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THE GRADUATE MUSICAL THEATRE WRITING PROGRAM

FALL 2017 NEWSLETTER

Creating an Immersive Hit: KPOP



This last fall, KPOP, a new immersive musical inspired by the beloved pop genre exploded onto the New York City theatre scene at Ars Nova. Produced in partnership with Ma-Yi Theater Company and Woodshed Collective, with music and lyrics by GMTWP alums Helen Park & Max Vernon (both Cycle 22), book by Jason Kim, direction by Teddy Bergman, and musical direction by GMTWP alum Sujin Park (Cycle 22), KPOP received critical acclaim as well as an extension due to its popularity. We had the chance to interview Helen and Max to discuss the creation of the show.

How did the idea for KPOP come into existence?

Helen Park (HP): Our director Teddy Bergman and Jason Kim, our bookwriter, thought it would be insane yet amazing to create an immersive show based on the KPOP phenomenon. They were introduced to each other by Ars Nova who got excited about the idea. As soon as that idea was formed, Max and I were quickly brought on as songwriters among others. After the initial workshop in Spring 2014 that consisted of songs and choreography, everyone agreed that it would be best if Max and I collaborate and write a cohesive score for the show, and that's how the core creative team—Teddy, Jason, Max and myself—was formed. Ars Nova commissioned us and we worked on the show for the last three and a half years to develop the show and put it up Off-Broadway this past fall.

Max Vernon (MV): Ars Nova had seen one of Woodshed Collective's immersive/installation theatre pieces and got excited about having them create a spectacular event in their building. Psy's Gangnam Style had just come out and created this viral sensation on the internet, so Woodshed pitched the idea of a KPOP show. Ars nova recommended me as a composer because before coming to grad school they had workshopped my musical, WIRED, which was all electronic pop music, so they knew I had a love of the genre and also that I was a producer. Meanwhile, during grad school Helen Park and I had bonded over our love of pop music, and she played me this amazing KPOP song she'd written called "Shopaholic." When I met with Woodshed's Artistic Director, Teddy Bergman, I told him there was no way we could do the show without Helen.

The genre of K-pop obviously plays a significant role in the telling of this story. How did you go about incorporating it into the makeup of the show?

MV: Because we felt very strongly that the songs had to be legitimate pop songs that could be played on the radio, and not just "poppy" musical theatre tunes, there wasn't a ton of storytelling real estate to be had for the lyrics. Within KPOP there are so many different types of songs—hype-y club banger tracks, romantic ballads, trap-heavy rap tracks, etc. Those different beats and grooves make your body feel a certain type of way. So instead of taking a lyrical cue, we often used the vibe of the songs to determine book placement. In terms of the performance, we had to put our actors through popstar bootcamp to hammer out those conservatory musical theatre edges.

HP: The producers wanted the show to stick to the existing genre of K-pop. Max and I felt up to the challenge to steer away from the traditional musical theater structure and stay true to the pop structure. We still wanted the songs to move the story forward in some way, so we were in constant communication with each other and with Jason Kim about what each song moment was trying to achieve and what emotional effect we would want to create for the characters and the audience. As a result, we created songs that felt appropriate for the moment in the story and the show but which were also true to the existing genre of K-pop—a lot of verse-chorus songs that could easily work as stand-alone pop songs.

Which came first? K-Pop or story? How did one influence the other?

MV: Helen and I started writing music before we even knew what the story was going to be. Our first workshop four years ago was just a performance of a bunch of songs and some choreography. Over

the four years we developed the piece, the book kept changing so much because it was entirely dependent on space. When the size of the show ultimately outgrew Ars Nova and we moved into the Art/NY space, most of the book had to be rewritten because suddenly nothing worked in the new environment or timed out correctly.

HP: We started out with a _____ we _____ as we continued to write more songs, Jason was in the other corner writing the book. A lot of the songs were the result of the creative team discussing what type of song and what emotional effect was needed for the story, but sometimes it was the other way around—the songs dictating the direction of the book. We went through a lot of script changes, so there was a lot of rearranging of the songs as well.



Photos by HanJie Chow

LEFT: John Yi, Jason Tam, Jinwoo Jung, Joomin Hwang, Jiho Kang

RIGHT: Susannah Kim, Deborah Kim, Julia Abueva, Katie Lee Hill, Cathy Ang, Sun Hye Park

What were the challenges working in a musical genre that is already well established in pop culture and so beloved by so many?

HP: The biggest challenge for me was representing K-pop right. The story we were trying to tell centered on how much Korean people obsess over trying to be “perfect”. Knowing existing major K-pop labels and the insane amount of training and organization that goes into incubating world stars, I felt it was my responsibility to replicate the quality in the songwriting and music production as best as I could. The last thing I wanted was for people to get the wrong impression about K-pop music—that it’s simply funny or dumb. This required a significant amount of time and effort to learn what producers in the field do. I also researched what sounds are “current”. I constantly watched YouTube tutorials on music production, all of which were necessary steps in creating this fictional world that is based on an already well-established, popular genre.

Another challenge was having the songs contain both Korean and English lyrics and still have them be interesting and appealing. Most of the audiences were non-Koreans, so we had to keep that in mind when writing the show and make sure that even if someone understood only a part of the song, they would still capture what the song was about and feel the emotions coming through it. As I was writing the songs, I realized that the power of pop music transcends language. The music itself can be the universal language, and so a lot of the songs actually came music first. I think this made the songs “catchy” even though people had no idea what some of the words meant.

MV: I felt a huge pressure just to not f*ck it up. I have a huge love and admiration for Korean culture and I didn't want to create something that seemed like a parody. People can tell when you use garageband drum loops, versus spending thirty hours to create your own beats. Over four years, I pushed myself to become a better music producer because it was important for me to show that we were honoring and respecting KPOP, rather than making fun of it.

How did you go about creating the score for the show?

