

An Application for Randolph College's Summer Research Program 2014

The Play's the Thing: A Communal Creative Jaunt through Dramatic Structure

by Gary Dop, Assistant Professor of English and Grace Gardiner, English '15

Abstract

Gary Dop and Grace Gardiner will collaborate to study dramatic structure in significant plays as a launching point for creating original dramatic work. Their primary goal is to utilize their study to plan, write, and develop at least one full-length and one ten-minute play each. The secondary goal is to study the process of building a new work by borrowing structural elements from an established work. As part of the secondary analysis, they will work with advanced high school writing students, pitching the structural process to the students and working with them on developing their in-progress works. Finally, when Gardiner and Dop have finished their fulllength drafts, they will consult with a professional dramaturge to fix significant concerns and polish their scripts. Ultimately, Grace's scripts will be submitted to major collegiate awards and conferences, and Gary's will be submitted to agencies and contests.

Project Description

Rationale:

Creative writing is often thought of as a solitary activity, and at some points it does reduce to a lone soul scribbling in a notebook. However, for most writers this image is reductive and can be destructive, as well. Young writers often feel that if they ask for help or they solicit advice then the thing being created no longer belongs to them. Every semester I have students in workshops who feel that when they are offered a replacement word or idea for their inferior choice they cannot accept the replacement, not because it's a poor choice, but because it wasn't *their* idea. This inhibits their writing and is a product of a culture that celebrates individuality over communality, exalting in the notion of celebrity and the individual artist. Conversely, this project exults in developing dramatic scripts in a community of amateurs and professionals.

Everything in this project is designed to capitalize on the communal nature of creative writing. The primary goal is for Gary and Grace to plan, write, and develop at least one fulllength and one ten-minute play each. The secondary goal is to analyze the process of building a new work by borrowing structural elements from an established work.

Implementation:

The primary goal will begin by studying how traditional dramatic structure is utilized and adapted in five significant plays: *King Lear*, *Little Foxes*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Lost in Yonkers*,

and *Almost, Maine* (a series of short plays). Grace and I will borrow elements of the unique structural choices from these plays as inspiration for our own plays. While we will stick to this method as means of kick starting our writing experience, it is important to note that the writing process must remain fluid, and the pieces we begin to construct may end up abandoning their initial structural foundation.

Secondary goal

is an analysis of the process itself. We will introduce our process of developing an original script from the structural skeleton of an extant script to advanced high school writing students in Nebraska to pitch the structural process and coach them on their in progress works. Each summer for the past five years I have taught a group of 12 advanced creative writing high school students, selected each year from the region's high schools. I will be doing this again this year. I have received permission—and they are thrilled—from the program to have Grace join me in Nebraska to meet with students, to workshop her play-in-progress, and to continue writing, during the week of June 9th.

Grace will get the opportunity to pitch her play to the students (they will offer feedback) and to coach them on developing their own short scripts, using the same process we've been using on our scripts. This is an important element for our process and for her experiencing the other side of the creative writing—helping other writers. She will continue during this time to work on her own plays. When working with me, she is the student, and in this program she will be able to coach students younger than her. We'll work with them over the course of three full days to develop their work and to discuss the process of working from an established piece. I will have already been working with them for several days when she arrives. The program will provide a place for Grace to stay while she's in town.

During this time in Nebraska, I have also arranged for Grace to attend a professional theater production of *Almost, Maine* (one of the scripts we're studying) and to meet with a Chicago theater director and playwright (who will also be teaching in Nebraska during that same week), to discuss and practice pitching her play.

