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Who's Afraid Of Peppa Pig: A Transition From Stage To Screen Acting

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Who's Afraid of Peppa Pig:
A Transition From Stage To Screen Acting

Senior Project Submitted To
The Division Of The Arts
Of Bard College

By
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I. Introduction: Theater, Film and the Importance of Work

I entered Bard College knowing I wanted to study acting and that's it. I didn't want to direct, I didn't want to write, I only wanted to act. It was the thing I had the most joy doing, the thing that came most naturally to me, and probably the thing I was best at. For the most part that plan worked out, though I learned that acting requires a lot more than pretending. Over my years I learned the immense amount of preparation that is necessary in order to give a full and convincing portrayal of any character. I learned about objectives, and given circumstances, and the importance of specificity in your choices. I was of the assumption that if I did not do all this work before the show, or sometimes even before rehearsals started, I was a bad actor. Then I started doing film. Before junior year I had only ever done theater acting. My first student film required absolutely no preparation. The director was actually shocked when I asked him, "What does my character want in this scene?" As long as I knew the lines and stood where I was supposed to, everyone was happy. I thought this might just be the thing for me. However over time I was surprised at how disappointed I was when I did not put in the work. In theater classes that stuff had been a pain, and I had all but written it off as unnecessary. I couldn't understand how anyone could tell whether or not I was "playing an intention" during a scene. After watching myself in this film I understood. I knew that I didn't understand the character, I could actually see the confusion in my face. I never wanted to see that again.

There are so many differences between stage and screen acting; the biggest for me is the lack of rehearsal process for film. With theater acting I would spend months rehearsing and building the character and developing chemistry with the other actors, and with film there is sometimes no rehearsal process at all. Therefore the actor has a lot of responsibility to do that rehearsal work on their own. With theater I tend to over rehearse, so I have everything precisely

mapped out, but then during the performance I am not living truthfully in that moment, and I am not open to change. With film I find I revert to my initial instincts, because I have less time to dwell on the material. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't but I do think I am more honest and open when performing on camera. With film the emphasis is on very small specific moments, rather than the whole story. It at times feels very disconnected whereas in theater you get to tell the whole story every night. With film I appreciate having a final product that I can watch over and over again. With theater you rarely get to rewatch your work and learn from it.

Mad Forest was the perfect blend of theater and film in that we had an extensive rehearsal process, but there was no live audience; we were not in the same space as our scene partners, and we were looking at random spots in the room. I haven't done real theater in over a year and when I leave Bard I will primarily be pursuing a career in screen acting. It makes perfect sense therefore, that my senior project ended up being a short film, after starting with theater. I think all the classes and training I went through was in preparation for this project. I had to put in the work and really get to know the characters I portrayed. Over the course of this year we totally had to redo our entire project. It felt as if an entire semester of work went to waste. There was a moment in the middle of second semester when we had absolutely nothing. If it were not for Avis's brilliance, I don't know what we would have done. She wrote a magnificent piece for both of us that we made into a film. This senior project was born out of a year of stress, anxiety and fever dreams. Thousands of tears were shed, thousands of emails were never responded to. The final result was certainly not our original plan, much like it was not my original plan to become a film actor. But it is something I am immensely proud of. And in the world of Covid 19, where plans mean absolutely nothing, this is what we did. Sometimes that's just the way the piggy crumbles.

II. Virginia Woolf

The planning for the project began in junior year, when Avis and I decided to work together. She and I had already performed together multiple times in student productions, and we both knew we wanted to focus primarily on acting. We also immediately agreed that we wanted to be in the senior project festival. As sophomores we both performed in separate senior projects within the festival, and really enjoyed that process. I also valued the Fisher Center's help on the technical aspects, and the opportunity to perform live in Luma. Once we knew we wanted to be in the festival, and had to come up with something no longer than twenty-five minutes, the task became figuring out something that we both were happy with. Throughout our acting careers at Bard, we had performed in a wide variety of experimental theater that prioritized aesthetics over acting. While we did enjoy these shows, we rarely had the opportunity to put what we learned in scene study and other acting classes to practical use. Our main interest was, and still is acting, and that is what we plan to pursue after we graduate. We wanted to put on a straight play, with all the focus being on the relationships between the characters.

We both started looking over old plays we had read, and soon Avis suggested we do twenty-five minutes of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, by Edward Albee. I hadn't read the play but instantly fell in love when I did. The relationship between George and Martha especially, was incredibly exciting. We were both drawn in by the complicated, realistic language of the play. It was impossible not to be shocked by the absurdity of George and Martha. The moments of unbearable awkward tension were ones we particularly wanted to investigate. We knew it would be difficult to achieve certain levels of build-up in twenty-five minutes (for example, the reveal about Martha and George's imaginary son has far less of an impact if we are introduced to the concept in a half-hour). However, we wanted to stage at least one of the many crescendos of

emotion that occur in this play. George and Martha both go from civil, polite characters to raging, manic monsters in a matter of minutes, and I was so excited to showcase my range as an actor. This work also plays a lot with breaking down societal norms. When this play came out in 1962 it was far more shocking than it is now, seeing these two seemingly normal people break from cultural expectations. The idea of a perfect family is smashed to bits in this play.