MV: Helen and I worked every possible way. There were songs we wrote independently of each other. There were songs where she would write a verse and then I would write a chorus. There were songs where I wrote a chorus and she'd add harmonies and a counter melody. She wrote Korean lyric hooks on my tunes. I wrote English lyrics on some of her tunes, and we both did our own production. Over four years I think we wrote nearly 50 songs between the two of us, several of which got written together in 30 minutes or less in the basement at Ars Nova. Helen and I have like a psychic creative connection as this point, so I think we can write very fast.

HP: It was a rather smooth collaboration due to our trust in each other's musical instincts. We gave very honest feedback to each other, which we never took personally because of our respect for each other's musical sensibilities and because we knew we wanted the absolute best for the show.

We also stuck to the pop world's definition of "songwriter" which, nowadays means not only serving as the writer for the melody and harmony (or piano/vocals in musical theater), but also as the music producer who mixes and arranges synths, drums, and sounds. Sometimes we would write the melody on top of a beat we had created and then add layers onto it as the song would become more defined. Other times we would have a melodic and harmonic idea for a song and create a beat around it.

How did working with the actors you cast influence the direction and writing of the show?

MV: We had a workshop about 6 months before rehearsals started that was kind of a disaster. Nothing was working; the show felt trapped between a book-musical and an immersive experience but was not particularly satisfying as either. Our workshop cast was technically talented, but a lot of them had more of a musical theatre background and didn't look/sound/move like K-Pop stars. We felt we had put something forward that was inauthentic and didn't feel like K-Pop, which provoked a lot of conversations around "well what the hell does it mean to be Korean anyway?" Helen has her experience. Jason has his experience. Sujin has her experience. And those are all completely different. So, we realized the answer to that question was to make the show itself the question. We started responding to the performers that we cast. If an actor was Korean-American (as opposed to being Korean or half-Korean), Jason wrote that into the show and made those conflicts in identity a central part of the story. Rather than trying to ignore Sun Hye Park's accent, we created a dialogue around it and said to the audience, "Why does America have such a problem with Asian accents? French accents are seen as sexy, so where is this racist perception coming from?"

HP: In terms of music, we were not precious about the keys for each song, and for some songs, we had to adjust the keys for each “artist” in order to bring out the most “star quality” sound in them. We experimented with various keys and tempos with the actors, and that in turn shaped the final version of the songs. It was also fun working with performers who were great “riffers” or strong belters and incorporating their respective skills into the score. I remember for the song “Phoenix”, which is the victorious song that Mwe sings in the final concert, Ashley Park, who played the Mwe, and I sat in the room together and collaboratively created a riff which skyrockets to a high C, thus incorporating her skills as a soprano (which were showcased in the Broadway revival of *The King and I*. I had written a different riff, and that moment when we came up with a new riff together was so magical and one I will remember for a long time.



Photo by Ben Arons
IN PHOTO: Jason Tam

What was the process and what were the pros/challenges of creating an immersive experience?

HP: The process of creating an immersive experience was unlike anything I'd experienced or heard of. It was a lot of math and calculations because we needed to make the experience smooth for the audience, and that depended on the space and the transition time from one room to another. Having three groups of audiences move through three different tracks simultaneously and end up where we wanted them to in time was extremely challenging to say the least. But with the army of people who

worked on the show, including the design team from Woodshed, and the amazing stage management crew, we were able to make it work.

MV: So often we had to write to a time signature. Scenes could not progress unless certain "trigger" events happened: a character walking through the door at the correct time, someone exiting, video sequences playing, etc. The show has something like 40 plus variations on how it can be experienced depending on which order and groups you are assigned, not to mention the one-on-one special audience/actor encounters. During the first week of performances many of the timings did not sync up, and actors were left alone in rooms having to improv to themselves until given the cue that they could move on. Another challenge was sound proofing— having 30 ceiling-less rooms next to each other with simultaneous music and dialogue created problems (who would have known????).

What's next for you and for the show?

HP: We're hoping for a KPOP version 2.0 to happen very soon. Fingers crossed! I'm also currently writing songs for an animated film feature at Dreamworks.

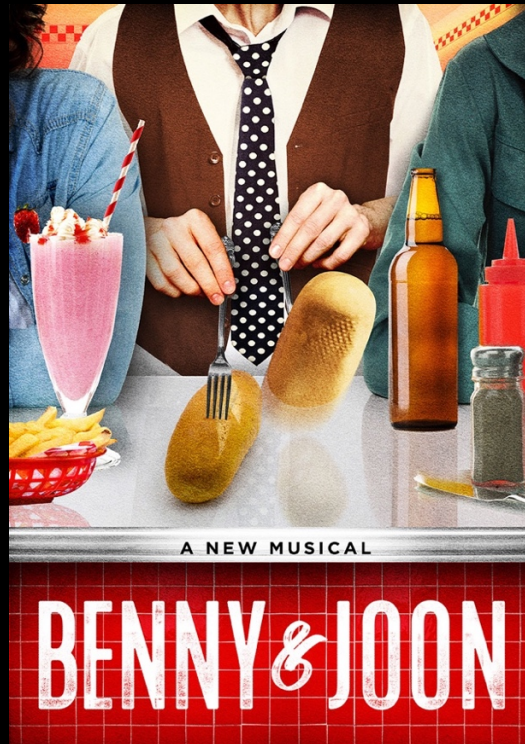
MV: We can't announce anything official just yet, but I promise you have not seen the last of KPOP. My new musical *The View UpStairs* is going to Australia, Chicago, Atlanta, and San Francisco, and I'm back at the piano composing for three new shows.



Photo by Ben Arons

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Katie Lee Hill, Deborah Kim, Sun Hye Park, Julia Abueva, Cathy Ang, Susannah Kim

World Premiere of BENNY & JOON at Old Globe



The Old Globe located in San Diego opened its 2016-17 season with a new musical written by GMTWP alums Mindi Dickstein (Cycle 5, GMTWP Adjunct Faculty) and Kirsten Guenther (Cycle 16). Dickstein, who wrote lyrics, and Guenther, who penned the book, collaborated with critically acclaimed composer and pianist Nolan Gasser, who served as composer for the piece. With musical direction by another GMTWP alum, J. Oconer Navarro (Cycle 15), the new musical, which is based on the offbeat 1993 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film of the same name, ran at the prestigious regional theatre from September 7th through October 22nd, 2017 and received three San Diego Theater Critics Award nominations, including one for Outstanding New Musical. Mindi Dickstein recounted the process of bringing a beloved film to the stage.

