
Senior Projects Spring 2020

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2020

8/28 - 12/8

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Bard College

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8/28 - 12/8

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Self-Hatred (Zoe Gonatas), Anxiety (Emily Kaufman-Bell), Cluno Bruno, Depression (Immanuel Williams), Ego (Lily Goldman)

When trying to figure out what I wanted to do for my SPROJ I struggled in deciding if I wanted to do something I knew the audience would like or if I should risk doing something different. I am an extremely self-aware person; this is one of my greatest strengths, but also one of my greatest weaknesses. I know I am funny. I know I am very capable of putting on a show people would enjoy, although, because of that, I often don't apply myself. I find myself relying on my ability to act on the spot and get by with the first couple of jokes that come to my head. All these things were part of my decision process for my SPROJ.

I had quit theater before coming to Bard. I came here with the intention of studying creative writing and EUS. I still loved theater, but ever since I was a kid, I was always cast in the

same role. I was the comic relief, never the main character. Not even a secondary character. I felt that if I was good enough, I would have had the main role, and I never got one. It wasn't until getting to Bard, however, that I realized and admitted my part in creating my own typecast. I knew I could be dramatic, but in auditions, rehearsals, and class I always took the default: the comic relief. Funny was comfortable.

I didn't want my senior project to be comfortable. And it wasn't. It was really hard. Who knew how difficult and consuming being vulnerable is? I am extremely critical of my own work, which made having to write, direct, choreograph, and act in a piece that was taken from a personal, extremely vulnerable part of myself and become even more vulnerable.

People all the time ask me how I think it went, and honestly, I still can't completely tell you. There was a 100+ person turnout every night. The cast, crew, and I continued to hang out after the show. People told me they loved it, told me that they felt understood. All those things, to me at least, define success. I also believe my pre-show self would have agreed, because the last line of my bio in the program reads, "Cluno hopes that everyone watching the show can find at least one thing is relatable enough to make them feel a little less alone." I think it did that: make people feel a little less alone.

Currently, I am quarantined with three members of the Baddie Collective, which made the beginning of April a very sad time for us. I know our senior project is supposed to be our final debut, our capstone work, the show we will be remembered by, but for me, it wasn't going to be, no matter when it happened or how it turned out. My legacy at Bard College is the Baddie Collective. I personally was not able to have what I thought was going to be my big debut,

although I am happy knowing that the Collective will continue at least two more years, even without the debut of our final show.

The Baddie Collective's show this semester would have been the second week of April. We had about half of the show choreographed. We rehearse three times a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8 am-10 am and Sunday 7-10). The theme for this show was "Black Swan Electronica." We started this semester with an audition. We were looking for two more members. Around thirty non-boys came to the call for auditions. Some of those people were good friends, three were people who were in my SPROJ, and some were people I had never even seen before. There is so much talent on this campus that goes unseen. That is one of the reasons I love the Baddie Collective: it creates its own community.

I started the Baddie Collective in my sophomore year at Bard. I had always considered myself a dancer, but I officially quit dancing in high school. In my sophomore year, I asked my dance teacher if I could be in the advanced level dance classes at my school. She looked at me and said I would never be able to partner, my body did not allow for some of the advanced choreography, and that I wouldn't "fit in" with the group. Yes, I could dance, but not well enough for it to be anything more than a hobby. And, I know this may be surprising to those who know me now, know I don't quit (especially since I submitted practically the same SPROJ proposal three times until it was approved), but I dropped out of "normal" dance the very next day.

I ended up taking a dance class at Bard my second semester of freshman year. I only did it because I was at a party and a couple of dance majors told me that I should take a class. I did not necessarily enjoy that class. I felt that maybe the dance teacher in high school was right. The

style of dance and the music, or lack thereof, was not clicking for me. There is nothing wrong with the style of dance that is popular at Bard; I actually enjoy seeing the performances. But I dance because of the music, and the music didn't inspire me and I knew I wasn't the only one. I would go to parties and see some of the most talented people performing on the dance floor. They were performing for themselves, they were dancing to the music they liked because they wanted to.

