

## APPLICATION/PROPOSAL DETAILS FOR THE 2012 RANDOLPH COLLEGE STUDENT/FACULTY SUMMER RESEARCH PROGRAM

Applicants: Mace Archer, Assistant Professor of Theatre, Matt Cornpropst ('14), Ashley Peisher ('15)

**Environmental Performance:** Tracy Lett's *Bug* produced and performed on location

**Abstract:** Students will produce the play *Bug* by Tracy Letts in a local motel room (or an alternative location that is not a traditional theatre space). The students will engage a series of questions in this creative endeavor. First, how does one create theatre outside of a formal theatrical setting, and what challenges are associated with such an endeavor? Second, in creating a piece of theatre in such close quarters, does the audience become overwhelmed because the aesthetic distance has shrunk so dramatically? Third, is there an audience in Lynchburg for such unique and cutting edge work?

### Goals

The goals are to stage a version of the play *Bug* by Tracy Letts using unconventional staging methods in a town like Lynchburg that doesn't see that much alternative or cutting edge theatrical work. In this creative endeavor, the students and I will explore the role of the producer as the center of theatre making. Students constantly have the opportunity to work on a scale that is characteristic of the professional theatre (fully equipped theatre, marketing plans, box office, etc.) that they may experience after graduation, but there is another road that graduating artists travel – that of art generator. This production will be produced outside of a traditional theatre space, in a location that is not designed for theatre production. This play is set in a hotel room, and the goal of the production is to stage the play in an existing hotel room with the audience trapped within the space where the action is happening, thereby reducing the aesthetic distance to zero. By making this choice, the students will gain first hand experience in environmental theatre, a means of producing work that provides exciting possibilities for theatre artists. Environmental staging is also a way for young artists to establish their work in the public eye prior to gaining access to more traditional production means.

Another goal of the project is to investigate this question of aesthetic distance. In the theatre, we generally provide a safe distance for our audience, separating them from the action upon the stage. Even in the most intimate environments, the Lab Theatre for example, clear distinctions are made between audience space and performer space. *Bug* is a play that is incredibly intense. It contains drug use (not actual drugs), nudity, and profanity. One of the questions we seek to explore is whether audiences need to have distance from work of this nature to appreciate it, or whether reducing the aesthetic distance to zero actually heightens the desired effect.

Finally, our project wishes to investigate the potential to attract Lynchburg audiences to such work. Lynchburg in general seems to be a staunchly conservative arts town, more or less. However, it certainly exhibits at times a hunger for more progressive thinking, and I would imagine more progressive art. By staging *Bug*, we are interested to see if there is a niche for such work in Lynchburg.

Significance of the project?

The significance of the project is implied within the goals of the project. With respect to the first goal, the students conducting the creative endeavor will gain experience and, to a certain degree, expertise in non-traditional staging. These students will identify the steps to mounting an environmental production. They will also broadly learn the nature of being at the center of the decision making process when creating new work. Most theatre experiences remove those lowest on the pecking order from the decision making process, but most young artists find themselves seeking ways to produce their own work before they are fortunate enough to work their way into more traditional venues. This work allows these students to be the theatre makers, dealing with budget, venue, promotion, casting, etc.

With regard to our second goal, in erasing the aesthetic distance from this production, we may be able to determine if theatre audiences are hungry for more intimate experience in theatre production. Does the audience want a thrill ride or do they desire something more comfortable?

Finally, our significance of the third goal will allow us to define departmentally how theatre in our city might be different. It may be that the conservative nature of Lynchburg is hiding another current under the surface that is excited to be engaged and challenged, or we may find that theatre is generally so conservative because there is really no desire to see anything other than theatre which reinforces an established worldview. A production of a play like *Bug* tests this idea because *Bug* is clearly beyond what is currently being produced in Lynchburg.

How will the project goals be achieved?

Goal one will be achieved by quite simply producing the work. First, we will hold auditions and cast the play. During the first six weeks of summer research, we will find our space, design the event, rehearse the play, promote the event, and ultimately open the work. During the final two weeks of summer research we will allow the play to run for public performances. The process of seeing the production through from beginning to end will explore the necessary steps in producing a play environmentally.

Goal two will be achieved in two ways. Each performance will be followed by a Q & A with our audience and our cast. The student researchers will conduct these feedback sessions. We will attempt to distill experience of the play, particularly with regards to the close quarters that the play occurs within. We will also design a post-show survey that will attempt to quantify audience response to these questions regarding aesthetic distance.

