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Bat Boy: The Musical

Sarah Carlson Cassell

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Bat Boy: The Musical

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

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Candidate for Musical Theater Degree
And Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Musical Theater

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
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Capstone Project Reader: _____
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Honors Director: _____
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Date: May 6, 2014

Abstract

When I began the process of producing my Capstone Project, *Bat Boy: the Musical*, I had no idea what I was about to do or how much work it was going to be. I ultimately learned that the key tools I needed were passion, confidence, and creativity.

I originally had a very difficult time deciding what show I wanted to do. I changed my mind several times between other shows, but once I landed on *Bat Boy* I never second-guessed my choice. I found a show I was passionate about, and subsequently poured myself into every second I spent producing it. My Capstone was a crash-course in producing. I handled every detail and enlisted the help I needed to make the show happen. I raised all the money, figured out how best to spend it, and generated an audience to sell out every performance. I ran into countless problems, but as I found ways to solve each of them my confidence grew.

Problems were inevitable, unexpected, and sometimes ridiculous to the point of comical. Just about everything the audience saw onstage was not an originally planned moment, prop, or set piece, but a solution to a problem. I found ways to use set backs to invent something more interesting than my original idea. I like to think it made our show charming.

By the time we began rehearsals, I was starting to trust myself as a producer. This was important because I had to focus on my role during rehearsals; we only had three weeks to put the show together. I have never spent my time as productively as I did during those three weeks. I was emotionally invested in the success of the show as a whole, but totally focused on each individual task. Sometimes giving yourself limited time to do something that means a lot to you forces you to do your best work.

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Executive Summary

My Capstone Project was to produce and perform in a full-length, two-act musical. The show I chose was a high camp, oddball piece called *Bat Boy*, which is about exactly what it sounds like – a boy who is part bat. This show was not only challenging for the actors in terms of style and musicality, but also challenging for me as a producer logistically.

To produce a show is, to put it simply, to make it happen. It involves handling the logistical and particularly the financial elements of a production. I was responsible for all the grunt work that no one thinks about when they see a show – finding a place to rehearse and perform, renting chairs for the audience to sit in, platforms to make a stage, buying extension chords for the lights. These are all needs for a show that seemed basic to me until I forgot one of them, at which point that need would become glaringly obvious. I was also responsible for some more artistic things, such as assembling a creative team that I could trust. I was in charge of selecting the director, stage manager, designers, crew, and cast. I pre-cast some people I knew I wanted to work with (including myself), and then held auditions for the roles I wasn't sure about. This allowed me to give opportunities to some talented underclassmen I hadn't seen work before, which was exciting.

As an actor in the show, I had a lot of work to do as well. We only had a three-week rehearsal process, so I had to learn all my lines and music in advance and

come to rehearsal with a really strong sense of my character right off the bat. The rehearsals were fun and intense. We packed a huge amount of material into a small amount of time, only running the show all the way through once before our first performance. Had it been the kind of show that takes itself more seriously, this may not have worked. However, the self-aware nature of *Bat Boy* allowed for mistakes and mishaps. Camp comedy is a little bit like clowning – the audience has to be taken into account a great deal. Unlike realism, where there is usually a strong fourth wall, camp functions with an awareness of itself. Audiences felt comfortable laughing at and enjoying anything we did onstage, even if we blurred the line between character and actor. We weren't intending to make mistakes, but we knew that if we did, we knew we were safe. It was a dream to be able to think on our feet, to be doing a show so large in style that we didn't have to apologize for anything.

I wanted to do this show for many reasons. The first is that I wanted to give myself an opportunity to perform, rather than wait for opportunities to be given to me. I took a lot of pride in being able to provide performance opportunities to other students as well. Another reason I wanted to do *Bat Boy* is because it's so rare that we work on comedy in classes or even in the shows we do in the Department of Drama. I think it's such an important skill, especially for young actors, and I wanted to work on it and show other students and the rest of the community that comedy can be as challenging and thought provoking as drama. Plus, it's fun.

Bat Boy, while highly comedic, has a darkness underneath it that I was drawn to. The subject matter is absurd in the details but very dark thematically. The title character, Bat Boy, tries to assimilate in a town that refuses to accept him because

he is different from them. No matter what he does, he can never change enough of himself to be welcomed by them. When we find out later in the show that his identity was not caused by some mutation but by a science experiment, we see him as a monster that mankind has created and then rejected. He dies a martyr, the only truly pure character in the show.

