

PAGE TO STAGE: A DRAMATURG'S DUTY

The nature of theatre is inherently collaborative. It is a process that demands teamwork, open mindedness, and communication. It truly takes a village to put a show on its feet, especially in student theatre where the final product is the labor of more than twenty undergraduates who are learning as they go. But theatre is not only a collaborative form internally — it also thrives when put in conversation with other disciplines. Every play or musical has had some connection to issues that stretch beyond the stage — for example, what is *Rent* without its theme of how people in the LGBTQ+ community are treated in the United States and what is *Les Misérables* without its themes of social injustice and revolution?

This is also applicable to *The Other Place*, a play written by Sharr White and produced by the Boston College Dramatics Society in the Bonn Studio Theatre from April 7-9, 2022. The play follows Juliana Smithton, a brilliant neurologist whose life is beginning to unravel. Over the course of the play's eighty-minute runtime, it is revealed that she has developed early-onset Alzheimer's and is imagining conversations with her daughter who ran away as a teenager. It is a text tied intricately with medicine and medical concepts.

The Other Place connects with these themes in two ways: telling and showing. Throughout the play, Juliana is seen giving a lecture about a medication she has developed that combats dementia. These monologues are full of medical jargon that directly discuss medical concepts and scientific explanations for brain disorders.

The play also hints at Alzheimer's in more subtle ways, especially in the character of Juliana, whose symptoms slowly become more noticeable as the play goes on.

The job of a Dramaturg is to draw out the themes of a text and help the cast, production team, and audience connect with and understand the play in its entirety. The primary way a Dramaturg accomplishes this is by asking questions — questions of characters, of settings, of words. These questions, and their answers (or lack thereof), can be communicated in a number of ways. In my work as Dramaturg on *The Other Place*, it took the form of an information packet, slideshow presentation, continuous conversation throughout the rehearsal process, a note in the program, and a post-show lobby display with information and resources.

College spaces are the perfect environment for these types of collaborations to thrive. The conversations I had throughout this process proved that. Most notable was the work with Dr. Karen Lyons of the Connell School of Nursing, an expert in the study of aging, and *The Medical Humanities Journal*, this very publication which perfectly mirrors the dramatic and scientific aspects of *The Other Place*. Altogether, working on this show was a process that reaffirmed my belief in the magic of theatre and reinforced my steadfast commitment to ensuring that “art for art's sake” is replaced by meaningful dialogues about important issues in our immediate and wider community. Theatre must remain collaborative for it to remain relevant.

AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA THOMPSON, DIRECTOR OF "THE OTHER PLACE"

Q: *Why do you call yourselves “the fishes”?*

A: Why that's our mascot? It just is (laughs). The Fish has been with us for as long as I know. We're the oldest student group on campus, we started in 1865, and I don't think we were the Fish back then, but somewhere along the way that got picked up. I know. It's strange. It was like a group of students. I don't remember what play they were producing, but they just banded together and said, “what if we put on a show” and suddenly the ds was born and that was it.

Q: *So you said you're primarily an actress, what's your experience with that?*

A: Um, I started acting when I was in sixth grade, and I kind of got bit by the bug and it has followed me throughout my entire life. Since then I've been in close to 50 productions in some capacity, whether it be acting, typical work, directing. But yeah, and it's been a huge passion of mine for a long time. When I got to college, I was like, There's no way I'm letting it go. So I picked up the theater major and it just makes me really happy and it's what I love. And yeah, acting is kind of my main faculty.

Q: *But you're the director of this play right? How did that happen?*

A: So directing it is kind of I feel like a lot of the

people I know there's some overlap between acting and directing. It's not always the case, but I think there's a love of character study that comes into both and there's some overlap in that. So instead of the playing one character, you always play all of them. So there's a lot of freedom in both (acting and directing). And I've loved like facilitating other people's discoveries of their characters. This is the first time I've directed in a while. I haven't directed since sophomore year of high school, so it's been really fun.

