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Syracuse Spotlight: Building a Greater Performing Arts Community

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Syracuse Spotlight: Building a Greater Performing Arts Community

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in Magazine Journalism

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Date: April 25, 2012

Abstract

Syracuse Spotlight is a performing arts magazine created in part to build a stronger performing arts community for the Syracuse University campus. Since the campus lacks any sort of regular coverage of live performance, I wanted to provide a resource to fill this void in student publications. For the most part, the coverage was not in depth, and most of the coverage was solely of the work done by the Syracuse University Drama Department.

With the creation of *Syracuse Spotlight*, I bring to the university community an outlet for representation of all performing arts – both of majors and non-majors. This includes features profiling students in the arts, behind-the-scenes, information on venues both on and off campus, news on the professional regional theater Syracuse Stage, and of the performing arts world in Syracuse in general.

I hope that with more complete coverage of the live performing arts in Syracuse, the community will have a medium to express themselves and therefore strengthen. I hope that this magazine will encourage patrons and gain more supporters of the arts in the community as a whole.

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Reflective Essay

As an arts journalist, I believe in the *art* of storytelling. Like clay or paint, words are molded to create a compelling story. The original idea for *Syracuse Spotlight* was inspired by *Back Stage* magazine based out of New York City and Los Angeles. *Back Stage* is a trade publication for working actors, models, and other performers to connect with others in the industry. The magazine provides entertainment news, advice columns, and a casting section devoted to pages and pages of casting calls so actors can know what opportunities are available and submit their work. This unique weekly magazine (some also call it a weekly newspaper) creates opportunities and helps advance performing arts careers.

In the process of storytelling, I believe the journalist becomes attached to her subject, whether it is a person, an object, or an event. I learned the lengths at which this bond between journalist and subjects could reach during one of my news reporting classes. For the class, I covered the LGBT beat for a semester, and wrote stories on all different aspects of the LGBT community on the Syracuse campus. In spending months within this community and sharing its stories with the world, I connected with the people that I wrote about and I began to see how important it was for there to be a publication for such a community, like *OUT* magazine and other LGBT publications.

I took this experience of the connection with the LGBT community and translated it to fit the area of media I wanted to make a career out of: the performing arts. Through internships, campus publications, and class assignments, I began to fully commit myself to the performing arts world. With each story, I

dug deep into the subject, and put all of my energy into telling the best story that I could for my audience.

Whether it is a feature story, a profile, a review, or a tiny blurb, arts journalists take their perception of the arts and share them through their own creation. In a way, arts journalists tell the world what to value – and give a perspective on how to understand truths in the world around them. I believe a certain responsibility comes along with this view of journalism. The foremost responsibility of a journalist is to serve the audience. As a journalist, I have always put forth the best effort into serving the people for whom I was writing. When I set out to create *Syracuse Spotlight*, I wanted to give the campus something that it didn't have. I wanted to provide a service to the art world. I wanted to make sure that my contribution would improve the greater community.

As an intern for two summers in the casting department of *Back Stage*, I began to think that Syracuse University could benefit as a campus from a publication of a similar type. The Syracuse University drama department has gained a lot of praise for its success in producing successful students, whether they work on stage or behind the scenes. The department has produced many famous alumni such as Taye Diggs (musical theater), Vanessa Williams (musical theater), Frank Langella (drama), and this year's Commencement speaker Aaron Sorkin (musical theater). These are simply the credits and alumni of the department as a whole, and do not include the talents of the full performing arts community on Syracuse University campus.

It made no sense to me that such a highly regarded department and community of performance artists should go unrepresented in campus media. There is no campus publication that regularly covers theatrical events. *The Daily Orange* only reviews large shows. Smaller performances go unnoticed by campus media. There is no medium focused entirely on performance, and therefore this community lacks this important part of their culture. I wanted to take on the task of providing a publication like *Syracuse Spotlight* to this unrepresented audience. And my internship at *Back Stage* provided the perfect template from which to start.