It's a bit overwrought, but that's the root of its charm – it's aware of its hilarious grandeur. The message may come across as extreme, but I believe it is actually universally relevant in any society or culture. We are afraid of what we don't understand, even and especially if it comes from us. We all fear parts of ourselves, and Bat Boy represents the part of each of us that we are frightened to access.

I think producing one's own work is an incredible way to experience theater from the inside out. I have such a great respect for every person involved in a show now that I have taken on a project like this. It's incredibly rewarding not only to display talent and entertain people, but also to choose what kinds of messages you want to put out into the world, to select material that says what you want to say.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Your Capstone Project is an opportunity to hold yourself accountable for your work. Your biggest idea may seem daunting, and it may be tempting to take an easier, more manageable route. But the most rewarding path is to do a project that you are passionate about. Don't be afraid to do a Capstone that seems larger than the other projects you've seen; the more risks you take, the better the payoff can be. I say this from the depths of my own experience. You don't have to have a totally clear vision of your end product at the beginning of your project. In fact, if your project turns out exactly how you envisioned it on day one, you may have missed the point. Challenges to your initial ideas are a blessing – they force your imagination into high gear. Trust yourself and your work.

The Honors Program is full of amazing resources, and they will open doors for you if you are passionate about what you are doing. They will match your enthusiasm and ease your nerves. Apply for Crown-Wise Funding. Ask Eric Holzwarth for help. And above all, make room for an incidentals expense in your budget. You will need it.

Preface

When I was about eight years old, I did a back flip off the diving board at my local pool. I had no experience with this kind of acrobatic activity at all. I just decided I wanted to do it, and like most decisions I made at that age, I just did it without any further thought. When I came out of the water, I was met with a symphony of scolding tones. Apparently, my head had been about an inch from the board and I'd almost killed myself without even realizing it. I hadn't known enough to be scared. As a result, I did something I would most likely have chickened out over had I really thought it through.

I approached my Capstone Project with this same sense of naïveté. While I don't support the amateur attempt of dangerous diving tricks (because seriously, someone could crack their head open), I think it's a wonderful way of working artistically. If you hit your head on a real diving board, you get stitches and a hospital bracelet. If you hit your head on your artistic diving board, you get the opportunity to reroute and come up with new ideas. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that it is okay to hit your head creatively. The best ideas come out of biggest mistakes.

Chapter 1: Why *Bat Boy*?

False Starts

I began this process with several false starts. I originally wanted to do a two-person show called *Jon and Jen*, which I didn't really like but seemed easy. As it turned out, my Capstone advisor, Rodney, didn't like it either. He was also going to direct my project, and he refused to direct *Jon and Jen*. I could have argued, but I honestly didn't have a case for it. He suggested another show, *Gifts of the Magi*, and I agreed to it. I trusted his judgment, and like I said before, I wanted things to be easy. It only had a cast of four people, and it was perfect for the Sutton Pavilion lobby down at the Syracuse Stage building, which would have been a free venue if my project were approved by the Drama Department. I even went so far as to write and submit a Capstone proposal on *Gifts of the Magi*.

As I wrote my proposal, I struggled to come up with compelling reasons why I wanted to do this show. I knew the only real reason I wanted to do it was because Rodney suggested it and I wanted to do what he wanted. Deep down, though I could recognize that *Gifts of the Magi* was well written and poignant, it didn't resonate with me. I still submitted my proposal, not sure what else to do.

Landing on the Right Show

One day, after my proposal had already been submitted, Rodney stopped me in the hallway and said, "What about *Bat Boy*?"

Bat Boy.

This stopped me in my tracks. I thought back to my sophomore year of high school. I had seen another school do a production of this weird little show, and I had fallen absolutely in love with it. Based on a series of articles that came out in the 1990s in a sci-fi tabloid called *The Weekly World News*, *Bat Boy* is the story of a half-boy, half-bat creature who is found in a cave outside a small southern farming town. The local veterinarian's family takes him in, and with their encouragement, he begins to assimilate. As he learns to speak English, studies pop culture, and reads the Bible, his desire to become "human" grows. However, every effort he makes towards societal acceptance is met with resistance. The townspeople obsess over, ridicule, and fear him. He is constantly reminded that he is considered fundamentally different from the rest of humanity because of his pale skin and fangs.

