
Senior Projects Spring 2019

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2019

Baby Snooks and Daddy

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Recommended Citation

Carlisi, Sarah T., "Baby Snooks and Daddy" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 103.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2019/103

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Baby Snooks and Daddy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Art
of Bard College

By
Sarah Carlisi

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019

Acknowledgements

Lynn Hawley, my rock, who has been a tonic for the past four years.

Stacey Boggs, who brought our show to life.

Sofia France, who was both my daughter and my mother all year.

Avis Zane, who our project would not have been the same without.

Hannah Eisendrath, who is above and beyond.

Bianca Asare, who has been my Absolute since freshman year.

Wayne Carlisi, who is my dad.

Goals

I can't believe my senior project is already done. Going into it, I had a few goals in mind for what I wanted it to accomplish. I knew I wanted to make a piece that authentically represented the work I tend to create. Not only did I want this for the final product but I wanted to embed that sensibility into the process of creating it as well. My goal was always to make a piece centered around character. The plan was not to do the original story of *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* as we found it but rather to use the script as a rough outline of a story we would be telling. Even before we discovered the *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* script I knew that I wanted a simple template that would allow us to explore character and that's exactly what the script provided us with. After reading it, I thought that the story structure of the Halloween episode of *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* was clear and minimal enough to use as a floor plan for something very different. This is a structure I enjoy working in because I've always felt that specific and well-developed characters will discover something interesting in any circumstance they are put into. I was consciously making a project that would not be focused on spectacle and I did not want to enter the process with a specific message or agenda in mind. I find that when I go into making any art with an idea about what I'm trying to say, I am then unable to say it. Rather, I feel that, by allowing the art to evolve and create itself, the intent will shine through organically. I never wanted the piece to expect itself to be perfectly choreographed but still expected specific choices to be made. I've always preferred performances that were clear with intention yet malleable and present. In no way did I want to shock or impress the audience, I only was hoping to engage with them. I wanted us to minimize any disconnect that can often accumulate between performers and observers.

Conception

Prior to discovering *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* script, Sofia and I had thought we would be doing a dramatic piece of theater from a play with intricate characters and strong text. But then we found that, for a senior project, we would have to do something that we felt was more of our own creation. While I love dramatic acting, I do not think I had the courage to do it for my senior project or to act dramatically in anything that I was in control of. I just knew that I would clam up and it would not result in the best product. But I still wanted to keep character exploration as a driving force in the project. I think that this was accomplished to a certain extent. Although I wouldn't say that the project was at its absolute ideal, I still feel that, in conjunction with the many discoveries our characters made during the project's genesis, the final piece was an accurate representation of what I wanted to both gain and give through this experience. I consciously avoided looking into *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* itself. Because this piece wasn't exploring the world that that show existed in but a world we would be creating around it. This was not about the history of 1950s radio shows but an exploration of what can be done by experimenting within the confines of a specific story.

Casting

As I mentioned, I wanted the project to be conceptually simple. Over a year ago, when Sofia first proposed an idea for what we would be doing it was clear that she had planned on undertaking a more complex endeavor. Ultimately, I think we found a balance but, when it came to casting, our differing perspectives presented some issues. I know how scheduling rehearsal time with a large cast can be strenuous so I was leaning towards casting the minimum amount of actors we would need. I also viewed *The Baby Snooks Show* as merely a story to base our project

off of whereas I think Sofia viewed it more as the piece we would be casting for. In many ways, I am glad that we had multiple actors to work with but sometimes it felt as if we were trying to justify certain characters simply because we had to include all of our cast members.

The casting process itself was tough. We wanted to see everyone's audition before we made any decisions on who the characters would be. Even after seeing everyone's auditions we still didn't know who to cast as which character because we were unsure of how they characters would evolve as the story did. Instead, we cast who we thought had the clearest understanding of the type of theater we were making and would bring their own unique energy to whichever character they would be portraying. Hannah is theatrical and bold so we knew she would command the stage. Avis is so willing to do anything and take everything to the extreme which is exactly what I wanted for the piece. Catherine is so subtle and quirky that no matter who she was playing she would make it far different than anyone else would play it. Allegra has an elegance that I do not relate to at all but she still has this amazing sense of humor so I knew she could combine the two to create a very specific character. Taty has both an innocence to her and the ability to be really tough and confident so we felt that she had options for who she would portray.