As a side note, the completion of the primary goal, the development of the two plays can legitimately happen without the trip to Nebraska. However, knowing I was already committed to teaching in Nebraska, I chose to include bringing Grace for three reasons. The first two are practical: it's easier to continue working on our work when we're able to meet with each other face and face and to discuss our progress, and second, it's a good opportunity for us to expand our understanding of beginning a script from a structural foundation. The third reason is more fundamental to the core of my own communal approach to the arts. This program in Nebraska is a one of the nation's best kept secrets. In her days in Nebraska, she'll interact with some sharp students and the aforementioned theater director from Chicago, but also she'll meet the other instructors--a philosopher from Iceland, an actress from Los Angeles, a stop-motion animator, and so on. There's a rich community of creative thinkers that she'll be exposed to during her short excursion, and I'm thrilled for her to have this experience. Most likely, I'll have her pitch her play to several of the classes who do work that intersects with story (philosophy, film, theater, and others), but the details of this will be worked out when we arrive.

Upon returning to Virginia, Grace and I will complete workable drafts of our scripts, which will involve workshopping with each other and discussing and pitching our ideas to friends. Around Week 6 we'll arrive at the point where the play can be shown to a dramaturge,

someone who has not seen the earliest phases and who can approach the work with a fresh lens. Dramaturges are trained to understand the surface material and the support structure of a script in progress. Our intensive process should allow us at Week 6 to be prepared to submit two full length scripts (Grace's play and mine) to professional dramaturges for consulting.

I have worked out an agreement with the Playwright Center, one of the nation's leading organizations for playwrights, to establish an extremely fast turn-around time on the submission of our scripts and a consultation with a dramaturge. We will consult one-on-one (in our case two-on-one; we will both be present at each other's session) with two different dramaturges to further develop our scripts. This is a vital process in the journey of a script from page to stage.

The final aspect of our project will be to polish our scripts with the dramaturge's advice in mind, and to present Grace's script in a reading. Grace will be responsible to organize the event, and beginning in the fall, she will submit her plays to at least three major collegiate awards (i.e. The National Student Playwriting Award) or conferences. Gary will also submit his scripts to conferences, agencies, and contests (i.e. The National Playwrights Conference).

The undertaking is a significant commitment of creative energy and will require many long days of writing and workshopping, but the end product, the creation of polished original work, will prove beneficial for the both of us. It is likely that at the end of eight weeks, after the final reading of the student's work, there will still be changes and improvement that need to be made on our scripts, but this is common and to be expected. Grace and I will work with each other occasionally throughout the next school year to keep accountable on submissions and progress. It would be nice to say the script will be done in eight weeks, but most creative projects need space at some point, and the writer has to return to the work with fresh eyes, and an ability to see what needs to be improved; the dramaturge will help with this, but there will likely need to be more work done over the months following the program. We will, however, complete a full draft of each of our scripts.

I will not be applying for the additional release time for this project.

Project Timeline:

In Advance: Read the five plays we'll be utilizing.

Week 1: Study structure / Begin several Ten-minute play concepts / Workshop
Create organizational character and story outlines for potential scripts.

Week 2: Continue drafting and planning / Narrow full-length choices
Read and discuss McKee's *Story* / Workshop and revise

Week 3: Complete a draft of first third of full-length play / Plan NE workshop

Week 4: Complete a draft of the second third of the play / Travel to NE

Work with high school writers / consult with director

Week 5*: Complete the final third / work backwards to unify the script /
Establish major questions for revision

Week 6: Polish for submission to dramaturge / Recruit actors for script reading
Dramaturge submission

Week 7: Dramaturge consultation / Script editing and revision

Week 8: Final polish / Script reading

Establish a further development plan and a submission plan

*I will be out of town during this week, but I will consult on a daily basis with Grace about the progress of her script, and I will continue to work on our project. She will have plenty to do.

Dissemination Goals

During the last week, based on the type of scripts we produce, Grace and I will choose a minimum of three conferences or contests to submit each of our scripts.

Past Outcomes

N/A.

External Funding

There is no external funding available, except the reimbursement I will receive for my travel and meal expenses related to the teaching in Nebraska at the high school Summer Honors program. This will be paid by the Education Service Unit 11. The housing is provided by community members and the programs administrators.

Academic Credit

Grace is not applying for Academic Credit.