How did the production at the Old Globe come about?

The production was a direct result of our participation in the National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT) Conference in fall 2016. Our commercial producer had submitted a script and demos to The Old Globe after we completed a workshop of the musical at the Transport Group in 2015, but when Eric Keen-Louie, associate artistic director of The Old Globe, saw the 45-minute excerpt (which included revisions made since our workshop), he felt we were ready. We were actually discussing a world premiere with several U.S. regional theaters who saw our presentation at NAMT, all of them for 2018-2019, but when The Old Globe made fall 2017 a possibility for us -- that's where we went.

What was the writing process like working out-of-town?

The writing process was the same as it always is: intense, swift, exhausting. A lot like the two years at GMTWP. We rehearsed for a month in rehearsal studios in Balboa Park, where The Old Globe is located in San Diego. The studios were in a building called The House of Charm. As with any rehearsal

process we made small changes daily, often in response to the needs of the production or questions from the actors, and once we got to the point where we could see runs of the show we were able to start seeing the big picture changes that were needed, mostly in the form of cuts and rearrangements of material, new songs (at least one) and scenes. During the week of tech and the week of previews I think we worked 20 hours a day. Starting the day with creative meetings, then rehearsals with cast and tech, then a 2-hour dinner break usually devoted (as well) to creative meetings, then evening rehearsals (during tech) and performances (during previews), followed by tech meetings and, yes, more creative meetings. Creative meetings were devoted to reviewing new material and discussing changes to come (whether those were writing, staging or some other technical detail to be discussed among the bookwriter, lyricist, composer, director and choreographer). Exhausting but exhilarating. We accomplished a lot in a short amount of time.

What were the challenges of adapting the film into a stage musical?

The biggest challenge, from a lyrics perspective, was getting inside the characters' heads. In a film, and certainly this one is no exception, the cinematic rules of storytelling dictate minimal dialogue, close-ups, long visual panning shots, the use of silence and visual cues to convey deep or complex emotion. It's a guess, really, what is happening specifically in their minds, which is fine for a movie where the visual images often cue the gist of a moment. In a musical, none of these cinematic tools is at our disposal. We use music, sung thoughts and conversations, and vivid language to reveal the emotional journey. On a stage, the lyrics conjure the world, the senses, the emotions, they crystallize characters and actions. Sometimes it is a matter of trial and error, to discover each character's truth, sometimes not; ultimately the goal is to render the essence of the original film in an equivalent, if not a literal, way.



THE BENNY AND JOON WRITING TEAM
(from left to right): Kirsten Guenther (book), Nolan Gasser (music), Mindi Dickstein (lyrics)

Once you found the actors who played Benny and Joon, how did working with them influence the direction of the show?

We found Hannah Elless when we did our first reading (which only had a half a score) in January 2013. She is a gift—able to mine a scene or a song for every detail and nuance it contains. We did

do one reading once without her (she was doing another show out of town) and I really felt the difference. She just always seemed to have a deep connection to the material. Andrew Samonsky started playing Benny when we did the workshop at The Transport Group. We had seen two or three others in this role, all very good but not quite right for one reason or another, and with Andrew we felt we found the right combination of qualities that defined the very complicated Benny. I wouldn't say they have influenced the direction of the show -- the story is the story -- but they have certainly raised questions over time that have helped us to more deeply illuminate moments.

What's next for the show?

At this point there is interest, again, from a few different regional theater companies. Nothing to announce yet but I am optimistic we will get to continue our work on this beautiful story.

{MY LINGERIE PLAY}: Exploring the Gender Politic with Diana Oh



Described by the press as part play, part protest, part concert, and part installation, GMTWP alum Diana Oh's (Cycle 19) *{my lingerie play}* heralded in the new season at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater this past fall. Co-directed by Orion Stephanie Johnstone and featuring Ryan McCurdy, Matt Park, and Rocky Vega in the on-stage band, *{my lingerie play}* explored gender politics and mainstream culture's relationship to the female and gender-queer body. Diana discussed the project with us.

What inspired you to create this piece?

I read an anonymous article online of a woman who took photos of her lingerie collection. Underneath each photo was a story about that piece of lingerie. The article inspired me to talk about my own collection of lingerie, but in my own way, within the context of a live concert. While wearing my lingerie I would sing relevant songs about each piece and shoot the shit with the audience so that I could show the humanity of the sexual woman, and the humanity of well, me.

What has been the journey of the piece from its genesis to the most recent production at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater?

I started writing the piece in 2014, and eventually it came to the point where I threw my pen down and thought to myself, "This is bullshit. The message of this piece needs to extend beyond theatre-going audiences. This message is for the masses." And then I stood in Times Square in my lingerie on top of a soap box with brown paper bags with messages on them explaining why I would decide to stand in my lingerie in Times Square as a woman who enjoys wearing lingerie but does not enjoy being violated, raped, threatened, or dehumanized. During that first time standing out in Times Square, I gave myself the assignment to do ten street installations, and suddenly the project as a whole became {my lingerie play}: ten underground performance installations in my lingerie staged in an effort to provide a safer, more courageous world for women, queer, trans, and non-binary humans—FOR US ALL—to live in. The street installations culminated in a concert as the 9th installation. The 10th installation was born out of the audience members who came together. I met Daniella Topol at New Songs Now at Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre in which I was one of their featured songwriters. We read the script for the concert around the table and she wanted to produce it. We really saw each other which made for an incredibly grounding and passionate collaboration. With Rattlestick, I won the Venturous Capital Grant and am currently their TOW Playwright-in-Residence so I was able to create the street installations anew for 2017, update the script for the concert, and take the installations to be performed in New Orleans, Virginia, in front of The White House in Washington, D.C., and in various locations in New York. For the 10th installation, I was able to do something I had always wanted to do: invite all audience members to participate and partake together in the final installation at Christopher Street Pier. You can watch all street installations at www.mylingerieplay.com

As someone who identifies as a queer artist of color, what are the challenges you face in the current theatre scene? How has your art addressed these challenges?