Once we had cast everyone in the project, we began talking about who would suit which role. We had known for awhile that Sofia would be playing Snooks and I would be playing Daddy because Lynn pointed out that that would make the most sense. We were always fairly certain that Hannah would play the Announcer but the rest of them were up in the air. First, we held a rehearsal with everyone just going around reading the original *The Baby Snooks and Daddy Show* script. Everyone would switch off who they were reading for so that we could get a sense of what they sounded like as each role. This honestly was not helpful at all. We encouraged

them to make bold choices but cold readings are hard and I don't think everyone had gotten comfortable yet.

So Sofia and I discussed it on our own. We envisioned what each person would look like as each character, what they would bring to the role. Somehow we came to the conclusion and by the end of the project her and I were both saying how grateful we were that we cast it the way we did because everyone wound up fitting their role exactly as we had hoped.

Rehearsal

Having been in three other senior projects in previous years I thought I had a fairly firm grasp on what was to come in terms of the highs and lows of rehearsal. In every senior project I have been cast in in the past, there have inevitably been tensions between the collaborators at one point or another and ours was no exception. While I was planning on writing this paper with all of those tensions omitted, I realize now that that would be nearly impossible and I think it is important to discuss the lows of collaboration because they taught me just as much as the highs. Sofia and I, obviously, have fairly different personalities. We also have different ways of creating content. This can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it is important to have a range of sensibilities as it gives the project various tones and perspectives. On the other hand, it can be incredibly frustrating. In the beginning, Sofia would often try to apply the techniques that Amanda and Gideon had used to get something out of our rehearsals and it was not working at all. I knew it would never work because Amanda and Gideon had been using those particular techniques for a reason. That was what worked for them. I knew that I would never be able to replicate someone else's art just by following their method. There has to be a reason you are

applying those techniques, you have to know what you're trying to get out of it. This was when we were the most stuck and I finally had to address it.

After awhile of feeling like my voice wasn't being heard I had thought I would just submit and focus on the element that I did have control over and that was my character. But that felt even more awful than fighting for my ideas so I decided to do the most responsible thing and that was to communicate. The way in which I did this may not have looked the most responsible. I kind of lashed out at the beginning of one of our rehearsals and had to pull Sofia aside. However, after doing this, we made it a point to just be completely candid with each other about how we were feeling and what we wanted for the project. This made me regret not having done that from the get-go because the entire process became so much more productive and comfortable. It felt so cliched because obviously everyone knows that communication is key. I was just afraid of it and thought I could work my way around it. I was wrong. Communicating wound up resolving so many issues that I was having and made the experience much more fulfilling. We didn't have to use anyone's method to generate material and had to instead think about what we were trying to get out of our own project and what our actors were giving us. I also realized that me feeling like my voice wasn't being heard was something I needed to take responsibility for. Sofia is naturally very open and was very good at communicating with the cast whereas this isn't my strong suit. As the rehearsals went on I think it definitely balanced out which is not what I expected prior to beginning this project. It's always been my impression that the collaborators are on the worst terms just before the performance but we actually managed to nip that in the bud.

The project only really began to take off once we just let it breathe and accepted that what made us and our cast happy in the rehearsal room would be what would most likely satisfy an audience. For awhile, Sofia and I would get so caught up over what this story was about and what we were trying to say. Then we found that if we just let our instincts allow it to evolve, meaning would come through it naturally.

Something we really encouraged the actors to embrace was this idea that the character they were playing didn't have to be the character that the story would expect but a version of that character that they could uniquely bring. It took us awhile to get in the groove of how to generate what we were looking for. I found that the most productive method of writing a script was to get into the body of the characters and improvise interactions with a clear objective in mind. I didn't want to put the pressure on the actors to create a character on their own. I knew for some this would be easy and for others it would be intimidating and unfair. This is something that I think Sofia and I disagreed on in the beginning. I was once in a project where I was asked to do this and it left me angry and confused until I realized that it wasn't the directors trying to take the pressure off themselves to create a character but was actually them trying to make the experience more gratifying for me by giving me creative freedom. Still, I knew that for some of our actors this would not come as enjoyable. We always wanted to treat the actors as peers and not as employees but if they were asking for more definite direction then I thought we owed that to them as well.