My original proposal was almost an identical type of publication, printing casting notices of all types of auditions on campus. The goal was to provide access to opportunities for students who are not drama majors. Sometimes such opportunities are difficult to find, especially for those unfamiliar with groups that provide prospects for performance or behind-the-scenes work.

However, this task seemed a bit impossible for a monthly magazine, such as *Syracuse Spotlight*. There are obviously not near as many opportunities on a weekly basis for actors on the Syracuse University campus as there are in larger markets. My adapted proposal included the *Syracuse Spotlight* blog, which would allow more flexibility for such audition announcements. Instead of worrying about getting them into print in time a month in advance, a simple post could send casting calls to a resource that could be checked by readers from anywhere with internet access. This was how I adapted *Back Stage* to the Syracuse University campus in order to create the idea of *Syracuse Spotlight*.

The experience I had with the talent staff of *Back Stage* as well as the guidance of many Newhouse professors have given the ability to maneuver and adapt the concept of *Back Stage* into a better fit for the Syracuse University community. These experiences also gave me the technical skills (writing, editing, designing, organizational, etc.) to be able to make that idea a reality. The familiarity that my internship gave me with blogging with purpose and for a specific audience allowed me to develop a useful component to my project that could set it apart from other magazines similar to it. Although my education at Syracuse University, specifically in Newhouse, has contributed greatly to the success of my work, I cannot adequately describe the value of my hands-on experience interning at *Back Stage*.

Prior to *Syracuse Spotlight*, I had not created a publication on my own, The challenges were both expected and unexpected. In the publishing world, stories fall through, writers or subjects back out, etc. This also happened on *Syracuse Spotlight*, but I think these setbacks were valuable, as they forced me to be more spontaneous in my process. I began to think quicker to solve problems. As I result, I developed a sharper eye for potential stories to replace the ones that have fallen through.

I have learned the resilience needed to create something in the journalistic world. In a fast-paced environment, there is not time to dwell on mishaps. Instead, I learned that when a story fell through or a writer backed out, that there was no use spending time worrying about it. I try to live my life according to the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done

what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.” I learned that this is a strategic way to be a leader – in this case, in the form of an editor.

By doing a majority of this project on my own, I was able to hone all the skills I have learned in order to be a successful journalist. I was writing, editing, designing, and creating stories from beginning to end. Although much of the work and organizational responsibilities were my own, I did not do this magazine completely alone. I served as a leader to my writers, bloggers, and photographers. By adopting Emerson’s philosophy, I was able to maintain a level-headedness and became a more efficient problem solver.

In a way, I discovered how being a journalist is very similar to being a problem solver. Stories can spark rebellions, enforce truths, or even just entertain. For my magazine’s purposes, the latter was the main goal. But the magazine itself solved a problem by filling the void of performing arts journalism available about the Syracuse University campus. Each decision I made was for the audience I was trying to serve by creating the magazine in the first place. Always moving forward and allowing myself to keep my work flexible were both incredibly useful skills in the creation of *Syracuse Spotlight*.

The biggest change from *Back Stage* to *Syracuse Spotlight* is the addition of the blog. As mentioned, part of *Back Stage* is the extensive casting section. Other publications, such as *Playbill*, have similar sections on their websites, but half of *Back Stage*’s print edition each week is completely dedicated to this. This casting section, being the main inspiration for my magazine, is important to

Syracuse Spotlight. However, being a monthly magazine and having a significantly fewer number of casting calls, I needed to find another way to make *Syracuse Spotlight* a viable resource for non-majors interested in the performing arts.

The blog quickly became a solution to this challenge. It created a resource that was both accessible and very flexible, with no time restraints. Without the blog, I would have completely lost my concept of providing a solution to the problems I faced as a first-year student. Its existence allows for the concept of creating a resource for readers to find out how to be more involved in the performing arts community. It also became a more efficient way of doing this. It allows for auditions and casting to be announced right away. Last minute additions to casts or needed replacements now had a resource to use that could be updated immediately.