I really felt the effects of the lens through which people view theatre, something I would call them out on in the concert by asking audience members to remove their "theatre helmet." This is why live music, watching bands, and admiring recording artists really matters to me and my artistic process. There's a lid that really pops off during presentations with live music, and when watching recording artist personas that some theatre consumers might be a little confused by. I had to learn that I am, in many ways, creating my own genre of art-making and theatre-making, which might be uncomfortable for some (and exciting for many), but definitely necessary for me. Queerness is messy. Being an artist of color is messy. I'm only now learning that English was not my first language. I was fluent in Korean before I learned how to speak English, and then I learned French, and I can understand Spanish. I don't believe in the gender binary. I think there's an endless array of genders people can be. I straddle many worlds because of this, and I think my voice and the work that I make represents that. Needing to compartmentalize my voice was a hard pill for me to swallow, because well, COMPARTMENTALIZING HAS ALWAYS BEEN HARD FOR ME. I believe in nuanced contradiction. And in needing to label my work, I knew that what I was making wasn't a musical, and it wasn't a straight-forward concert, and it wasn't a storytelling memoir. It was an experience. It was a

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give a clean label for what I'm trying to make and I don't have a clean label for it. The best way I know how to describe the work I want to make is by calling it an EXPERIENCE, an EVENT, a PERFORMANCE. These descriptors give me the most room in which to breathe and create unapologetically and cast spells. I believe art is spiritual and it casts spells, and the work I make

welcomes and calls for this vulnerability from the performer and the audience alike. I don't believe my art should be consumed. I believe my art should be experienced—like a ceremony of catharsis. It's these kinds of exchanges between performer and audience that are really fulfilling for me as an audience member and a creator of work. I also think when the people writing about theatre aren't queer people of color, lifetimes of nuances fall right through the cracks. We have sex so differently from the cis-gendered heteronormative world, and I love it when people who understand that can write about my work. I can really feel the difference in how my identity is cared for.



Diana Oh

What are your goals as an artist?

To continue exactly what I'm doing and to never feel like I'm in a cage. I am accountable to my collaborators. I am accountable to their safety and happiness. My collaborators are people of colors, transpeople, non-binary, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, intersex, women. I am personally accountable to my collaborators, and until I can feel like we live in a world that is safe and nurturing for them, then my work isn't done. ALSO, WE NEED A NEW SEX EDUCATION SYSTEM!!! OUR CURRENT SEX EDUCATION SUCKS!

How has working with Rattlestick help you to achieve your goals as an artist?

Rattlestick is artist-driven—a theatre company that honors the impulses of the Artist. They look for possibility and how to break new ground. They have so much integrity in their work as producers and are profoundly committed to the work of collective liberation as producers. Being their TOW Writer-in-Residence this year allows me to practically follow through with what I feel responsible to create as an artist.

What's next for you?

Lots of traveling and resting. This past year really took it out of me. I'll be doing {my lingerie play} in the Fall and then travel with it in 2019. Meanwhile, lots of journaling, getting more piercings, doing glitter make-up for my friends. Follow it all on Instagram and online: @dianawhoa @mylingerieplay

An Exercise in Interactive Art: Halloween at the GMTWP



On the evening of October 29th, The Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program had been massively transformed into a Pleasantville-esque township called Twyp (pronounced “twip”). Practice rooms and offices became locations of the township’s drug store, police station, chapel, funeral home, grocer, library, radio station, science lab, nursery, and town dump. Hallways were transformed into back alleys, a cemetery, and a town square. At 6:30 PM sharp, around 60 costume-clad individuals, all of whom had received a mysterious invitation to The 24th Annual Twyp Township Community Players Halloween Ball, were funneled into the fully decorated, chandelier-lit “Twyp Town Hall” to dance the night away. Unfortunately for them, their night was about to take a terrorizing turn. After a mysterious power failure threw the entire town into darkness during the Twyp Mayor’s speech, the guests were cast into a complex horror-filled storyline in which they would encounter alien larvae, secret tasks, and strange-acting community shop and business owners whose bodies had been taken over by malicious extraterrestrials. The objective? Uncover the alien threat and save their sleepy town from being completely overrun by an invasion.

A result of months of preparation and planning, this was the second haunted house-style, immersive, story-driven event that the GMTWP had hosted. Created and run by students, faculty, and staff at the GMTWP, with lighting designs by students from the Department of Design for Stage and Film, the evening, aside from being a spooky and entertaining soiree, was a way for students to explore world building and storytelling techniques in an immersive and interactive way. The concept for such an event was devised by GMTWP faculty member and program alum, Robert Lee (Cycle 6). We asked Robert to discuss the event in further detail.

How did the idea to create a Halloween event come about?

The idea of a Program Halloween event goes all the way back to when we were on Second Avenue—I remember having a conversation with GMTWP alum and Administrative Coordinator Danny Larsen (Cycle 14) about an annual concert which might feature new one-act musicals based on Asian ghost stories, which we both loved. Halloween is such an evocative and theatrical time of year it seemed like a no-brainer that we should try to do something with our students, but sadly it all started to feel overwhelming and we never took things further. I ended up resurrecting the concert idea for Leviathan Lab's *Ghost Stories* project in 2014, which even featured work from three alumni teams; but otherwise Halloween at the GMTWP was, for years, little more than a day where half of the class showed up to lab in costume.

Then about two and a half years ago I happened to visit City Tech's Gravesend Inn, a high-tech haunted house set up and operated by students from their Entertainment Technology department. My interests had been moving steadily towards game design, world-building and immersive and interactive storytelling, and so as I took it in—it's a short walk-through installation, very professional and popular and impressive and loads of fun—I started to think, "we should have something like this." City Tech's event is primarily tech-based, but the Tisch version in my head would have access to writers and performers and designers and filmmakers and game designers and scholars and inventors, all crazy talented and working at a ridiculously high level. Of course, the time and resources we would need were daunting and the nature of the academic calendar would mean an enormous amount of work would have to be finished within the first six or seven weeks of the school year, when most students are just settling in. But it would be an audacious undertaking worthy of the holiday, and the sort of event that could only happen at a place like Tisch, which as far as I'm concerned is reason alone to try anything. If we could build it over time into a signature event, it could become a unique showcase for the students and for the school, and there was also an argument to be made regarding creative research, since a haunted house-style event would provide a rare opportunity to build an immersive, interactive world and experience on a grand scale and in risk-free environment. Most of all, though, it seemed like it would be a gas.