Goal three will be achieved by two indicators. First, the number of attendees at the show who came from the greater Lynchburg area will tell us if Lynchburg was interested in this kind of work. Second, part of our audience survey will be to ask about audience reaction to the work. In other words, first, did they come, and second, did they like it. (We realize that our attendance will be extremely limited in this work because we anticipate that only 10-12 audience members can see each performance, as is often the case in environmental theatre. Still, we will be able to test audience capacity and audience response in our small sample.)

Timeline

As an arts project that focuses on a specific piece of creative endeavor, our project will be contained within the 8 weeks of summer research.

If your project is a continuation of research already begun, explain what progress has already been made and how this summer's work will advance the study.  
**This is new work.**

If you are applying for the course release option, please make that clear at the beginning of your description, address how you will use the extra time, and describe in what capacity you will work with the student during that semester.  
**No course release**

Dissemination goals:

We will stage the work in the greater Lynchburg community, so not only will the summer research and Randolph community be invited, but the very nature of the questions that the project poses requires an effort to bring in people from the greater community.

External funding: As a faculty member, I will be requesting funding from PDC to assist in securing the necessary actors for the project. I will be asking PDC for \$1500, and we hope to raise \$1000 on admissions to the performance. If these funds are not approved, I will find other means of funding.

Budgetary needs: Each project can request up to \$1000 budget for equipment, supplies, travel, etc., necessary for carrying out the scholarship project. You must itemize needs as specifically as possible, but you may estimate costs. Please explain the budgetary needs. If your project requires more than \$1000, please provide a careful justification as to why it cannot be carried out with less. Unlike past years, you will need to stay within your project's budget request. This money is expected to be used between the date of acceptance of the proposal, and the end of the Summer Research Program (7/6/12), unless you specifically request an extension. This budget is for not for dissemination (such as conference travel,) but is for support that adds to the scholarship.

I have attached a brief budget outline that requests \$1000 of funding to support the production of this work.

Past Outcomes: If the faculty member has been in the Randolph College Summer Research Program previously, they should discuss past outcomes and dissemination of the project, and/or discuss why the project did not go as planned.

This will be my first experience with Summer Research at Randolph College.

Statement about student researchers written by faculty member. \

The students will secure the rights to the play. The students will devise the environmental approach to the play. The students will conduct the auditions and be involved in casting. The students will implement all design choices for the performance. The students will create and organize all marketing materials. The students will organize and moderate post show feedback sessions. The students will create the survey to be completed by all audience members. The students will collate and synthesize the findings from the post show discussions and the written surveys. Students will keep a detailed journal of the steps they took in creating this

environmental piece of theatre, culminating an articulated process they would follow in creating another similar

I will be the director of the play being produced. In this capacity, I can work with them as producers of the work and advise and guide their work in achieving a successful creative endeavor. We will be meeting on a daily basis to work through production issues and needs, setting deadlines and assigning tasks.

I believe the students will leave the project with a greater understanding of the possibilities before them with regards to creating theatre. During the year, we create opportunities for large groups of students in full-scale theatrical production where structure already exists. In this project, they will discover the very nature of theatrical creation. They will also engage audiences on the question of aesthetic distance, learning more about the concept by experimenting with its boundaries.

Both Matt and Ashleigh are among the brightest and most creative young theatre artists currently enrolled at the college. Both have proven to be serious in the classroom as well as in the rehearsal hall. Both have proven themselves onstage and they continue to be cast and utilized in a variety of ways in the theatre department. Both of them have brought with them a theatrical background that has matured them sufficiently to take charge of such an ambitious and experimental project.

I am asking for more than one student for two reasons. The amount of work to be done on this experimental piece of theatre will be immense, and each of these students has proven to possess resourcefulness and broad capabilities that can contribute to a successful outcome. Part of each theatrical production is the delegation and setting of priorities. By having these students work together, the task will be achievable, but it also will force them to separate the tasks and make decisions regarding who would best be suited for particular aspects of the project.

In addition, I personally would like each of these students to have this experience because I believe that this sort of production will not be attempted often and it is a great opportunity to involve multiple students in unique work that is outside the norm. Students not working on the project will not gain the full benefits of the work. The results regarding the Lynchburg community and the conclusions regarding aesthetic distance can be shared but the core of the project is about the process and the work. Each of these students is in fine academic standing and shows continued excellence in theatrical endeavors.

Statement from each student.