Project Budget

Dramaturgy Consultation: 400.00*
NE Housing: 00.00**
Plane Ticket (DC to NE):330.00***
Rental Car: 150.00****
Travel Meals: 100.00
Almost, Maine Ticket: 20.00
TOTAL: 1000.00

* This includes a consultation on two full-length scripts with professional dramaturges from the Playwright Center and a required membership in the organization for Grace. I am already a member.

**The program in Nebraska will provide housing for Grace while she is in town.

***Prices are currently workable and low if Grace flies out on a Tuesday. Her family is close enough to DC that getting there should be fine.

****I will arrive in Nebraska a few days before Grace and will have transportation, so Grace will need transportation to join me a couple hours from the airport.

Institutional Review Board

NA. All of our inquiry will be to generate original creative works and will be within commonly accepted educational practices (writing, revision, discussion, and editing) that do not require IRB approval.

Faculty Statement about Student Writer

Grace Gardiner is an incredibly bright and talented young writer. I had the opportunity to witness her passion for writing in our Advanced Creative Writing class this past semester, and she is the first student I considered partnering with for this project. She is an exceptional English major with impeccable grades (Phi Beta Kappa Award winner) and a record in our department of consistency and positivity.

This project will offer Grace a whirlwind of wisdom in dramatic structure and playwriting, and I imagine she'll come out of this experience with more of an understanding of the playwright's life than most 20-year-old writers.

Her success will come from her strong talent and self-discipline, and she'll gain an understanding of how the arts can function as a communal and supportive process.

Grace will be responsible to organize her writing and her study, and she will need to manage the intense pace of our eight weeks. I wouldn't have chosen her for this if I didn't think that our efforts would be mutually beneficial. We will work hard. She's up to it. She will be responsible for consulting with students, a director, a dramaturge, and whoever else we throw in front of her. In addition, Grace will be responsible to organize a final reading of her play and to submit her play to a minimum of three conferences or awards beginning in the fall semester.

Most days, I will be on campus working on my portion of our project, and Grace will be on campus working independently on her own. During the initial phases of the project we will likely meet every day for a portion of planning and discussion. We will meet every day or every other day, depending on our need, to discuss our progress and to consult on each other's work. Most days Grace and I will consult on our scripts on campus and over the phone or Skype in the rare circumstance that one of us isn't on campus. We will interact every weekday and other times as necessary. Her time will be organized as studying, brainstorming, discussing, refueling and writing.

Student Statement about Faculty Writer

From the first moment that I met Professor Gary Dop, when I attended a mock class of his, held during the English Department's search for a new Creative Writing professor, I was captivated by his ability to teach Creative Writing. As a fairly amateur undergraduate writer, I find it hard to grasp how the creative process works in regards to my own writing, let alone to be able to help others understand the art of writing creatively.

My initial opinion of Professor Dop was only further confirmed when I took his Advanced Creative Writing class this past fall. Professor Dop has a great talent for making understandable and engaging the parts of writing that are intrinsically elusive and subjective; he is an excellent resource for information on how to navigate the current publishing market as well. When he asked me to apply for a research project with him, I was thrilled to accept, especially for his extensive knowledge in playwriting.

As a writer, I lean toward poetry as my genre of choice and have only a little experience in writing drama. I have always been intrigued, and even perplexed, by the dual nature of plays, both as written and performed entities, but have been, as of yet, unable to reconcile my thoughts on how these two aspects fit together. Since Professor Dop has experience in both sides of the theatre world, in writing and in performance, I feel confident that, in studying under him during the Summer Research program, I will develop an understanding of how to write plays as works of literature and performance.

My goal will be not only to have my work recognized for its literary merit, but also to see it animated through performance. I am very excited for this second goal in particular because I have never had my dramatic writing performed. Though I have little experience in playwriting, I am extremely invested in learning about the process: I am a young writer and therefore open to experimenting with different genres in the hopes that I might get one step closer to discovering my own creative voice as well as a new mode of writing to enjoy.