So I scaled the project down to a GMTWP event for its first year and sent a proposal to our Chair Sarah Schlesinger, who to my delight approved it and even allotted it some funds. Most importantly, she suggested Danny come on board as a coordinator, who ended up being a godsend and instrumental to making the whole thing happen. I found out soon thereafter that Danny had been actively involved in creating haunted houses through his youth, and so while I had a strong notion about what the event should and shouldn't be, it was he who was able to bring years of practical experience to the table—to say nothing of his tremendous creativity and theatrical flair. We soon discovered that Amy Burgess, our Administrative Assistant, as well as an alum of the program (Cycle 17) had similar experience, and she too became an invaluable resource, particularly on the technical side. Once we put out a call for student collaborators, we were in business.



The GMTWP is transformed into the township of "Twyp"

What is it about Halloween and interactive world-building that interests you?

It's funny—Bryan Blaskie, one of our second year students, created these brilliant GMTWP Faculty trading cards for the incoming students last fall, and the flavor text on mine said I have a thing for Halloween parties. It took me aback since that's not at all how I see myself: I don't "go out" for Halloween, have only seen the Greenwich Village parade once, and am not even a person who enjoys getting into costume. (I was invited to one Halloween party in college and went as myself.) But once I got over being indignant, I realized Bryan was absolutely right. I do love Halloween parties: it's just that I've never been to one I liked. I read somewhere recently that Halloween is all about thinning the boundary between this world and the Other, which to me is a great way of describing its appeal—the chance to experience another world, or at least to feel its presence in a way you don't during the rest of the year. I don't mean to get precious with this, but for me this Mystery (with a capital "M") is a fundamental part of the Halloween experience, and for me a lot of Halloween celebrations fall short of it. Without it you're just dancing around in costume or worse sitting around watching other people dance around in costume. (I have the same reaction to theatre which bills itself as immersive, when it's really just being done in the round.) Halloween events at their best engage your mind and alter its state, which is why Halloween and interactive world-building are such a natural fit to me. It's strange how rarely they're brought together, actually, considering how big Halloween has become commercially... That's why the events we've designed so far have been game-based rather than performance-based.

How did you go about creating the world for the Halloween event? What were the challenges?

So far there have been a number of "givens" every year. We know from the outset that we're going to be using the Program as our event space. We also know the scale of the project means it has to involve collaborative world-building, with each collaborator being given their own space, experience or aspect to design which contributes to a central narrative. For me that's also a huge draw of the experience, though: not only does it provide variety while giving everyone a sense of autonomy and ownership, and offer the students a unique collaborative experience that might be hard to come by

outside of a university setting, but it also frees everyone up to indulge in their individual interests since no one is shouldering the burden of the entire experience. My function is to make sure everything feels “of a piece” and to handle with Danny all of the additional work involved in telling the overall story.

The main challenges were and continue to be time and money—both of which are in short supply, but necessary to build a world.

Money-wise, we’ve tried to embrace a low-budget “homemade” aesthetic which I think has added to the charm of the event. The first year we saved money on scenic elements by coming up with a story that would transport participants to a parallel universe version of the Program. (Each room provided a puzzle leading to a clue which would ultimately help them escape back to the “real world.”) The success of that event has allowed us to take a more optimistic approach this year. With a generous boost in budget, we decided to invent a small *Twilight Zone*-esque town for our setting, which could then be carried over into future installments. This has allowed us to invest in props and scenic elements with an eye towards their reuse, as well as open the door to both continued cross-Cycle world-building and even transmedia events during the rest of the year, which I find super exciting. (“Twyp”—named by Cycle 27 composer Benedict Braxton-Smith in honor of the Program—is a town in which all manner of strange things occur year-round.)

Time-wise, we’ve tried to give ourselves more developmental lead time by establishing a system in which outgoing first-year students take the lead in planning the next year’s event before leaving for the summer. That way they can hit the ground running the following fall while mentoring any incoming first-year students interested in signing on. We’ve designed gameplay and narrative elements so that participants and creators alike can play or run the event with minimal preparation—a particular challenge for this year’s event, which was as a live-action role-playing game far more ambitious and complex than its predecessor. Finally, we’ve had to figure out how to scale events so they can work for any number of participants from 3 to 60, since the demands of a university schedule also mean it’s difficult to predict the exact number of people who will end up attending any particular event.

There’s no question we can always use more time and resources (we’ve already gotten a generous offer from one alum to help with future efforts); but I think we’ve all been astonished at how much we’ve been able to accomplish with what we have. Not everything has worked the way it’s supposed to, but we’ve come away from every event with a solid foundation from which we can build the next, and I can’t overstate the shared excitement of working in such a new form. The musical theatre industry can feel so oppressive, with everyone an expert on how to fix your show. The Halloween event, by contrast, has felt like a grand adventure; we’re all in it together, putting a show up in a barn.

Incidentally, as ordered and logical as this process may seem in retrospect, I can’t stress enough how none of it would have been possible without the extraordinary team of students who volunteered their time and talents. Everyone was a total delight and I can’t count the number of times their inspired ideas had me grinning or giggling like a fool. Their dedication to each other, to the project and to their classmates moves me deeply and is something I’ll never forget. I hope we have room to list them at the end of this article. Without them the project would have been dead in the water.

How do you view the importance of world-building in the entertainment industry?