It was also very new to learn how to manage working with performers who had very different preferences when it came to rehearsal. Some actors wanted to be told exactly what to do and say while others preferred the freedom to interpret it in their own way. I didn't mind what

they were looking for either way but balancing the rehearsal time to meet those needs was something we had to adjust to. By the end I think we had gaged who was looking for what in a rehearsal. For the actors who wanted to be told exactly what they would be doing, we would sit down and write exactly what they would be doing and wouldn't call them in until we knew we would be utilizing their time most efficiently. For the actors who wanted to explore their character in the room, we would call them individually to improvise with us and then use whatever had worked during that and add it to the script. Then we would use it as a jumping off point for other scenes when we would write alone. My goal was to have a cast of characters who were fully developed to the point where they could ad-lib their lines because they knew their objectives so thoroughly in each scene.

There were certain requests we had that I think were somewhat difficult for many of our cast members to get understand. One of these being to always looking out to the audience. Not typical cheating out that is done onstage but actually saying all of the lines to the audience. With the exception of Junko and Daddy, all of the characters were meant to pander to the audience. I was constantly saying that you're talking to the audience and not to who the line is addressing. I think we should have explained this more thoroughly. While some of the cast members got it immediately, others seemed thrown. We should have explained is that it's still acting it's just that they weren't going to achieve their objective from the character onstage they were addressing but actually from the audience. I would use examples like when a big celebrity guest stars on a sitcom and their first line for their big reveal isn't even meant to serve the scene but is meant to be like, "Here I am." We wanted our actors to be saying, "Look, I'm onstage now." Once it

clicked for the actors, I think that it really gave them a better understanding of what we were trying to do with this project.

Production

Because of this central focus on character, I intentionally wanted to abandon certain theatrical elements that I have put energy into in the past. I think something that I learned during moderation was that in order for me to make any sense of a piece I have to keep it as basic as possible. Despite this being performed in LUMA, I still did not want the set to actually be an attempt at creating the illusion of a living room or a sidewalk. The ridiculousness of the set was essential to the piece as a whole. This is something we should have communicated with the department crew early on. I think Sofia would agree that we were certainly not the best when it came to communicating with the department and I feel terrible about that and about everyone whose job that was made more difficult because of it. In my mind I had few demands for production and would take most of that upon myself. Because, as I said, I wanted there to be an underlying acknowledgment that this is a performance, I actually wanted everything to look comically thrown together. I had never created a piece of theater where it wasn't on me to organize the various aspects of it. I went into this production with that in mind and hadn't thought that when we were told we would be in the festival that this also relieved much of the pressure of production. I think it would have been very effective to communicate more clearly our ultimate vision to the crew. By failing to emphasize the lack of technicalities we wanted the performance to have, I think we left the production manager overwhelmed and confused. In retrospect I see that I was only making everyone's job harder. I had low expectations for production value because that was the type of theater I wanted to create—almost a mockery of a

1950s sitcom with a simplistic set. I didn't want it to be finely tuned because apart of engaging with the audience in this piece was letting them in on the joke that this is all a performance.

As a side note, I have to say that Stacey, the lighting designer, was so amazing and would find lighting cues where I hadn't even thought to put them and they would bring the performance completely to life. I really like her.

Sofia and I both wanted the project to be visually specific. Although we wanted elements of the performance to be flexible in many ways, we also wanted the intentions to be very clear and sharp. For instance, the opening when Daddy first enters. It was important that in order to enter the house and sit on the couch, I make sharp turns and sit as soon as I reach the couch. Then it was equally important that when Vera entered, she would have an entirely different gait from Daddy and land just downstage of him, take a long pause, and then deliver her first line. It didn't matter exactly how Allegra did this, just that she made bold distinct decisions with every gesture.



Photography by Chris Kayden

I wanted the humor to feel fluid but the characters to be fleshed out and their actions to be sharp. We would have our actors run drills just to get each beat tight and clear. It was not that we wanted them to do exactly what we were saying but that we wanted them to make strong decisions about what they were doing in each moment. Sometimes they would take a stage direction loosely when we needed it to have intent. This would look differently for each character. Hannah as the Announcer, for instance, was very bold and confident so her gestures would embody this while, on the other hand, Junko was clumsy and meek so his gestures, while less sharp, were no less specific. We urged everyone to overact and assured that we would tell them to pull back if they had gone too far. Many of the actors resisted this at first, presumably from fear of embarrassment. But once Sofia and I led by example and embarrassed ourselves, they seemed to feel more comfortable.