The idea behind the collective was brewing for a while before I told my friend Jae, who became the assistant choreographer for my SPROJ. At that point, the idea was basically, "let's get a bunch of hot non-boys, and let's choreograph some dances to Rihanna or something and perform them somewhere." That weekend I was at a party, and I was watching people dance. I walked up to people I had never met before and said, "do you wanna be a part of a group of hot non-boys where we choreograph some dances to Rihanna or something and perform them somewhere?" and all six of the people I asked accepted on the spot. I followed up the next day, and that was the beginning. I applied for the Baddie Collective to be in Fest. I was lucky that people knew me in the theater world because my proposal was not much more detailed than what I've said above. I had no idea what was going to come from it; I was just hoping we didn't completely embarrass ourselves.

Fast forward to the present day, we are an official club on campus. We collaborate with numerous other clubs. We are featured in many student projects. We have an Instagram with a committed following, and we generate around 175 people at each of our performances. Our first solo performance was first semester last year. We raised around \$1000 and transformed the Old Gym into a burlesque club with tables, a host stand, and a mocktail bar. The tables sat 60 people.

We posted a sign-up sheet outside the Old Gym for table requests, and within 4 hours all of the spots were filled, including the sign-up sheet for the 100-person standing room only. We ended up having to turn away about 50 people each night to stay below capacity. We had 15 volunteers who performed an array of roles: bartenders, waiters, hosts. People came to see us dance, but more importantly, they came to feel good.

Our biggest and most common compliment is that after our shows people feel sexy, energized, and inspired. Each of us, at one time or another, all were “dancers” and, at one point or another, all quit due to similar reasons that my high school dance teacher provided me with. At the end of each of our shows, we stop the music and talk to the audience. We remind them that it is hard work to get up on stage in a corset and heels in front of your peers. We reminded them that we worked hard, and continue to work hard to be able to mentally and physically do what we do. But most importantly, we remind the audience that we struggle with loving ourselves just as much as everyone else, but that it is time to stop letting our self-hatred hold us back.

The Baddie Collective was perfect for my SPROJ and, in fact, you could say heavily influenced it. Even though originally I had a different idea for my show (this is still my dream theater piece that I hope to one day make), I have no regrets in adapting it to include the Baddie Collective. My SPROJ is what I needed to hear and see:, a reminder that I wasn't alone, and I hoped it made others feel that too.



Isa Tenuta, Kate Gonzales, Javen Lara, Niko Mbaye, Milan Weatherspoon, Cluno Bruno

REHEARSAL

Most of the music in the show was picked out long before the characters were even developed. I would say, music is the one element of my original idea that did not change much. I believe throughout the entire rehearsal process, only one change was made to the playlist that I had been crafting since freshman year. The music created the feeling for the show, and everything else followed. I conceived of the original idea during my first year at Bard. I spent most of that year hanging out with students from the conservatory. I have always loved music. I tried for years to play the piano, but I was never able to read notes. I would learn songs from being able to recognize what keys made what sounds. One night I was hanging out with some friends, and I heard this song. By the end of it, I had the entire story written in my head. The story did change a lot (which I will get into later), but the core is the same.

The song that inspired it all is Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes: No. 3 - Lent* (If you are able to put on the song, I feel my description will be enhanced). If you break down the notes, it is a pretty simple piece. But the simplicity is hypnotic: it takes you from the world you're sitting in and teleports you to the "other." The "other" can be anything, but no matter what it is, it is not what is. The song is liminal; it creates a medium feeling. It is comfortable, but not in a good or bad way. I wanted my show to feel liminal. I always knew I wanted the stage to be 360 degrees. Life happens all around you just like the show; you don't get to see and experience everything straight on. But at the same time, the stage also played as a ring for non-human entities to interact and dominate. The action happens here, in this space. Where is "here"? No one knows.

Often, shows about mental illness end on either side of the spectrum: either the character was able to push through it, or they succumb. Although, most people live in the middle. There are good moments and there are bad moments, and the rest of the time lands somewhere in the middle.