World-building is everything. But of course, world-building has always been everything. We all know [former GMTWP faculty member] Martin Epstein’s infamous question: “What’s the weather like?” Our environment helps to define everything about us and our story. The term itself may be trendy, but a

story with bad world-building is not off-trend, it's just poorly conceived. That said, there's clearly a heightened awareness today of its value, and while I'm not a media expert, I think that it's related to current trends towards immersion/interactivity and transmedia storytelling, both of which are in turn reflections of our love/hate relationship with technology. The way I see it, transmedia storytelling is ineffective unless the world you create is rich and believable enough to support multiple stories on multiple platforms; Immersion/interactivity is ineffective unless the world you create can respond to spontaneous stimuli in a rich and believable way; and traditional storytelling is ineffective unless the characters, stories and worlds you create support each other in a rich and believable way. Good world-building as a concept isn't going away anytime soon—it's essential regardless of what paradigm you're embracing. If anything, training yourself to view it through these newer prisms can only open up all sorts of unexpected possibilities.



Students dressed up as characters from Twyp Township



What does the future hold in terms of courses in world-building and Halloween events at the GMTWP?

Seriously, I'd just like for the Halloween event to continue as a GMTWP tradition and for it to continue to grow. For the immediate future, there's a lot we can do to refine our development process, particularly in the realm of playtesting. I'd also love to experiment with transmedia storytelling through an official Twyp website, www.twyp.town. (What's online is just a placeholder at the moment, but the site is live for anyone who wants to take a peek.) And we haven't found a way to bring our full musical theatre writing skills into the picture yet, though I've got an idea for next year that could be really fun. (The tricky thing about musical theatre is that the visceral nature of music already makes it immersive and interactive in its own way, so how do you add a layer of immersion and interactivity without cheapening the other? It's similar to the difficulty you run into with fantasy and science fiction musicals: how do you not cannibalize the magic that's inherent in the medium?)

One thing we're definitely going to do is continue reaching out to other departments and inviting them into the collaboration. We were so fortunate this year to involve two students from Design, Rachel Fae Szymanski and Chris D'Angelo—both lighting designers whose contributions blew us all away and were vital to selling the story we were trying to tell—and Jack Schlesinger from Cycle 26, a current first-year student at the NYU Game Center, who was crucial in helping to iron out a number of gameplay details. The addition of Rachel and Chris actually made the event into an Institute of Performing Arts (IPA) event, which thrills me to no end since my ultimate hope is that it gets embraced by Tisch as a whole. I'd love nothing more than for the Halloween event to become an opportunity for

the entire school to experiment. Clearly, live immersive interactive storytelling is only in its infancy and there's no reason Tisch shouldn't be at the forefront, considering the diversity and quality of artists that make up our community.

In terms of courses, we're still in the early stages—which is also what makes the trial-and-error nature of the Halloween event so addicting. I certainly hope we continue growing our collaboration with the Game Center: Clara Fernandez-Vara's class in world-building for video games has been eye-opening for more than a few thesis teams, and had a profound impact on my own views on games and theatre. I myself experimented with a musical theatre world-building course in 2016 which may re-emerge in some form. And I just heard from a former student—a fantastic theatre writer, in fact—who has achieved success writing for games and would have a great deal to offer students. I wish there were more concrete news to report, but honestly it's all a bit dizzying since it's so new. I guess the day that isn't the case is the day I'll start to worry.



"Welcome to TWYP" (2017) created by Elyse Anderson, Bryan Blaskie, Benedict Braxton Smith, Amy Burgess, Zack Childers, You "Fish" Cui, Christopher D'Angelo, Justin Gates, Briana Harris, Danny Larsen, Robert Lee, Jamie Maletz, Marcus Perkins, Molly Reisman, Morgan Smart, Eric Sorrels, Rachel Fae Szymanski and Zhaoqing "Judy" Yin with special thanks to Jack Schlesinger.

"The Lost Cycle" (2016) created by Bryan Blaskie, Benedict Braxton Smith, Amy Burgess, Kristina Kauffman, Danny Larsen, Robert Lee, Molly Reisman, Spencer Robelen and Lauren Taslitz.

Amanda Yesnowitz (Cycle 8) Wins 2018 Kleban Prize



GMTWP Cycle 8 alum Amanda Yesnowitz was announced as a recipient of the 28th Annual Kleban Prize for Musical Theatre. Yesnowitz tied with composer-lyricist Alan Schmuckler in the most promising musical theater lyricist category. The 2018 prizes will be presented to the winners on February 5th in a private ceremony hosted by ASCAP and BMI at ASCAP.

The finalist judges for this year were Tony-nominated actor Marin Mazzie (*Ragtime*), Tony-nominated composer and lyricist Dave Malloy (*Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*), and author and professor Laurence Maslon.

The Kleban Foundation was established in 1988 under the will of Edward L. Kleban, best known as the Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning lyricist of the musical *A Chorus Line*. Kleban's will made provisions for two annual prizes, which in recent years have totaled \$100,000 each (this year all 3 winners will receive the full prize), payable over two years, to be given to the most promising lyricist and librettist in American Musical Theater.

Ms. Yesnowitz wrote the lyrics for *Somewhere in Time*, a 2013 musical adaptation of the 1980 film starring Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour. She is currently working on a musical inspired by the life of Margaret Bulkley, an Irish woman who lived as a man in the 19th century.

Ballad of Little Jo Cast Album Released at 54 Below



GMTWP Department Chair Sarah Schlesinger, along with collaborators Mike Reid and John Dias celebrated the cast album release of their musical *The Ballad of Little Jo* at Feinstein's/54 Below on November 12th. The release concert and album were produced by Sean Flahaven, CEO of The Musical Company and Cycle 7 program alum and adjunct faculty member. Both album and concert starred a cast and band from the recent acclaimed production at Two River Theater Company in Redbank, NJ. Original cast members Teal Wicks, Eric William Morris, Jane Bruce, Daniel K. Isaac, Brian Flores, Leenya Rideout, Perry Sherman, Kristin Stokes, and Barbara Tirrell were joined by orchestrator Danny Larsen (Cycle 14), under the musical direction of John O'Neill for the concert. The album is for sale through iTunes, Amazon Music, and Barnes & Noble.