Performance

When I watch the video of the performance it is really baffling to think that it took so much time and stress and nightly nightmares to create this piece because it really is so simple. Sofia and I would sit there for hours writing and rewriting the smallest moments, many of which never even ended up onstage. In some manic episode towards the very end of the rehearsal process we rewrote the entire piece. In that version, Daddy would start off as a Don Draper type of character and only become the real Daddy once Sandy had pantsed him. I have no idea what prompted us to make this change but we sat in the Fisher Center for about eight hours one day trying to make sense of it until our cast got there for rehearsal and told us that the change was completely unnecessary. I think that this is what is most helpful during this process—asking for feedback from a clear set of eyes. We had gotten so involved in the piece and what it was

supposed to be that we lost sight of how simple it needed to be. For this we primarily listened to our actors to tell us what was reading and what was not but we would occasionally bring in Patrick for a completely objective opinion. Hannah was always willing to offer her opinion because, as the Announcer, she was actually watching almost all of the time so she had a very clear take on the performance. She could always minimize the number of unnecessary questions we found ourselves asking.

In terms of our own character research, Sofia and I had had to partake on very different quests when it came to finding our characters. At first, Sofia's Snooks was very brash and rowdy. Then we got feedback that the character wasn't fitting the story so she turned it into America's sweetheart. Even though this may have served the story more, it felt stale and she wasn't getting any joy out of it. I think she wound up finding the perfect hybrid of these two characters. The final character she came to had the spunk of the original Snooks and the charm of the second. This way Snooks served the plot while still being charismatic.

It was also difficult trying to build characters around other characters. Trying to justify why one person is one way while another is this way and figure out how they feel about each other and why. We had to find ways for each character to compliment the others and we weren't always successful but I felt that we got further than we thought we would at a certain point when we were panicking thinking that nothing was falling into place.

I was constantly consuming content that I thought would fuel the piece. I would spend so much of my free time trying to get a feel for the different rhythms of comedy. I think this definitely helped during rehearsal and as we wrote the script. It gave us a much better idea of what to look for in a scene, what a good angle to have on a certain situation would be. While a

lot of these bits we cut for time and efficiency, I think it still gave us a necessary tone for the piece. Now, watching the video, I realize that we didn't actually need to cut so much from the script. My speeches wound up being only a few lines long and Sandy didn't get to say all of the lines we loved writing with Avis. I didn't realize until seeing the video that Snooks's monologue took up three of the 25 minutes. If I could go back, I would have reviewed the entire piece so that there would have been a more equal distribution of time allotted to each character and each moment in order to keep the performance at a constant rhythm. When I watch the performance, Jenny and Junko are onstage for almost an uncomfortably short amount of time and Vera hardly has any interactions with Snooks. Although I was exhausted by the time the project was complete, there was a part of me that still wanted to make these changes.

Take Away

Something about the project felt very empowering to me. We didn't intend to but we ended up with an all female cast and I think not to make gender a central focus of the piece was an accomplishment. I never wanted Daddy to be a mockery or a stereotypical depiction of masculinity in the 1950s and we never wanted Avis to treat Sandy that way either. Every character was unique and served a purpose to our story, not a purpose to the world of 1950s radio plays. The characters very rarely expressed themselves in the way one would expect from this type of show. I often feel that when people attempt to address hot button issues they end up doing more harm than good despite the best of intentions. I don't think that art has to blatantly address the current political climate or anything of that weight in order for it to be meaningful. On top of this, I feel that when you approach your art with no desire but to express your truth, those larger truths bleed through inevitably. In a sense, I do feel we were addressing gender in

this piece. I've never been cast as a man and I probably never will be again but by giving myself this role, I felt I proved to myself that I could play a character far different from myself while making it neither about my gender nor the gender of the character and instead making it about that unique individual. I think the same can be said for all of the characters in this project. They all had something that distinguished them from everyone else in an unexpected way and, from early on, that was what I had hoped we could make happen.

By messing around with stereotypes, I felt that we were reclaiming something very important. Sandy turning out to be introspective and vulnerable and Daddy turning out to be very attractive in the eyes of Vera. Instead of learning and teaching a lesson to everyone about why treating each other with kindness and forgiveness is the answer, Snooks just overpowers Daddy and earns her dominance. Catherine's character Junko could have gone by as the shy kid with the crush on the popular girl but instead we insisted that he be subtle and demand attention when he was onstage. We told the cast that the show was fast-paced and loud but that when Junko speaks it's as if that suddenly stops. It is slow and quiet for a moment. For me, this demands just as much attention as someone screaming in the middle of a quiet moment. I find that characters come to life when contrasted by the characters around them. These are the sorts of contrasts that I think can make a piece of performance like this one so interesting.