The original idea for my senior project followed two people and their relationship. The entire show took place in a liminal space: one character enters the space then eventually leaves, while the other person has always been there and always will be there. The clowns were very similar in both ideas (although in the original idea they were all going to wear roller skates and break out into choreography). The adaptation came from me taking the good clowns and replacing them with the baddies, and making one of the people in the relationship the center point of the story. That is what I knew entering the rehearsal process.

I had the faculty viewing of the second half of the show on Thursday, before opening night. I personally felt most anxious for the faculty viewing, but the rest of my cast felt a bit

relieved. They were able to run a part of the show to an audience that wasn't their friends. Half of the cast members in my show are not theater majors. For a couple of them, it was their first show. Before my SPROJ, the Baddie Collective had performed shows, but my SPROJ was different. I was not the only one putting myself in a vulnerable position. The script was written in rehearsal. I broke the actors into three groups. For the first two months, the clowns, the dancers, and the love interest all rehearsed separately from each other. I created a system of how we wrote each of their sections based on the first couple of weeks of rehearsal.

Javen Lara, who was not in the show but helped choreograph it, was being followed around by a film crew for a couple of rehearsals. She was chosen by the conservatory to do a profile on her everyday life at Bard. In one of the rehearsals, we were running "ego," which is the section where there is a fight between the Baddie collective and me. We were running the scene, and halfway through the woman stopped filming. She pulled Jae aside and asked if she should leave because she thought the fighting was real, not staged.

All of us in the Baddie Collective have known each other for three years. We had all worked with each other, had tech weeks with each other, and also are very good friends outside of the collective. The writing process with them was the easiest of the three what?. Basically I would have Emma (the assistant director) come to rehearsal and record our stretching conversations. Emma and I would then look over it and transcribe the conversation into a script. In terms of the conversations related to the plotline of the piece, those would also follow a similar way. I once went to rehearsal and started talking about "a guy I had a crush on," and everyone started to comment. Out of that conversation came the scene in the show. A lot of the scenes with the Baddie Collective were written from us talking about the topics in real life and

applying them to real-life situations. I believe that is one of the ways the comedy slipped in the piece. In “real life” we often mask our struggles with comedy. The scenes with the Baddie Collective felt real even though they were scripted, because of individuality and truth all of us put forth. We are all friends who care very much about each other. This show was about friendship, and I got lucky that I had a group of very talented non-boys who were willing to be a part of my SPROJ.

The show wasn't necessarily always about friendship, however. In the original idea for the show, there were a lot more scenes with Sam (the love interest), but as time went on, they began to not fit anymore. Emma and I spent a lot of time asking ourselves, “if the show is about friendship, why is there a love interest at all?”. So, about halfway through the process, we stripped everything we thought we knew about Cluno and Sam's relationship and started from square one. It is very interesting writing a show that is based on a lot of personal things, starring yourself, yet the character of Cluno was not me. There is a lot we knew about Cluno because those elements were from the Cluno writing this essay, but there was a lot we ended up finding out about the Cluno in the show. In Directing Seminar last seminar, Jonathan used the movie *Titanic* to describe the options a character had in a scene. I began calling this metaphor “the titanic theory.” We would ask, “Who ends in the water, who ends up on the door? Is it both of them? If it was one of them, why not the other?” “The Titanic Theory” ended up beginning every single conversation we had about every scene between Sam and Cluno.

After applying “The Titanic Theory,” the writing process became a lot easier. We knew where each scene started, and where it was going to end. Hunter, Emma, and I would sit at a table and just start speaking as our characters. Sam and Cluno would sit across from each other at

a table in Fisher and get to know each other. We went chronologically, just like the relationship. We started with the beginning stage, then to the flirty stage, then all the way until the breaking point.