Michael John LaChiusa's *Hello Again* Film in Theaters



GMTWP adjunct faculty member Michael John LaChiusa's celebrated Off-Broadway musical *Hello Again* was adapted into an exciting new film and presented for a limited engagement in movie theatres

across the country. The show chases 10 lost souls across 10 periods in New York City history in a daisy-chained musical exploration of love's bittersweet embrace. The film boasted such talents as Audra McDonald, Martha Plimpton, Cheyenne Jackson, Rumer Willis, Jenna Ushkowitz, T.R. Knight, Tyler Blackburn, Sam Underwood, Nolan Gerard Funk, and Al Calderon.

GMTWP Alums Featured at NAMT Conference



Several GMTWP alums had their work featured as part of this year's National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT) Festival of New Musicals. Cycle 17 alum Niko Tsakalakos had his musical *Fall Springs* presented during the conference.

Additional events as part of the festival included the Songwriters Showcase which featured work by Sukari Jones (Cycle 16), Creighton Irons (Cycle 17), Rona Siddiqui & Liz Suggs (both Cycle 21). A Mid-day Cabaret also focused on the work of Timothy Huang (Cycle 11), Anna Jacobs (Cycle 17), and Sam Chanse and Bob Kelly (both Cycle 23).

Broadway's Future Concert Features GMTWP Alumni



A host of GMTWP alums were featured in Broadway's Future Concert at Lincoln Center in the Bruno Walter Auditorium at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts on December 18th. The evening is part of the *Broadway's Future Songbook Series*, presented by Arts and Artists of Tomorrow and produced, directed, and hosted by John Znidersic and featured new holiday songs by a host of new writers. Participating writers included Dina Gregory (Cycle 12), Hyeyoung Kim (Cycle 13), Gordon Leary & Julia Meinwald (Cycle 16), Bill Nelson (Cycle 17), Rona Siddiqui (Cycle 21), Ty Defoe & Tidaya

Sinutoke (Cycle 22), Marella Martin Koch (Cycle 24), Minhui Lee (Cycle 24), Manda Leigh Blunt, Divya Maus, and Janet Noh (all Cycle 25), and current student Alanya Bridge (Cycle 27).

GMTWP Alums to Receive Seattle Production of New Musical



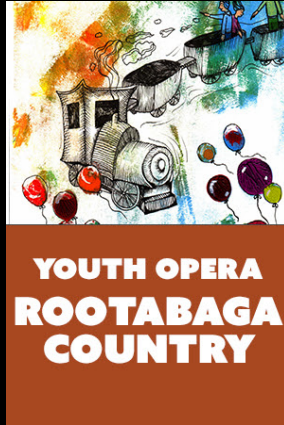
GMTWP alums Rob Hartmann (Cycle 5), Liv Cummins (Cycle 8), and Scott Keys (Cycle 5) will receive a production of their musical *Vanishing Point* at the Seattle Public Theater in January and February. With book & lyrics by Hartmann and Cummins and original concept & additional lyrics by Keys, the show is a musical comedy-fantasy, bringing aviatrix Amelia Earhart, evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, and author Agatha Christie together to solve the mystery of their disappearances.

GMTWP Alum Joel B. New Wins 2017 MAC Award



GMTWP alum Joel B. New (Cycle 15) was the 2017 recipient of the John Wallowitch Award for Songwriting, presented by the Manhattan Association of Cabarets (MAC). The recipients each received \$500 and a certificate which was presented at MAC's annual holiday party in December at Elmo's in NYC. Two other GMTWP Alums and one GMTWP current student were finalists: Alanya Bridge (Cycle 27), Ryan Korell & Jonathan Keebler (both Cycle 23).

GMTWP Alum has World Premiere of New Opera



GMTWP alum Rachel Peters (Cycle 14) had the world premiere of her new children's opera *Rootabaga Country* at the Sarasota Opera House in November. The opera is an adaptation of selections for Carl Sandburg's 1922 *Rootabaga Stories*, a collection of whimsical American fairy tales. The opera was commissioned by the Sarasota Youth Opera program, which offers young people ages 8-18 the opportunity to experience opera through participation in after-school choruses, a professionally produced Youth Opera production on the mainstage and more.

Honors & Events

Current GMTWP students David Kornfeld & Kyle Segar (both Cycle 27) featured original songs in a cabaret at the Duplex on Sunday, Sept. 10th.

Cycle 17 alum Niko Tsakalakos had his new eco-conscious rock musical, *Fall Springs*, co-written with Peter Sinn Nachtrieb featured at this past NAMT festival in the fall. His musical *Pool Boy*, co-written with Janet Allard was commissioned for a re-imagined cabaret-style version at Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. He also had a performance of his 10-minute musical *Hello, My Name is Laura Buxton* at Prospect Theatre Company this last year.

Cycle 6 alum and adjunct faculty member Deborah Brevoort had her two new comedies *The Poetry of Pizza* and *The Velvet Weapon* published this past year. The official book launch was held at the Drama Book Store in NYC on Thursday, November 2nd.

Cycle 15 alum Joel B. New had his Something New Podcast Series finale presented live in concert at the Duplex Theatre on Sept. 30th.

Cycle 14 alum Rachel Peters had her new songs featured in a new play by Susan Bernfield entitled *Tania in the Getaway Van* this past November and December at the Flea Theater in TriBeCa.

Cycle 19 alums Brandon James Gwinn and EllaRose Chary had an Encore Performance of their new show *Thelma Louise; Dyke Remix!* At the Duplex Theater in NYC on October 11th.

Cycle 16 alum Shoshana Greenberg presented a cabaret “Finding My Own Damn Way: Shoshana Greenberg’s 35th Birthday Cabaret” at the Duplex on October 22nd. She presented work written with many other GMTWP collaborators.

Cycle 15 alum Mike Pettry dropped an album for a new show he wrote with collaborator Eli Bolin entitled *The Last Song of Eddie Scourge*, which is described as a “rock ‘n’ roll Christmas Carol”. The album was released in early October.

Cycle 7 alum Lauren Marshall and Cycle 13 alum Ian Williams was one of 5 finalists for the TRU Voices new musical festival in NYC which will be presented in January/February 2018.