This project actually taught me so much more than I had anticipated. Not only did it show me what it takes to put on a production of this scheme but I discovered how to create theater that feels like an honest expression of myself and the type of work I want to make. More than that, it taught me how to get to that place, the mindset that I need to get myself into in order to generate this type of work. I can now see what were the most effective methods of getting something

strong out of other actors as well as myself. I know that it's so typical to say of art but I really do feel that art makes itself and, while I in no way think that it was a perfect project, the parts of it that did seem to work were the ones that came about effortlessly.

On top of it all, I was so surprised that Sofia and I found meaning in a story that in many ways seemed shallow. We had discussed these ideas of growing up, parent-child relationships and the pressure to please people but at a certain point it seemed that we had ditched that idea for the sake of making something entertaining. As the process continued, we found that these ideas were coming to life without us having to force it out. Although these messages didn't hit the audience hard, for me, they were never intended to. It was gratifying to tell a story concerning something that we were concerned with but, as a performer, I never want to connect with an audience in an intellectual way and always want to connect in a visceral way. My goal onstage is never to force the audience to think about what I'm trying to say but to ensure that they don't have to. I find that this comes about only by listening to your instincts. As I said, we decided to perform what made us happy in the rehearsal room. We couldn't be sure that the audience would laugh at what made us laugh but when they did, I felt that we had made the right decision by going with our guts.

We were able to tackle themes of self-love, growing up, independence, forgiveness and bloating in 25 minutes and do so in a lighthearted way. The way that I hope that this project resonated with the audience is what I would hope for a lot of my work. I want it to address abstractions through personal narrative. While I enjoy in art when it is difficult to decipher just what exactly it is about it that resonates with me, I do not enjoy watching something that seems to be being done for the sake of being done and I did not want to put an audience through that. I

looked at this project not as an opportunity to examine hard hitting issues but as an opportunity to take what I've gained from theater and performance and apply it to a very comprehensive story structure. The focus was not on the overall arch but the moments in between. There are limitless opportunities to create something powerful or funny or heartbreaking in any circumstance so long as you're aware that these moments exist everywhere.

I know that I'm suppose to cite five sources, talk about which artists, artistic movements, or performance modes my project is in dialogue with, what historical, theoretical, dramatic, or performance texts that have been central to my production research and why. I think it's pretty obvious that I wasn't reading a theoretical performance text to make a skit about pranks. All of my inspiration came from such a variety of sources, I couldn't begin to really pin down exactly what each one was. I also don't think that I would have been able to get through the piece if I had been aware of what I was "in dialogue with" while making it. I don't think I can intellectualize performance and still have it turn out any good. The reason I perform is to take a break from intellectualizing and to allow what I feel to take over. I'll keep it to a minimum but I need to source some sources that have been inspiring to me over the years because it would feel wrong not giving them credit for so much of this project.

Many of my character's idiosyncrasies were inspired by some of Tim Heidecker's portrayal of "Scotty Andrews" as well as a number of his other characters. John C. Reilly's character "Dr. Steve Brule" was another individual who I found bits of in *Daddy*. I thought about *Rain Man* for *Daddy*'s inability to look anyone in the eyes. I don't believe I once made eye contact with another actor in the entire performance.



Tim Heidecker as "Scotty Andrews" in *Tim and Eric's Bedtime Stories*



John C. Reilly as "Dr Steve Brule" in *Check It Out!*



Dustin Hoffman as "Raymond Babbit" in *Rain Man*

The goal, for me, was to bring these characters to life in order to provide a show that I as an audience member might enjoy watching. I'm looking for a way to meld these certain aspects of performing together. To find a character that feels real but it also a far cry from myself and serves the purpose of the story it's telling. People like Chris Lilley or Christopher Guest would be prime examples of this but that's setting the bar very high.

I don't know how to end this. I don't know if I should get sentimental about my journey at Bard or just stay technical and focus on the project. I will say that, regardless of what the reception to the project was and despite the random meltdowns over it in my car, I got way more joy out of making this than I've gotten out of other school projects.

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