Q: *How does the biology major fit into everything, since you're a Biology and Theater double major?*

A: So I originally thought I was going to be pre-med. I spent a lot, like pretty much the entirety of my life thinking I was going to be a doctor. It was just like it was my thing. I was interested in anesthesiology, dermatology and so on. And I was like, this is what I want. You know, I'm good at this. This feels right to me. And then I got to college and I started doing a lot of the pre-med coursework and I started to realize that it just kind of wasn't filling my cup the way that I wanted it to. I chose my theater major because I wanted to have both. And I was a bio B.S. with pre-med. And I was just I think part of it was pandemic and like being locked in

a box for, oh, sophomore year and taking organic chemistry online. But I just did not feel fulfilled by what I was doing at that current moment. So I was also taking EcoEvo at the time, and I absolutely loved that because I liked going out on walks in nature and things and I was like, This feels right to me, so I'm going to kind of redirect myself. So I dropped the pre-med, kept the bio, redirected my coursework towards more ecology, organismal biology, physiology type thing. And that has made me a much happier and more balanced person.

Q: What inspired you to direct specifically about the intersection of biology and theater?

A: I thought it was going to be like a couple of bio jokes and then, you know, play. But I asked for feedback a little bit from the playwright. In our conversations the chemistry lucky enough to go with him, it came from talking primarily about his mother and his experiences with her. And then in that, you know, dementia came into the fold and then he was like, okay, we've got to make her the smartest person in the room. Let's bring this jargon into it and see how that affects their perception of her. And when I first read it, I was just like, Oh, these are my interests in mine. And they fit together so beautifully. And her command of these concepts and of these ideas and her ability to communicate them is so intrinsic to who she is that losing that makes us so much more empathetic for her as a character. And I love the way that they work together to make a really cohesive story and to give us a very clear understanding of this person. So it felt very personal to me and it felt like just a really wonderful play.

Q: Do you think you'll direct again in the future?

A: You know, I might direct again in the future. I'm definitely open to it. I love being the Director. Yeah, it's been really fun and I have had the best experience this year. I don't really have any other directing projects lined up, but I'm open to it in the future.

Q: What are the origins of the play?

A: So the play actually was developed back in

like 2012, oh, with the actress Laurie Metcalf, the director Joe Mantello. And it went to Broadway with that whole original company, with that playwright. So in this case, once it went to Broadway, then the playwright Sharr (White), he basically goes to a publishing company and says, I want to license out my work so it can be performed all over the country. And then we go to the licensing service and we say, we want to do this play at this time. They send us the contract; we sign it. So I had no hand in the creative process of the creation of this play. I just happened to find it and love it.

Q: What did (Sharr White) say?

A: What did he say? He was wonderful. He was a little bit surprised, I think, that we were doing the play as undergrads. He was like, Oh yeah, 21 year olds playing 50 year olds. Yeah. I think that's something that's like and yeah, when you're a Broadway playwright, you don't really think about your work, you know, going to younger people. You can do professional contacts. But he was very excited that we were doing it incredibly helpful and answered a lot of our questions beautifully. And he was just very supportive.

Q: What was the process of picking this play, then?

A: Part of the way the DS picks the shows that they produce is that they just have an application process. I'm also a board member on the DS, so I just applied to my own group, and I wasn't a part of the selection conversation, but that was the process. I have this play that I love, and I went to the DS and I said, I'd love to direct this show for you next year. This is my vision for it, This is why I want to do it, I Write everything out. I do an interview, and then they select their season. I was lucky enough to be selected and to have my show selected. There are also cases where they'll select the director for them to be like, we don't love your show for this reason, or it's just not really feasible, So we'll select a different show for you. But they liked the show. They liked me. So I was able to get a slot to produce it. And since then, it's been doing things like picking designers who I know and trust, all students, and casting the show and things like that. So since then, it was a lot of, like, reading it, analyzing it, thinking

about what I wanted, and how I wanted to see it come to life. Then things really started happening over winter break when we started thinking about: "what do we want it to look like?" We did designs, pulled it together, got our budgets in, and then we cast the show back in January and started rehearsing late February.

Q: What's the role of the dramaturg?

A: Yeah. So Tyler is the dramaturg and the assistant stage manager. So as the assistant stage manager, he helps our stage manager, Emily, with anything that she needs. So he'll be backstage with a headset on, like handing props to people, moving set pieces, things like that. And he also does a lot more, like paperwork, things like tracking the props throughout the entire show on a spreadsheet.