Jack always tells me that one of my biggest issues as a theater maker is that I have such strong ideas when going into a process that I may miss out on a lot of things that could be brought to the table. I think my ideas are great, which is why I agree with this. So, before I talk about the writing process for the clowns, I want to talk about Emma, my assistant director. Emma was everything I needed, that I didn't know that I needed. (So thank you Jack, for forcing me to find an assistant director.) Emma and I have a lot in common. We are both very organized, critical (but kind about it), intense, driven, and most importantly, we are both Virgos. I think the reason we worked so well together was not because of our similarities, but because of our differences. We are interested in very different things: her thought process is very consistent while mine is very sporadic; she thinks of detail while I think of the big picture. I truly do not know how the show would have turned out if Emma wasn't a part of the process. She wasn't afraid to question the things I thought I knew and loved the most about the show, which usually led me to find out that I was just in love with an idea that was extremely impractical or irrelevant. Even though she is not a dancer, having her be able to come into rehearsal and say, "the choreography is great, but it won't fit in the space we have," ended up saving us so much time during spacing. She was the most crucial part of the SPROJ.

While Emma helped in every part of the process, she really was the queen of the clowns. Working with the clowns was hard. First, we were asking (for the most part) untrained actors to play an extremely difficult role. Those roles are extremely physically demanding. We spent the

first two months just learning what the clowns would be doing when they weren't speaking, which left very little time to figure out what they would be doing when they were speaking. The clowns were the element of the show that I thought I had a complete grasp on, but within the first week of rehearsal, I realized I literally had zero idea. Emma was just as much of a creator to those characters' outcomes as I. I would even argue that their creation was mostly hers--not necessarily in the beginning, but definitely towards the end of the process.

I should have named my SPROJ “vulnerability” instead of “8/28-12/8,” because once again I am going to bring it up.

Another reason why the roles of the clowns were extremely difficult, was because it is really hard to ask someone to call someone else “ugly, annoying, pathetic, etc.” in front of a bunch of people. A lot of the script from the clowns was written off moments of improvisation. Before we would begin improvising, Emma and I would sit down and talk about what is fair game. I would write an approved list of pretty horrible things they could say and give it to each of them. Emma and I thought that the list was extremely important because everyone needed to feel safe before they could fully dive into their character. The clowns needed to know that they weren't going to hurt me, and Emma needed to know that I was going to leave rehearsal, for the most part, feeling okay. I say for the most part because, towards the end of the process, I had to step away from the clowns. It started to become extremely hard to think about their characters, without being biased or unnecessarily judgemental. A lot of the scenes in the final script, I look back on now and don't like. Those scenes were extremely hard, not because they didn't flow well, but because they did. So I trusted Emma, and I knew that if I wanted to have the show be effective in the way I wanted it to be, I had to step back for the show, and mostly for myself.

There was also one other crucial member of the crew. Jonja was the lighting designer for my project. Emma and I started meeting with him at the beginning of the semester. Music was most important to the piece, but lighting followed pretty closely. To create a liminal space, I needed the music to focus the ears, the lighting to focus the eyes, and the story to focus the heart. I have been in or put on eight shows in the Old Gym; the space has its perks but also has its downfalls, with the lighting system being number one. The show followed one story that was broken into four parts: Anxiety, Self-Hatred, Depression, and Ego. Within each part, there was an arch. A problem was introduced that then was addressed and solved in some ways. I believe lighting is very important to set the mood. Fluorescent lighting is a lot less romantic than candlelight. It wasn't necessary to break the sections up for the audience, but I wanted to create a separate mood for each. Working with Emma, Jonja, and the lighting system in the old gym, we chose colors for the four sections: green, pink, blue, and red. Those four lighting palettes were used in moments where the space felt a little more "other," while the classic stage lighting was used when moments felt a little more real.

The general color scheme was also questioned when choosing the costumes for the piece. After much discussion with Emma and the baddies, we decided that since the baddies and I were playing ourselves, we should dress like ourselves. It would add another layer if the audience had to question how much of the show actually happened. Due to budget, Sam (Hunter) dressed in clothes he had, but solid colors. Most of the intentional costume decisions were made towards the clowns. We knew we wanted them in all black. We wanted to make sure they did not rely on what they were wearing to dictate their character; they needed to channel it from within, although after a meeting with Jack (where I had a complete mid-process breakdown) the idea of

props was introduced. One of the biggest struggles for the clowns was staying in character when they weren't being focused on. Emma and I began trying many things to get them to stay occupied. We started to pair them into teams, we tried creating group interactions and poses. It always worked for a rehearsal or two, but eventually, it would fade away. We had to ask ourselves, what keeps us busy? Our phones, playing with our jewelry, applying chapstick, biting our nails. So, we needed to find "busy things" for the clowns to do. Anxiety was given a fidget spinner, Self Hatred was given a purse (with a mirror and nail polish), Depression was given a blanket, and Ego was given a butterfly knife. And wow, that ended up being one of the greatest ideas we had. It kept everyone in character and added a cute visual detail.