It asks the question: why are we so endlessly fascinated and disgusted by what is different from us? In today's society, where we hate-watch reality TV and entertain ourselves with the details of other people's lives, the concept of voyeurism and mass judgment present in *Bat Boy* felt relevant. The show is completely offbeat, but at the root of it is a really poignant understanding of how it feels to be alienated. Everyone has had the experience of feeling like an outsider, and *Bat Boy*'s essential goodness and desperate desire for acceptance resonates with audiences. On top of all the thematic material in this show, I adore the book and score, written by Keythe Farley, Brian Flemming, and Laurence O'Keefe. The music is challenging and skillful, and the libretto is loaded with campy comedic bits.

However, it's big. The production I saw had a cast of at least twenty people, multiple sets, a five-piece band, and extensive lighting and sound. It definitely wasn't suited for any of the spaces available in the theater complex. While it posed many more production challenges than the other shows I had looked at, I was immediately more passionate about telling *Bat Boy's* story, and I had always wanted to play the role of Meredith Parker, the veterinarian's wife. I found I was excited to rewrite my proposal – I couldn't wait to talk about my ideas. The main thing I learned from this part of the process was that passion is the first thing to consider when embarking on any artistic or intellectual endeavor. The grunt work feels tedious without passion.

I wish I could say that I had thought of *Bat Boy* on my own, but I can see why I didn't. Looking back, I realize that I didn't feel like I had permission to do a show so much wilder and more logistically challenging than the other independent projects I had seen. I couldn't even conceive of making such a bold move on my own. I'm lucky that Rodney suggested *Bat Boy* to me on that day; I think of it as a moment of serendipity. His merely suggesting it gave me the permission I needed to stop dismissing big ideas. I wouldn't have found something I was so passionate about if I had committed to staying small. *Bat Boy* wasn't just a show that I loved; it was a show that I had the right sensibility for and could actually excel at producing and performing.

Chapter 2: The Art of Producing

The producer is the person that brings together all the elements of a show. It's a job that requires organization, a creative eye, and patience. In a production like *Bat Boy*, where the actors and crewmembers weren't paid for their work, it also takes a great deal of enthusiasm and trust. The main parts of producing are budgeting, assembling a creative team, marketing, and problem solving. You can strategize the first three items on that list; the last keeps you on your toes.

Marrying Budget and Concept

I knew that *Bat Boy* was going to be a low-budget production from the start. I wanted to focus on the performances rather than the spectacle, a decision I look back on as one of the main reasons my project turned out as successfully as it did. I applied for funding through the Department of Drama and the Honors Program in May, submitting a budget request that called for under \$1,000. By October, my budget had quadrupled to \$4,000.¹ I raised the full amount through grants from the university, online fundraising, and bake sales.

The budget I ended up with was the perfect amount for this show. My original budget would have hardly covered the accompanist fee, and if I had had another \$1,000, I wouldn't have known what to do with it. There is an awkward middle ground between low budget and large budget that I have observed in productions I've seen over the past few months. With a very large budget, a show can go for total realism or spectacle. A Broadway stage can have a full sized house

¹ A copy of the final version of my budget is included on pg. 18

with every detail accurate, if the show calls for it. The sets can move, the lights can change, and the curtain can come up and down. There is an artistic freedom in having no budgetary restrictions. However, there is another kind of freedom in working with a small budget: it demands creative thinking.

As a producer on a budget, I knew immediately that we couldn't do most of the things the stage directions called for in the script. This took the pressure off – it meant I could work with my creative team to make the production our own. The script itself is very campy and self-aware, so it seemed appropriate to approach the design and staging in a way that was deliberately unpolished. Rodney often threw around the phrase “guerrilla theatre,” which I think is the most accurate way to describe our concept. Though our message wasn't political, as the term implies, we borrowed elements of its spontaneous and unconventional nature.