In addition to keeping my original concept intact, the blog also opened more opportunities for the magazine. Reviews, which would not have come out on time in the print magazine, now could be posted on the blog. It allowed for breaking news from the professional entertainment industry as well. I could now maintain a loyal readership. Not only would the readers now pick up a print copy each month, but in theory they would also visit the blog daily and get shorter news stories, reviews, and of course casting calls.

In a changing media world, a journalist has to be prepared to use technologies and media such as blogs to help add another layer to a publication. I feel like this blog is one way that the changing media world is reflected in

Syracuse Spotlight. Since this is also the launch of the magazine, I can use my own blog as an advertiser for the first magazine. I am able to post teasers for upcoming stories. Once a more established readership comes after the launch, the magazine would theoretically jump on to social media as well (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)

This changing world was a huge factor to the process of creating this magazine. I believe timeliness has always been a struggle for monthly magazine journalists especially. It is important for a journalist to live within their time; perhaps this is the most important thing they need to take into account. As opposed to a newspaper, which publishes daily, or even a weekly magazine, a monthly magazine allows for a greater amount of story options, but the challenge to make such stories interesting even though they may not be breaking news.

The digital media world, in a way, mimics the spontaneity of live performance itself. A live performer, much like an arts journalist, but hone her skill of thinking on her feet, and improvising a decision at a moment's notice. My passion for a reliable and entertaining representation of the arts has simply grown during my time as an arts journalist. I have a deep appreciation for performing arts. I believe that live performance is one of the most interesting art forms, as it is never exactly the same. During the creation of *Syracuse Spotlight*, I strove to translate that spontaneity into my design and look of the magazine pages themselves. There is no real set structure to any of the designs, and they are free to flow from one story to the next. This is most reflective in the major fonts and in

masthead on the cover. The design of the title is not meant to be structured, but free; a performer in its own way.

Art without boundaries. Performance without boundaries. That is what I wanted to promote with the magazine. It wasn't just about actors and theater, but about live performance in general. I had a responsibility to my readers to cover a broad range of performance art – and to try to include something for everyone. My theory behind arts journalism is that the writing has to match the subject. It needs to be unique and interesting. It needs to grab attention and make a statement. This theory is woven into the structure of *Syracuse Spotlight* with diverse stories and voices that make it something unique.

I have made a habit out of jotting down important quotes dealing with journalists own perception of what they do. One of my favorites is “While politicians dictate what is important, journalists decide what is interesting.” This is the philosophy I have always adopted while making decisions on stories and story ideas. The decision to write a story goes so far beyond a simple “story about comedienne.” The decision on what angle to take with the story, how to present it, and what sources to look at are all decisions that need to be made prior to actually writing the story.

Again, I always trace this back to the audience. How do they want to read it? From what perspective? What do they not know about the story already that can enrich their experience? Entertainment media may not always be world changing, and many of the stories presented in this publication are not, but that

doesn't mean they aren't important. It doesn't mean they won't be read, enjoyed, talked about, or thought about.

I've spent a lot of time drawing my inspiration from *Back Stage* magazine, but my reading extends far beyond that. I have also drawn inspiration from publications such as the *New York Times* Arts section, the *Guardian's* theatre section (and corresponding blog on their website), *New York Magazine's* Vulture blog, and my experience studying abroad in London. Vulture was a major inspiration of the blog, especially their TV recaps. However, the other publications were inspiring because I was able to see how different media outlets handled the same stories. By studying the angle of similar stories that different newspapers and magazines took, I was able to examine the process of angling a story to a given audience. The *New York Times* and *Guardian* are both general interest publications with specific sections, but publications like *Back Stage* allowed me to see how to write a story for a niche audience within an industry.

My experience studying abroad allowed me to see multiple live performances a week. I was at a theater in London at least once a week, but was also able to see live bands (both professional and amateur) and even a little comedy. Displays such as the theater exhibit at the Victoria & Albert museum allowed me to become more knowledgeable about the theater industry. By seeing all of the elements that go into a single production, I was able to get a variety of stories that went beyond just the performer on stage, but also the behind-the-scenes artists and the training process as well.

