deals with the struggles of teenagers growing up in such an online world. I then began the conceptual work in September 2020, and found a costume designer and production manager who could collaborate on the project. I worked a lot with my mentor on how to make the production as engaging as possible, since we wouldn't have the advantage that a live theatre show has of interaction between actors and the audience. Based on his advice, I settled on a style that could combine elements of theatre and film. The majority of the "performance" would be actors talking directly to the camera, but important moments in the script would be overlaid with "expressive" scenes that weren't related directly to what the actor is talking about, but rather expressive of how they're feeling.

After making a conceptual plan, I went into rehearsals. I cast the show with three undergraduate actors and rehearsed with them one-on-one over zoom for three weeks at the end of October and the start of November. It was an interesting experience since I'd never worked on a show made up of monologues before. There also wasn't much blocking to do for the show, so we ended up spending a lot more time on analysis of the show and character work that could inform how the actors perform their lines. For the first two weeks we rehearsed either over zoom or in-person if the weather was warm enough that we could meet outside. Then, for the last week

I wanted them to practice talking to a camera, so I had them film themselves so I could watch and give notes. Finally, in mid-November it was time to start filming.

Filming was very condensed. In an ideal world, it would have been spread out over more time, but the production had been delayed so I wanted to make sure there was enough time for rehearsal. Also, for health reasons, I wanted to minimize filming days, so each monologue was filmed in a single day, and all of the “expressive scenes” were filmed outdoors. In all, the whole thing was filmed in a two-week timespan before Thanksgiving. Then, after Thanksgiving, I spent about a week editing the whole thing together (it ended up running a total of 90 minutes). Finally, we did three screenings on Youtube from December 17-19.

Although I did not get to direct a full-length in-person theatrical production as originally intended, I still achieved many of the original goals I set for myself. I gained extremely valuable experience learning how to pick a play for the right context and how to adapt a play to the circumstances that I was in. I also learned to experiment with art forms I’d never really worked with before and found ways to blend theatre and film that I never knew how to do. Finally, I learned how important it is to have a team of strong collaborators, mostly because I made the mistake of not bringing in enough collaborators to work on the project. All in all, it was a stressful project to undertake, especially because it was squeezed into a shorter time frame than originally planned and because of the circumstances, but I did gain a lot of valuable experience from *Natives*, experience that I hope to take with me as I start a career in theatre.



You can read more about *Natives* in [the review from The Cavalier Daily](#).

Budget

Natives relied on both the Fourth-Year Award from Miller Arts Scholars and the University Award for Projects in the Arts. The funding was used to purchase equipment, props, costumes, scripts, and software in order to produce this play in a digital format. I'm extremely grateful to Miller Arts Scholar program for making this project possible.

Item	Price
Filming Equipment (includes Lights & Sound)	
Camera	\$947.69
Camera Lens Adapter	\$115.82
Camera Lens	\$786.32
Extra Camera Batteries	\$23
Gimbal	\$421.19
SD Card	\$53.50
Lighting Batteries	\$58
Wireless Mic System	\$231.61
Camera Bag	\$36
Power Cords and Strip	\$15
Headphones	\$10
Total	\$2,698.13
Editing Equipment	
Hard Drive	\$283.50
Laptop Docking Station	\$146
Total	\$429.50
Software	
MotionArray Subscription (2 months)	\$59.98
Adobe Suite Student Subscription (3 months)	\$89.97
Total	\$170.14
Props & Decor	\$463.15
Costumes	\$107.56
Hair & Make-Up	\$62.81
Scripts & Production Materials	\$61.56
Publicity	\$50
Travel Expenses	\$32.11
OVERALL TOTAL	\$4,042.85

Images from *Natives*