A snowstorm canceled our first three days of tech. Very unlucky. I was stressed. That is all I have to say about that.



Sam (Hunter Lustberg), Cluno Bruno

SHOWTIME

Sometimes I look back on the show and completely forget I broke my elbow opening night. I know that sounds like a weird thing to forget. For most, this would have been a huge misfortune, although, in some ways, it benefited the other two performances. I am glad the faculty was able to see the show before the injury. I think it would have been an unnecessary distraction.

To break down what I mean when I say that I think the injury benefited the show, first I will start with the reason it didn't. The choreography in the first half of the show (the half the faculty did not see) was very difficult to do in a sling. The first choreographed number was a hip-hop piece, and the second was a burlesque number. You don't realize how much you use your elbow until you can no longer use your elbow. It also created a bit of a panic when we had to re-choreograph and alter the script to fit the sling.

I was originally supposed to take off my clothes during "Self Hatred," which I did the first night, but I was not able to do that the other nights. Weirdly, this is the first good thing that came out of the injury. As I alluded to before, this show pushed me very much out of my comfort zone. One of the scenes that made me most uncomfortable was the undressing scene. In hindsight, it probably should not have been in the script, so the injury eliminating it actually made me like show two and three better. Secondly, the injury happened halfway through the show, and since I never left the stage, I just had to push through it. But in terms of acting, that second half of the opening night show was my strongest. During the ending when I broke down into tears, I actually broke down into tears. I took the pain I was feeling and let out a big cry. Finally, most people had no idea that the sling wasn't a part of the show. They thought it was a

choice to have my character in a sling, and it wasn't until people saw me after the show that they realized it was not a theatrical choice. I also now get to say that I broke my elbow during the opening night of my senior project, and I pushed through till the end. This makes me sound very professional.

I cried before show two and three. I did not want to do them. My family came to town the last night of performance and took me out to dinner before the show. I cried at dinner; I was so upset I couldn't even talk. I tried to bargain with the higher power; I told them I would acquire \$1000 and burn it to not have to do the show. I was tired, in pain, tired, sad, hungry, and tired. But I did it, I pushed through and earned those bows.

POST-SHOW

It truly felt amazing to be done. Once the final show was over, I thanked the sky that I have an irrational hatred for Sunday shows.

I know now I am not meant to be a theater actor. I couldn't fathom doing a full run of a show. I am not a very consistent person. It is hard to get myself to do things I don't want to do. I know my place now. It is either a writer who fades out after rehearsal or a director, who fades out after the first couple of shows, or someone who owns a theater and hires people then fades out for a while but then comes back. The reason I wanted to do an independent project, is because I wanted to see if I could do it. I wanted to see if I could put on an hour-long, original show. I wanted to see if this is something I wanted to try to pursue post-college. I now am one step further in figuring that out because at least I know I can cross off theater acting.

I also was famous for a couple of months, which was very cool. I had done shows before that people liked a lot; for instance *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, where I played Frank N.

Furter three weeks before my SPROJ. (I was in three shows last semester, which probably contributed to my many breakdowns). Everyone loved that show. We had a huge turnout, but my SPROJ brought a different kind of fame. The show stayed with people. It affected people in a way that made them come up to me and congratulate me months after. I made new friends talking about the show. People told me a lot about themselves, told me how it helped them, told me how much they related to it. That is a good kind of fame, the kind that is earned from helping people. I am proud to have been a part of my show. And even though I opened this essay saying my SPROJ wasn't supposed to be my final debut, I'm glad it was. I am happy that 8/28 - 12/8 ended my college theater career.