Ashley Peisher

This particular Summer Research Project is a once-in-life-time opportunity for me. Undergraduate college students don't often get to participate in experimental theatre. Currently, I am caught between the idea of acting and directing professionally for the rest of my life. I have a huge interest and potential in both directing and theatrical design, and I'm being presented with the opportunity of dramatically improving my abilities, learning so much, and doing something that I truly love. This program will help me finally decide on a future career, and gain valuable and marketable experience in the Theatre world. By the time this research program will begin, I will have been directly involved in thirteen shows. During my four years of Theatre at Ocean Lakes High School Theatre Company, I directed two shows during our Annual Student-Directed One Acts. Four or five plays would be produced and only thirty or so students would audition. I have experience in casting shows, recognizing the strengths and weakness in actors I have only seen act for

two minutes, and finding replacements/additional actors in a pinch. During those productions, I had to build the set, find costumes, organize my peers, create offstage illusions of explosions, lead rehearsals, etc, completely on my own and without funding. I also designed my high school theatre company's logo (still in use), as well as multiple playbill covers and advertisements. I attended the Old Dominion Center Magnet Art Program for four years in my youth, and learned how to create both business and art oriented designs in my time there. During this summer research program, I will bring my design/art, directing, and organization skills to the table.

I will learn how to organize/produce environmental theatre, manage a budget, design economically, collaborate with a production team, hold professional auditions for paid actors, conduct interviews and audience surveys, legally secure production rights for plays outside of the public domain, form of a cast of actors with chemistry and experience, efficiently use limited resources, effectively advertise such innovative art to a vast and conventional community, organize a rehearsal schedule, and find a cost-effective venue for unconventional theatre. I will also learn so much more about audiences; how specific choices effect different audience members, what an audience wants to see, how aesthetic distance effects viewers, etc. My leadership, directing, and organization skills will improve. This will hugely impact my class selections, and my future career choice. Having all this experience will also help me become employed after graduation. Once I graduate, I won't have extensive funding or sponsorship, a venue, or willingly unpaid actors at my disposal. This project will help prepare me for my possible future career, and will forever change my perspective on Theatre.

Matthew Cornpropst

I find this project interesting for several reasons, chief among them pursuing my interest in increasing audience interaction (in this case, eliminating aesthetic distance) in theatrical productions. I believe that in order to revive a wounded theatre culture in America, theatrical productions should take advantage of things that other forms of entertainment simply cannot offer. In this case, we would be placing the audience *in* the environment where the story they are witnessing is taking place. Another reason this project is so interesting is that it requires a wide range of skills to complete. Ultimately, it is my aim to become a skilled, well-rounded theatre artist, and this project can further my progress toward this goal.

I believe I can significantly contribute to this project in numerous ways. First, if time would allow, I would like to audition for the show and be a part of the production in that regard. This would be a unique opportunity in terms of acting in close quarters with an audience. The focus and care required to perform such a show would undoubtedly be a growing experience for me as an actor. I believe that I can also contribute with the scenic and lighting considerations, taking experience from classes and practical work and applying that experience to a show produced by myself and Professor Archer.

My previous internship experience with Studio Roanoke, a community theatre located in Roanoke, VA, should also assist in the organization and execution of this production. Studio Roanoke faced similar challenges with funding and marketing. Because these problems are not new or unheard of to me, I believe I may be able to integrate solutions used at the theatre, as well as new ones.

Finally, I believe that my workload during my career has *more* than prepared me to handle an 8 week production process. During the years I balanced my time between acting and/or holding a technical position for all shows since my arrival, dance rehearsals for pieces either in the fall or spring Dance Concert, working as a Resident Assistant this year, as well as consistently taking an above average class load and maintaining a █ GPA. I feel no qualms about taking on a project of this magnitude as a full-time job and giving it the same consideration and effort I would give at a professional theatre company.

Overall, I hope to gain a clear understanding of and experience with the full process that goes into production of a show, from obtaining rights, to administration duties, to design, to rehearsal, and to final execution of a finished show. Moreover, this experience will have come from creating a quality production with a small budget and limited resources. I feel that this will make me more marketable in the theatre world in many potential areas of work.

I also feel that I will gain a better understanding of the world as an artist. I can learn to make the most of the materials around me. I will be able to experience a psychologically intense show in a unique environment. I will face a variety new challenges and further my ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Perhaps most importantly, I will be furthering my understanding of what limits exist to the average audience. Lynchburg is far from representative of America (let alone the rest of the world), but I believe that there is an average human comfort level that we may experiment with in this production. From my experiences with this work, I can devise new ways to test and involve audiences in future theatrical works.