As an experienced actress myself, I have developed a longstanding passion for the arts. I feel that as a journalist, no matter which subject you take on, an underlying respect must always be present. A respect for the integrity of journalism is also important. This is how I approach the writing with each article. I constantly ask myself while writing, “Is this respectful to the subject, to the audience, to the art itself?” In my self-editing process I then ask myself “above all, is this accurate?” I take my responsibilities as a journalist into account through the entire process, from idea to published article.

This is mostly done through constant self-policing. I’ll sit down at a computer with my interview transcript and can usually flush out an entire story in one go. I had a teacher, Hart Seely, who encouraged this way of writing a first draft, relying on your first instincts to tell the story, then go back and clean it up through multiple revisions. He also taught us the value of knowing how to not over-edit, which is something I always take into account.

To the writer, the story may never seem finished. It is possible that what you are writing could continuously evolve to the end of time. The key is to know when a story is finished. I’ve always taken the approach that once I start changing the same parts back and forth, the story is done. There has to be a point when you cannot perfect it anymore, a limit that comes with having a deadline. Once I am done editing a story and have moved on to the layout, I generally ignore the text as much as possible, so I don’t continue to rework something that I have already considered ready.

In creating the look for each article, I put special effort into making each a little different from one another. Keeping the magazine visually exciting was something I learned from studying various publications over the years. As opposed to newspapers, magazines have more freedom to play off the artwork. I played with fonts and bold colors until I found ones that would give a spirit of fun but also of an audacious performance

Now I would like to take some time to talk about a few struggles I face and how they changed the course of my process. I started this project as mostly the editor. I was assigning stories and organizing artwork. I was setting deadlines and editing as the stories came in. As mentioned, with deadlines come stressful situations and the necessary patience and spontaneity to deal with them. However this concept was learned. Through a series of mishaps that reshaped the issue that was produced, I was able to experience the unexpected realities of publication and the determination and problem solving skills it takes to confront them.

The first was a lack of dedication of the writing staff. It is probably much different when a writer has the incentive of a paycheck to hand a story in on time, but I struggled to receive about half of the written content handed in on time. I realized the importance of a dedicated staff, but more so than that, the importance of my own dedication. When writers began to drop out right before deadlines, I panicked. But there was no time to dwell on obstacles. I began to take on the responsibility myself of both the writer and editor of a few articles.

The real issues came when I was unable to complete two feature stories for my well. As it was getting close to deadline, I felt the pressure of needing to

fill content, and severely lacking. Frantically trying to get in communication with these sources for stories I was writing but receiving no response, I had to find a way to fill the void. I began contacting other writers I knew and trying to think of alternate stories myself. Since these two were already alternate stories to original ideas, I was struggling with how to make things interesting and innovative.

I ended up writing one of them myself. I wrote about instead of just profiling students. This gave a bit more depth to the magazine and allowed me to look at an entirely different perspective of the performing arts – the artistic director Timothy Bond.

One writer, Melissa Savignano, contacted me with a story she was working on about female comediennes. Noticing that it fit perfectly in with my approach to *Syracuse Spotlight*, performing arts from a unique angle, I took the story. Combined with two shorter pieces from the beginning of the front-of-book section of the magazine, I began to form a theme issue out. Although usually the first issue of a magazine is broad, displaying the aspects of the new publication, the comedy theme of *Syracuse Spotlight* seemed to fall into place. Again, the issue stuck with my original concept of being an all-encompassing performing arts magazine, but now it had the extra kick of a theme, which gave it a little more focus as a whole.

This theme also inspired the cover design, drawing attention to the comedy aspects of the issues as the cover blurbs. Although other stories are briefly mentioned, a spotlight could be held on the comedy stories, which is what I then based the design around. Consequently, the immediate panic that followed

the obstacles that arose allowed me to get experience in conflict management. I was forced to think spontaneously and creatively. I was able to see another side of the publication process that I was not expecting to encounter.