Cycle 11 alum Jessica Fogle released her new experiemental album “Jessica in The Rainbow: Make-Believe a.k.a. 365 Days vol. 4” in November. The album was made up in a weekend and was part of a year of 365-day songwriting challenge to write and share a song every day on social media.

Cycle 22 alum Marcus Scott and Cycle 28 current student Cheeyang Ng had their work presented at New York Theatre Barn’s New Work Series in September.

Cycle 26 alums Mishelle Cuttler, KC Hur, Kent Jeong-Eun Kim, Gianni Onori, and Xiaodan Zhang had their songs presented in a night of songs and stories from the international students of the GMTWP entitled “Aliens of Extraordinary Ability” at The PIT Loft on October 2nd.

Cycle 14 alums Rachel Peters and Michael R. Jackson and Cycle 16 alum Royce Vavrek had songs for voice and piano presented at the 25th Anniversary Concert of the AIDS Quilt Songbook on December 3rd at National Sawdust.

Cycle 23 alums Seth Christenfeld and Joseph Trefler and Cycle 26 alums KC Hur and Gianni Onori had their short musicals *The Bad Ideas of Jack Andrew* (Christenfeld & Trefler) and *Rapunzel* (Hur and Onori) presented at the NAAP Discover: New Musicals 2017 event in December.

Cycle 26 alum Alex Syiek presented songs from his Alex Syiek & Friends: Hella Crazee Holidayzee at Feinstein’s/54 Below in December.

Cycle 20 alum Josh Freilich and Cycle 24 alum Kate Chadwick presented The Songs of Josh Freilich and Kate Chadwick at Feinstein’s/54 Below in December.

Cycle 14 alum Joe Iconis hosted his Tenth Annual Christmas Extravaganza at Feinstein’s/54 Below the weekend of December 16th-17th.

Cycle 24 alum Ross Baum featured his work in October at Lincoln Center’s Bruno Walter Auditorium as part of the Songbook at Lincoln Center Series. Contributing lyricists included Angelica Chéri, Clara Doraine Luthas, and Kathleen Wrinn (all Cycle 24).

Cycle 9 alum Jeremy Desmon and current student Barbara Bellman (Cycle 27) had their work featured at The Duplex Cabaret on Sunday, October 29th.

Cycle 22 alum Landon Braverman and Cycle 23 alum Joseph Trefler produced and created a new series called BLAME CANADA which featured work by GMTWP alums Michael Cooper (Cycle 13), Daniel Maté (Cycle 16), in addition to Braverman and Derek Hassler (also Cycle 23). The evening celebrated Canadian talent and was presented on October 30th at Feinstein’s/54 Below.

Cycle 26 alums Jacob Fjeldheim, KC Hur, Andrew Drannon, Gregory Jackson, and Nina Kauffman had excerpts from their two shows *Big Deal* (Fjeldheim & Hur) & *Naught* (Drannon, Jackson & Kauffman) as part of the 4x15 Musical Theatre Factory Series in November.

Productions, Workshops & Readings & Other Announcements

Cycle 17 alum Niko Tsakalakos had a developmental production of his new musical *Into the Wild*, co-written with Janet Allard at the Encore Musical Theatre Company in Dexter Michigan this last May. The show was accepted into the Apples & Oranges Theatre Accelerator program.

GMTWP alumni writing team Derek Gregor & Sam Carner (both Cycle 12) had a production of their show *Island Song* at the OhLook! Theatre in Grapevine, TX in October.

Cycle 6 alum and adjunct faculty member Deborah Brevoort will have selections from her new opera *Albert Nobbs*, written with composer Patrick Soluri, presented on January 14th by American Lyric Theater as part of OPERA AMERICA'S New Works Forum.

Cycle 19 alums Brandon James Gwinn and EllaRose Chary had their wild, new, immersive musical *Cotton Candy and Cocaine* workshopped by Theatre C in Long Island City, NY in September.

Amy Burgess (Cycle 17), Sara Cooper (Cycle 18), and Julia Meinwald (Cycle 16) had a concert reading of their all-female ensemble musical theatre piece *Elevator Heart* on Saturday, October 14th at The Tank Theater in NYC.

Cycle 14 alum Michael R. Jackson and Cycle 17 alum Anna K. Jacobs presented a concert version of their new musical *Teeth* at Feinstein's/54 Below in September. The show is based off of the cult film of the same name.

Cycle 14 alum Michael R. Jackson presented a concert version of his new musical *White Girl in Danger* at Joe's Pub at the Public Theatre in late September. The musical is a dark musical comedy about an African-American teen who lives in the "blackground" of an all white world of a 90s era melodrama and seeks to prove she's just as much of a protagonist/heroine as her white friends.

Cycle 14 alum Joe Iconis had a workshop of his show *Love in Hate Nation* presented at the Musical Theatre Factory in mid-October.

Cycle 24 alums Greg Moss and Casey O'Neil had a cabaret reading of their musical comedy *The Great Cat Massacre* at the Kraine Theatre on October 30th. The event was directed by alum Marella Martin Koch (Cycle 24) with music direction by Mark T Evans (Cycle 18).

Cycle 26 alums Nina Kauffman and Thomas Jacobsen had a cabaret reading of their musical *Paranormative* at the Kraine Theatre on October 30th.

Cycle 15 alum Mike Pettry and Cycle 18 alum Sara Cooper had their work *Mechanical* presented as part of the In the Lounge Series at Dixon Place on Tuesday, November 7th.

GMTWP Alums Willem Oosthuysen (Cycle 20) and Laura Kleinbaum (Cycle 21) had a reading of their musical *#MARS* at Manhattan Musical Theatre Lab on November 16th.

The Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program

Faculty & Staff

Department Chair

Sarah Schlesinger

Full-Time Faculty

Fred Carl

Randall Eng

Robert Lee

Mel Marvin

Sybille Pearson

Julianne Wick Davis

Adjunct Faculty

Jonathan Bernstein

Deborah Brevoort

Kirsten Childs

Sara Cooper

Joel Dernfer

Mindi Dickstein

Donna DiNovelli

William Finn

Sean Flahaven

Michael John LaChiusa

Steve Lutvak

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