He's wonderful. And then as a dramaturg, the role of a dramaturg gets a little bit fuzzy, and it's a bit of a newer concept, but I think that the best way to describe it is kind of as an audience advocate. So he's someone in the room to help clarify things for designers, actors, me, and he's someone who does research and answers questions, poses thoughts about the way the play is constructed and how that can help us in our interpretation of it, things like that.

Q: Let's say I'm someone who's been deeply affected by dementia. What message do you want to get across to these kinds of people?

A: It's hard because it's very personal for me, too. So I'm, like, kind of speaking for myself. I'm trying to think of what I want myself to take away from it as well. And I think it's largely that even when we no longer really have the people we loved in the same capacity, if they're not there with all their memories, we have to watch them kind of go through this process, and we feel like we're losing them. I want the audience to know that the essence of who they are is still there and that they're still that person even without their memories or without the things that we may have thought made them them before. And I think we can walk away with it with just a tremendous amount of empathy and love and extra care for those people and thinking of them just knowing that in some way they're still present, even it's not as clear.

Q: If you could describe the play in one word, what would it be?

A: I think that the play is—this is going to sound so strange when I say it— pulsating. In your experience of it, it just drives forward and it has its own life and it's quick and it's strong, and it just has this kind of underlying wave of energy throughout it where we're building and building, and it feels like you're on a roller coaster that's about to lose control, but you kind of are and everything feels slippery. But there's this energy and electricity underneath it, and you know that it's just going to get more and more off course the further you go. And there's excitement to that. So it's kind of like your own heart is racing. And I think it lives and breathes and it changes a lot. So, yeah, I think of it as like a heartbeat and a pulse.

Q: If your middle school self could see you now, what would she think?

A: Yeah. I mean, I think she'd be very happy with where I am and that even though I'm no longer planning on going to Med school, seeing that desire and those interests live on in a new context, I think it's still really powerful. And I'd like to think that 6th grade me would be proud of me and would be happy with where we are. Yeah. I think I'd be very proud of how far I've come since then and how Theater has given me an Avenue to appreciate my love of science in a new light.

Q: What was the first play that you directed about? What is also biologically related?

A: It was very different. It wasn't even, like a full thought through play. It was a cabaret. So it was just musical numbers taken from different musicals, all different ones kind of glamorated together. So we had, like a cast of 15, and one person would do a solo from one musical, and then there'd be a group number from another musical just back to back. It was really fun to do, but a very different ballgame in terms of how you direct that.

Q: What are your plans for the future with this play specifically, or if you're looking to move in a different direction? What are you aiming to do as a part of DS?

A: I mean, I love this play, and I just want to take next weekend and really share it with the BC

community and allow them to enjoy it. And then for anyone who might miss it, we're also going to be at Arts Fest. We're going to perform a small selection there. That's the immediate future of the play—Just looking forward to performing it. Unfortunately, theater is a non permanent art form and in College there's no way for us to get funding to take it anywhere else. So this play will, in this production, live and die on BC's campus but I don't think that that's a bad thing at all. I think it's a very special thing at this moment. For me personally, I definitely want to continue doing what I do in theater and enjoying my time here at BC as an artist.

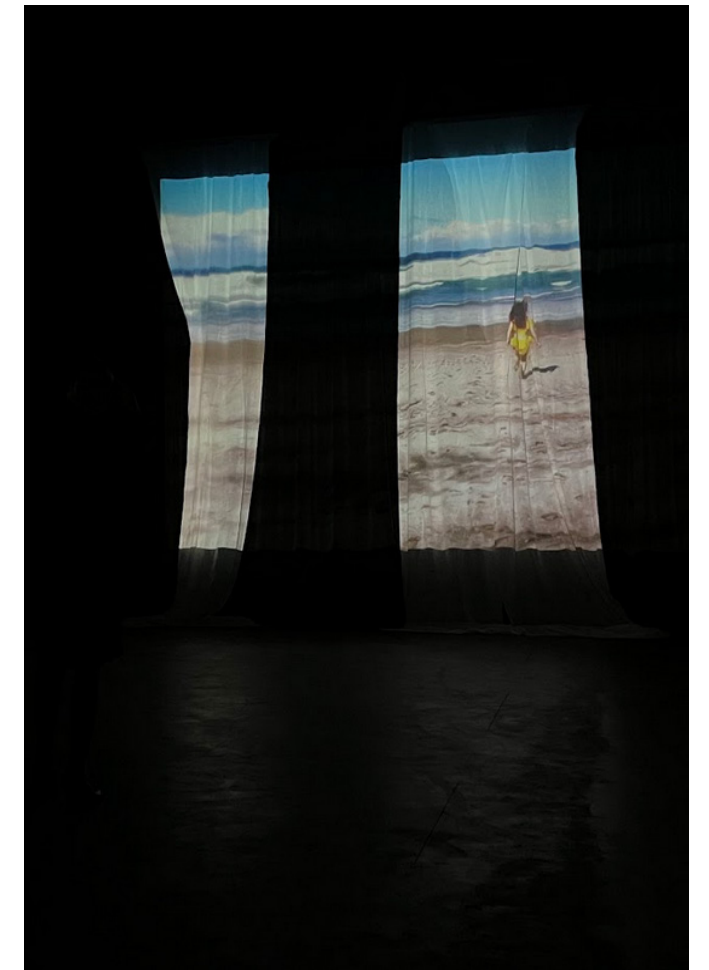
Q: What do you want to happen for your future specifically? I know that you said you wanted to be a doctor but then now what's happening?

