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Outcome Report for *An Independent Study in Shakespearean Directing and Acting:* A Lesson in Improvisation

When I wrote this proposal a year ago, attempting to shape a year-long independent study that would give me the tools to do the specialized Shakespearean directing I'm passionate about, I knew it would likely undergo change in a world still mid-pandemic, but I had no idea how much! As I will explain in more detail, my plan to build this study around summer intensives ended up needing to change drastically as the circumstances around those programs changed. I'm really grateful for the unexpected opportunities to study and get hands-on with directing that have emerged over the course of this study, and I think I've accomplished real growth as a director even if it didn't come along the path I had originally set out.

My original plan was to spend my summer studying with the Kennedy Center Directing Intensive and The Shakespeare & Company virtual summer acting intensive. I was not accepted to the former and the latter unexpectedly conflicted with my summer directing schedule, so I pretty immediately had adjustments to make. My summer was, however, far from devoid of valuable directing experience. I continued my work with Educational Theatre Company in Arlington, Virginia teaching and directing at their summer Shakespeare intensive. Directing this summer's production of *Julius Caesar* gave me a crash course in making in-person theatre happen during a pandemic, and more than anything reminded me how valuable learning Shakespeare and acting skills at a young age can be for the students I get to work with. I was pushed and challenged by unusually strict COVID safety guidelines with a cast that could not be 100% vaccinated due to their age, which made me and my production staff get extra creative with the stage pictures and violence we had to stage with actors six feet apart.

My grant resources were not absent to me during this period either. During a summer when lots of activities were canceled and attending live theatre was a challenge, the tools I was able to purchase with my Miller Arts Funds proved invaluable. Subscribing to National Theatre Live and Digital Theatre plus allowed me to watch high-quality recordings of live productions for inspiration and to challenge my instincts as I worked through a challenging mid-pandemic directing job for the first time, and the texts recommended by my faculty advisor, Dave Dalton, provided useful background reading through a more academic lense.

By the time my winter break rolled around, I had formed a plan with Dave to use the funds originally earmarked for the intensives to get myself some true in-person theatrical experience. I planned a four-day-long trip to New York to see multiple Off-Broadway productions that I intentionally chose for the elements of direction I thought would give me the

chance to observe. I saw *The Play That Goes Wrong* first, which is built around the kind of fast-paced slapstick comedy that is a hallmark of many of Shakespeare's comedies. I was particularly struck by the use of set for comedic purposes (the actors essentially destroy it by the play's end), and am excited to take some of the ideas I had while watching that production into my future work that hopefully has more of a budget than I've worked with in the past.

I also got to see *Slave Play*, an intense dive into modern-day race relations and the generational trauma of slavery on black people in America. This production affected me deeply and provoked me to reconsider the questions I had been asking in classes like Theatre and Social Change and Performance and/as Theory about whether or not it can be productive to stage trauma onstage. I wrote in my original proposal about my responsibility as a director to learn about the history of theatre as a white-dominated space and how reclaiming classical texts can be an act of decolonization and antiracism to create actively antiracist casting and rehearsal processes. This show taught me a lot about how that's accomplished on both content and production levels, by demonstrating the importance and power of staging the work of black playwrights while also making apparent the need for extremely intentional care practices for actors staging a work on racial trauma.

I had not been to an in-person production in nearly two years and I had never previously had the means to take a solo trip like this one. It was my first time getting to be an audience member on Broadway, and I am extremely grateful for that opportunity. I also got the chance to visit a former Miller Arts Scholar currently living and acting in New York which was perhaps the most helpful bit of professional development I got on the trip, as I got to hear the first-person account of a person from the same college and arts program as myself moving to Broadway to make theatre professionally. I think if I learned anything from that conversation it was that New York will probably not be the place for me immediately post-graduation, which was extremely helpful in validating my desire to take my work to regional theaters instead.

Shortly after my trip to New York, I began a very busy run of directing gigs that I am very grateful to have had the aforementioned resources for. While in New York, I was offered my first professional directing job by one of the UVA Department of Drama's MFA students, Auntais Faulkner. I directed a staged reading of his original play *Steps*, on the fastest turnaround I have ever directed a show on and for my first time with professional actors. Those factors made it a huge challenge for me as a director but the resources and experience I had behind me made it one I was eager to take on, and I was very pleased with the final performance. I spent the next month after that directing in the UVA New Works Festival, working on Karen Zipor's original play *Born Under a Single Light*. Directing in the department was a new experience for me as well because my first New Works Festival consisted of all audio dramas in 2021. Both of these opportunities stretched my ability as a director, particularly in directing new works as a director

focused on classical texts. The resources afforded by this grant, particularly the opportunity to study live theatre in New York immediately before, were a significant asset to my work.

The culminating project of my independent study is the part I am most excited about, and my plans to execute it are in full swing. The previously mentioned summer of Covid limitations drove many of us to discover new forms of at-home entertainment, and the medium that grabbed my attention and excitement was Dungeons & Dragons podcasts. Having never played the game myself, I was struck by how distinctly theatrical the collaborative storytelling roles of Game Masters and Players were as they fulfilled the roles of directors and actors in a differently structured setting. Filling out character sheets reminded me of the table work I love to do with actors and the improvisation and performance skills necessary to make an entertaining real-play recording of a role-playing game excite me as a storytelling form. The audio equipment I was able to purchase through this grant will give me the opportunity to record, produce, and publish *Bardic Inspiration: A Real-Play Adaptation of A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This project has also given me the opportunity to do the kind of interdisciplinary artistic collaboration I sought out when I applied to be a Miller Arts Scholar. I'm working with a group of assistant directors, dramaturgs, musical composers, and visual artists contributing to making this RPG audio drama come to life. I begin my direction of this culminating project in mid-March, and we hope to publish it on streaming platforms by the end of April.

Final Budget

Expense Type	Cost	Description
Shakespeare & Company	\$15	Application Fee
Audio Drama Equipment	\$1273.76	Microphones, Preamp, Adapter Cords
New York Trip	\$1159.12	Transportation (Amtrak), Meals, Tickets (<i>The Play that Goes Wrong</i> & <i>Slave Play</i>)
Directing Texts	\$163.33	Shakespeare our Contemporary, The Empty Space, Subsequent Performances, Directing Shakespeare in America, A Director Prepares, The Paper Canoe
Equitable/Antiracist Theatre Texts	\$119.54	Ensemble-Made Chicago, Shakespeare on the Shades of Racism, We Do This Til We Free Us
Streaming Services	\$268.75	National Theatre & Digital Theatre Online