Much of this concept was inspired by the venue I chose for the show. Spark Contemporary Art Space, littered with stacks of broken televisions and unmatched chairs, is a seedy, student-run, off-campus art gallery. Most other venues I had looked at had strict rules about capacity, hours of occupancy, staff presence, and property damage. These are all valid concerns in a nice theater space. However, Spark's deal was this: use the space however you want, as long as you leave it how it was when you got there. I could have painted the entire room hot pink if I wanted to, as long as I painted it back the day we left. I was drawn to the attitude of the management at Spark – they wanted to step back and let us use their space to create our work with total artistic freedom. We were allowed to set up, rehearse, and perform without any Spark staff supervision, and I was given a key to keep for the

week of our rental. I even negotiated three free days of space rental in exchange for cleaning the gallery. The room was small, but it had great acoustics.

We covered the walls of Spark with newspaper, and on top of that spray-painted a custom bat stencil our design consultant, Simon, had made. The bat stencil was based on the icon featured on the poster.



I wanted to create a recognizable symbol (that couldn't be mistaken for the Batman symbol) that people would remember. Shawn, our poster designer, did a brilliant thing by emphasizing his ears. Bat Boy's ears and fangs are what make him so aesthetically different from other human beings, so to create larger than life ears was an awesome representation of that perception and judgment of him. From costumes to posters to set, the design of this

show was simple and effective. This was an area where we were all on the same page.

Filling the Seats

Another important part of producing is bringing in an audience. I got advice from Timothy Davis-Reid, a member of the acting faculty who has a lot of experience with producing. He urged me to make it very clear on the posters how to reserve

tickets, and to include the names of everyone involved so that potential audience members would easily be able to tell if they knew someone in the show. I delegated a team of freshman production assistants to manage ticketing and web presence. By the time I put the posters up, we had already created a lot of buzz on campus surrounding the show. Our Saturday evening performance sold out just days after ticket sales opened. Demand for seats was so high that we had to add a performance.

The Creative Team

I was lucky enough to have an unwaveringly committed team of people working with me on this show, a team that I was very proud to have assembled. My Capstone advisor, Rodney, is a faculty member I trust and respect artistically. I think the show's success had everything to do with him. I asked him to direct *Bat Boy* because I had worked with him and watched him direct before, and I knew that he would create something dynamic and powerful no matter the circumstances.

For the rest of the team, I chose strong-willed students who could match Rodney's energy. Carmen and Simon, stage manager and designer, respectively, are both opinionated people with great ideas, so I knew there would be a productive push-and-pull at work. Taylor, the assistant director, has the twisted sense of humor to match the show itself; he was a no-brainer for me. I also wanted to include people who were deserving of opportunities. It was important to find the best cast possible, but because *Bat Boy* is so different stylistically from most of the shows done at Syracuse, I knew I would be looking for people who had not been in the spotlight as

much. None of the typical ingénues would have fit the bill – I needed character actors with strong, versatile voices and incredible comic timing.

I ended up with an impressively talented cast that consistently went above and beyond working on the show. The cast, creative team, and seven freshman production assistants stayed with me at Spark until midnight cleaning and setting up, hanging lights and taping up the hundreds newspapers I had asked them all to hoard for the show. No one complained. When Carmen and I took a vote to see who was willing to give up their Saturday afternoon to add a performance, the vote was unanimous; everyone wanted to do more. The cast, myself included, learned this show in three weeks. The process was short, but it was dense and purposeful.

Chapter 3: The Problem Chapter

This short segment is dedicated to all of the problems I encountered while producing this show. I think this would best be achieved in a bullet point list. In no particular order, my shortlist is as follows:

- The finale of the first act, “Comfort and Joy,” was missing an entire page from the score.
- Dramatists Play Service only sent us scores – no scripts. Luckily, I had already downloaded a PDF file of the script elsewhere, and we were able to print them out for the cast. Not sure if that was legal.
- We couldn’t afford to have an accompanist for every rehearsal, so we tried to record rehearsal accompaniment tracks. They were an epic fail, and totally unusable, with poor sound quality and wrong tempos. We spent several weeks of rehearsal singing along to the cast album.
- Approximately half of the outlets at Spark worked – I think we were only able to use six of the twenty clip lights we ordered.
- We rehearsed the show with the understanding that we would be performing on a 12’ x 8’ platform only to realize, three days before opening, that there was no way it would fit in the space. Luckily, we made this decision before the platforms were delivered, so I was able to call and change it to an 8’ x 8’ platform. We still had to re-block the show.
- Opening night, the actor who played Bat Boy came offstage after the first scene with a cut on his knee. We were never sure if he got a splinter from the wood floor or accidentally bit himself.