A: Yeah, right now it's very up in the air. I definitely thought when I dropped Premed last year that I'd have an answer by now but I'm open to a lot of things. I'm open to pursuing theater. Seeing where that takes me. I love it and it makes me really happy. Unfortunately, it's just not a super secure career option, so I'm also interested in law school, potentially vet school, even going on to get a Ph.D. and teach ecology. Things like that I think would all make me very happy and very fulfilled and it's great to have a lot of doors open and just not know which one to choose yet.

PHOTOS FROM "THE OTHER PLACE"



Juliana and Laurel



The Girl in the Yellow Bikini

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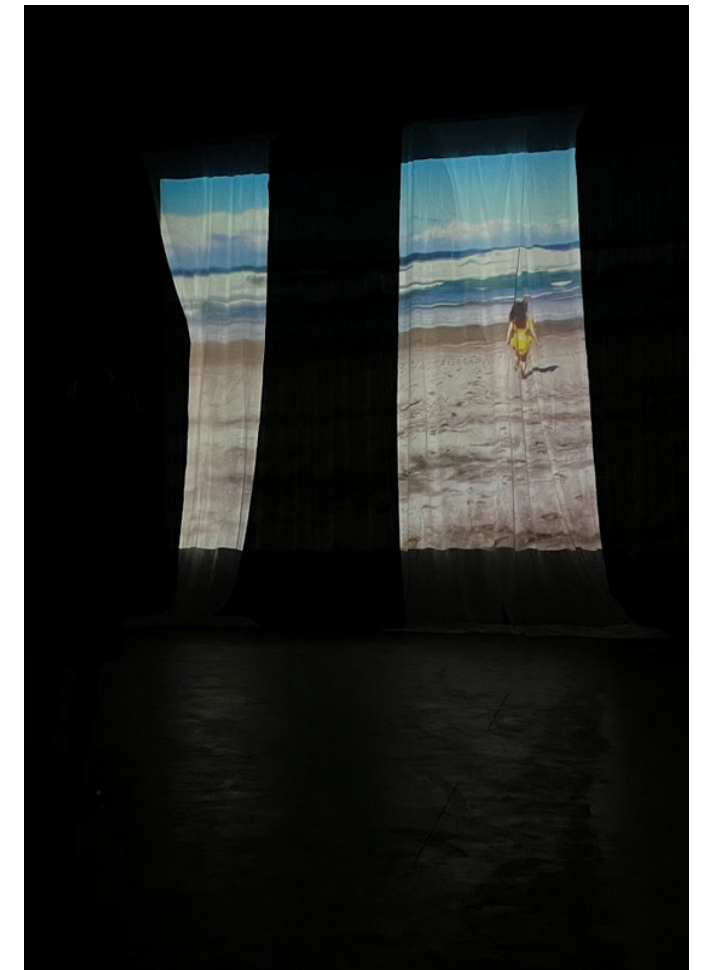
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Juliana and Laurel



The Girl in the Yellow Bikini



The Woman and Juliana



Juliana and Ian



Juliana's Final Lecture



Juliana, Ian, and Dr. Teller



Juliana



The Woman and Juliana