I noticed that the process of writing these stories for this magazine greatly differed from my creative writing process. I do a lot of exercises in the prewriting stage of creative writing. To create characters, I'll give myself a two-minute period where I just write non-stop. I do not concern myself with correct grammar, full sentences, or self-judgment. I can sometimes create a stream-of-consciousness in the mind of the character and use it to develop her in the story. I sometimes write monologues or dialogue that I can use as part of a later conversation. I also can do this with descriptions of places in my stories. I'll write a two-minute period of description of the place as best as I can to match the image of my head and then I can put the characters and the plot into that place.

However, with journalism, the characters are already there for you, as are the places and the plot. Instead of having to create them out of thin air, my interviews already create them for me. The difference between creative and journalistic writing is in what you are actually creating. Usually in creative writing, you start with a blank slate and build a world. With journalistic writing, you are given a world to share and instead build a perspective. The freedom is still there in the journalistic writing, but it is more defined. It is based more in truths. And it is important to keep these truths as part of the construction of every piece, or else the truth can escape you and you're left with a work of fiction.

I adapt my creative writing process into a style that fits journalistic writing. The creation is more within the perception; it depends on my view of the truth. I abandon prewriting exercises. The journalistic writing comes more in phases: the interview, an entire first draft, and then revision after revision until I deem it complete. Journalism is almost like a puzzle: I have all the pieces; my job is to simply put them together in a story for the audience.

Overall, the capacity of this work has taught me the pressures, the fulfillment, and the creative inspiration that comes with creating a magazine. Although I did not do this completely on my own (see ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS) I am more than thrilled to have a compilation of my skills as an arts journalist. The lessons I have learned from putting together a Capstone piece such as *Syracuse Spotlight* are ones I will take with me throughout any journalism I do for the rest of my career. I feel I have filled all of my aforementioned responsibilities as an arts journalist.

My passion for the arts has only grown, and continues to grow with each performance I witness. My passion for writing has only grown, and continues to grow with each experiment I take. My own voice has developed as well as the voice of my publication, *Syracuse Spotlight*. To track such growth from beginning to end is truly the process of creating. To create is to tell a story – these stories of art. Woven together they become their own masterpiece. By weaving them together, they became mine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a final note, I would like to extend my full gratitude to those who have helped to propel this launch forward. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Melissa Chessher and my reader Jim Shahin for their knowledgeable editing and dedication to my success with this project. The magazine would be non-existent without the contributions of my writers Sam Gerhardt, Kristin Hunt, Annie Knox, Erin Scialabba, Melissa Savignano and Eric Vilas-Boas. An extra special thanks is also given to Annie Knox for her role as contributing photographer and Joe Pasko for his illustrations. For her contributions to the *Syracuse Spotlight* blog, Sasha Patane deserves special recognition, adding her voice to keep the blog from becoming monotonous. Finally, thank you to the staff of the Renée Crown University Honors program for their support, guidance, and drive to help ensure my success.

Summary of Capstone Project

For my Capstone project, I launched a performing arts magazine called *Syracuse Spotlight*. The magazine was intended for a Syracuse University audience. It included stories dealing with the performing arts both on campus and within the city of Syracuse. These stories include profiles on current students, features on venues in the city, and features on topics relatable to a college-aged audience, such as the fate of college bands.

However, students on the Syracuse University campus do not often spend all four years in Syracuse alone, so there are a few stories about theater outside of New York State. There is a first-person “soliloquy” describing a student’s adventures studying with The Second City comedy troupe in Chicago, Illinois as well as a feature on venues in London, England, where many students study abroad. Furthermore, there are featured recent alumni sharing their post-grad successes in the world of performance.

The inspiration for *Syracuse Spotlight* came from my experience interning for two summers at *Back Stage* magazine in New York. *Back Stage* is a trade publication for the performing arts world directed mostly at actors, but also for models, crew members, singers, dancers, and anyone in the entertainment field. *Back Stage* is a weekly publication that contains entertainment news, advice for performers, and a casting section that takes up about half of the print publication that lists casting calls posted by casting directors in markets across the country. Working for this magazine, I realized that a performing arts magazine with this

sort of coverage was something the Syracuse University community was lacking and could definitely benefit from.