- Rodney was signed on to direct another student project with the exact same rehearsal period and performance weekend as *Bat Boy*. Somehow, we managed to split his time and both shows were great.
- Our accompanist's keyboard came unplugged during the finale of the first act during a performance. After a few seconds of total silence, someone plugged it back in and we just kept going.
- We forgot to preset the fourth chair for the only scene where four people needed to sit. As I was onstage internally trying to figure out a creative solution, a production assistant walked right up the aisle and handed it to me during the scene. His timing was perfect – he handed me the chair right as I said, straight to the audience, “Come, let’s sit down.” The audience loved this mistake and the fact that we acknowledged it. We kept this bit for the remaining performances.
- And, my personal favorite: a rock band started playing loudly next-door during a performance, and we had to give them a bribe of \$150 to stop. Good thing I made room for incidental expenses in my budget...

Chapter 4: Putting on a Show in Three Weeks

The first few days of rehearsal were the scariest part of this entire process for me. I had been managing all the logistics up to this point, but once rehearsals started I was wearing two hats: producer and actor. They cannot be worn at the same time, a lesson I had to learn the hard way more than once. I can't freely act when I'm thinking about producing. That was a problem I anticipated and took care to avoid. What took me by surprise was the fact that I couldn't produce with a level head while operating with the stress of an actor.

I had to separate these parts of my brain. Once we got through the first week and a half of rehearsals and were really beginning to work through the show, things started to click. I didn't have time to doubt myself. Just as I said there is a freedom in having a small budget, there is also a freedom in having a small amount of time. We didn't have the luxury of contemplating choices or second-guessing our work. *Bat Boy* is a camp comedy, and the only way it was going to work was to commit fully to whatever ridiculousness we had come up with.

My performance in *Bat Boy* was a personal best for me as an actor. Meredith, the role I played, is a challenging and complex character. She is the archetypal housewife, yet she has a dark side. I got to take all the tools I have learned in my time at Syracuse and put them to work, and I felt that they really served me in this high-pressure situation. I have never had more fun performing a show. By opening, I felt calm, relaxed, and ready to take on any challenges that might present themselves. I had come up against so many problems already that I was actually more confident. I knew that whatever happened, onstage or off, this team and I

would find some way of making it work, even if we had to deviate from our original plan. Those problem moments became blessings.

It takes a huge amount of courage to put forward creative work, which is something all artists have to push through. The possibility of total failure is always there. It doesn't go away, but I learned through this process not to let it dictate my work. That fear of failure is what causes an artist to make the "safe" choice, resist new ideas, or cling too tightly to the control of a situation. The people who wrote *Bat Boy* were not playing it safe – they wrote a musical about blood, bats, and incest, and they didn't apologize for it. Because they wrote unapologetically, I was able to take their cue and work my hardest to produce and perform their work unapologetically. I have learned that the part of yourself you are most scared of holds the key to your most creative work. As the closing lyrics of *Bat Boy* state, "love your Bat Boy / save your Bat Boy / don't deny your beast inside."

Final Budget:

Capstone Budget
Bat Boy: The Musical

Expenses

Item		Expense	Subtotal	
Cage (set piece)		\$70	\$70	
Marketing (printing/stencil)		\$115	\$185	
Major props		\$75	\$260	
Makeup (prosthetics)		\$100	\$360	
Costumes		\$150	\$510	
Lighting		\$340	\$850	
Platform rental		\$400	\$1,250	
Chair rental		\$48	\$1,297.50	
Guitarist		\$200	\$1,497.50	
Paper mache materials		\$60	\$1,557.50	
Cleaning supplies		\$60	\$1,617.50	
Program printing		\$60	\$1,677.50	
Additional accompanist hours		\$110	\$1,787.50	
Facility rental (SPARK)		\$350	\$2,137.50	
Accompanist: Josh Smith		\$1,000	\$3,137.50	
Rights*	Performance royalty	\$300	\$720.82	\$3,858.32
	Scores rental	\$200		
	Scores deposit**	\$200**		
Incidentals		\$130	\$3,988.32	
Total Budget = \$3988.32				

**Rights will be covered by the Syracuse University Department of Drama*

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