The process of launching this issue was an intricate one. First, I worked to adapt the type of publication *Back Stage* was to a publication that better suited the Syracuse University campus. Once I had this basic template in place, I began to seek out stories on my own to hone in and identify a readership. *Syracuse Spotlight's* readership can be defined as a member of the Syracuse University community, with an emphasis on the students, interested in the performing arts either as someone onstage, behind-the-scenes, or in the audience.

In order to get a diverse voice for the magazine, I accumulated a staff of writers. For most of them, especially those writing in the Front-of-Book section titled "Center Stage," I assigned the stories. For the feature well, I had my writers pitch me their own story ideas and worked with them to make sure that they fit into *Syracuse Spotlight's* readership identity. As I worked with the writers, we also angled their stories so that they would fit into a May issue of *Syracuse Spotlight*, which is the issue that is being launched for this project.

As we worked on stories, the writers mostly voluntarily took on the responsibility of supplying me with the artwork for the pieces as well. For those that didn't, I gathered artwork. I also found a photographer willing to contribute to the project in both the photojournal piece of outdoor theaters and any artwork missing from the features and front-of-book. As stories came in, I edited them myself, going through all the levels of macro- and microediting, including line and copy edits. After editing the stories, I began to lay them out in InDesign.

The layout process began with a design of the look of *Syracuse Spotlight*. I wanted the fonts to be modern and distinct. I chose fonts that were this and added a showy scripted font to complete the look of the type. The colors I used were bold reds and yellows against black and white neutrals, to match the feeling of performance. After layout was complete, it was simply revision after revision until the best possible publication was made.

Part of the uniqueness of *Back Stage* magazine was the casting calls that provided readers with opportunities to be a part of productions. I wanted to incorporate this into my monthly magazine that I had created, but needed to readjust it for a few reasons. The first is that *Back Stage* was able to publish weekly. The second is that the New York and Los Angeles markets in which *Back Stage* is based provides far more opportunities for aspiring professionals than the Syracuse city and campus does for the students. Thus, I created the *Syracuse Spotlight* blog.

This blog is intended to be a source for actors or behind-the-scenes crew to find productions to work on. These would be opportunities available for non-majors mostly, since the ones for majors are specifically in the program and for them alone. This would allow performers and crew members alike to be connected to a network of performing arts and opportunities to use their talents and become a part of a bigger community. There would also be another opportunity created for those that needed casts or crews for different projects, as they would now have another place to post their notices. The blog would also

serve as a source for entertainment news, both on campus and in the professional world.

In order to diversify the voice of the blog a little more, I had a writer sometimes contribute to the news portion of the blog, writing opinion pieces on anything that sparked her interest in the entertainment world. I included a few reviews of TV and movies as well. In short, this blog was an integral component of *Syracuse Spotlight* due to its ability to post items that would be too timely for a monthly magazine (auditions, reviews, news updates, etc.) The blog would also allow for a more dedicated readership. It also allows for interaction between reader and publication since a blog allows for immediate comments and conversation. Interest in the blog should in-turn spark interest to pick up a print copy of the magazine.

The main significance of this project is that there is no other publication like it on campus. From interning at *Back Stage* the past two summers, I discovered the importance of a publication such as *Syracuse Spotlight* in a community. For the Syracuse University community in particular, this publication is a place for both performing arts majors and non-majors alike to find news, shows, and auditions. The accessibility of this kind of information can help a community become more in tune with the arts, and therefore stronger culturally.

The inspiration for this project really came from my inability to be in touch with the performing arts community available for non-majors. The opportunities were not always well advertised and as a freshman, I was unsure where to look to seek them out. However, with a publication such as *Syracuse*

Spotlight, it is easier for everyone on campus to know where and when auditions are happening, groups are forming, or even when performances are happening for them to enjoy as a patron. My goal with *Syracuse Spotlight* was to not only contribute to the performing arts community on campus, but also to expand it.