The biggest potential problem was that the characters we would be portraying are in their 50s, and while all acting requires imagination and the ability to step into another's shoes, we lacked a certain level of life experience. We saw this as an exciting challenge. Their feral, ruthless relationship gives them a youthful energy that the younger couple, Honey and Nick, both lack. We were interested in playing with these varied moments - Martha and George's ages being referenced often, and yet contradicted in their fights. The verbal abuse that is shown from both characters is only possible because of their age and experience with one another.

Our plan was to both act in the piece as George and Martha, and then have Brian Watko be the director. Brian had previously directed us both in *Richard III*. We knew we would have to decide if we wanted to perform one block of text as is, or pick and choose different moments and put them together to form a cohesive piece. Either way that most likely included thoroughly cutting the script in order to get it down to twenty-five minutes. We sent in our proposal at the end of junior year and it was approved.

Over the summer I re-read the play a number of times and identified my favorite scenes/quotes/moments specifically for George. I would underline or bookmark any time I would read something of George's that I really wanted to perform. I approached George as I do for any character, with the method that I learned in scene study. It started with rigorous close reading of the entire text, followed by clear identifications of the actions of each line-with a particular

emphasis on the specificity of said actions. Unfortunately, my investigations into George only reached a surface level, before this idea was cut short. I knew he was a middle aged man, disappointed with his career and exhausted by the politics of being a teacher. George's boss is his father in law, who never wastes an opportunity to make fun of George. He has had to endure endless teasing for fear of losing his job and his wife's good graces. We learn later that George and Martha could never have kids, but have a mutually agreed upon fictitious son. George is very protective of the imaginary son, and when Martha brings him up in front of their guests George feels betrayed and heartbroken. He proceeds to inform Martha that their son has been killed, which destroys Martha. Their husband and wife relationship is one I could spend years attempting to understand, but I never really got a chance. One day I would love to play this role for real and be able to truly investigate.

When we got back to school in the fall we began meeting with Lynn weekly to discuss our progress. I appreciated the regularity of the meetings because it forced me to get work done. It had the cadence of a class in that Avis and I were assigned work and expected to come next week prepared. I think the pressure of knowing I had to perform in front of Lynn and Avis made me really respect the work. The homework for the first few meetings was all about understanding where the story came from. I read other Albee plays, including *Zoo Story*, *Three Tall Women*, and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* I also watched interviews with Albee to gain a better understanding of him as a person and an author.

Soon, Avis and I turned our attention towards casting the other two roles, Nick and Honey. We cast Andrew Crisol as Nick and Emma Sandman as Honey. After that we did a reading on Zoom of the entire play with the whole cast and Brian. The reading went wonderfully, and we all left having tons of ideas for how we could move forward. We had a couple more

meetings with everyone after that, and during those it was hard for me to let go and only focus on the acting. I had had practice just being the actor before but when I knew it was my own senior project I got very protective and wanted to be responsible for all the decisions. I wanted complete control. I would sometimes talk before Brian and give directorial notes. I don't think it was wrong of me to want to have a say in how the project looks, but I wanted to focus as much of my energy as possible just into the acting. I had to stop myself a number of times, and remind myself that Brian will probably take care of that. That was something I had to get used to, and I did over time. It helped having an intensely complex character in George. I had a lot to work on myself, without thinking about directorial questions.

Later in the fall I made a Google document for everyone to write down their favorite moments (exactly what I did over the summer). I wanted to get a sense of what everyone in the cast wanted to keep, before Avis and I really began cutting the script. Once that was all compiled, she and I began going through the script and making cuts. We essentially were rewriting our new script, going page by page and writing verbatim what we wanted to keep. We got about forty pages into the play when Lynn gave us some news. She told us that it was more than likely that the festival would be moved to May. Now since we knew we had more time, we stopped working on the project for a bit. In our meetings, Lynn told us to not worry as much about the project right now, but instead just use this time to work on any sort of acting we wanted. So then our assignments were to bring in a monologue, or do a self tape and we would watch and give notes, or find a new scene that we can read together, or anything else we wanted to workshop. For me this was enormously helpful because I was in the process of applying to graduate school.

III. Grad School

My auditions for graduate school were ironic in that I was auditioning for a theater program on zoom. Luckily my experience in *Mad Forest* somewhat prepared me but it was still a very difficult task. I essentially had to perform monologues as if I were in a film, while also not acting how I would for a film. They still wanted to see my acting as if it were for the stage. I had to focus on the camera and the angles, but get rid of all the subtlety. The requirements for the auditions were four monologues, two classical and two contemporary. Two would be for the first audition and the others would be used if called back. At the start of the year I was trying to find monologues that I wanted to do, so in the second half of first semester I was able to use Lynn's weekly meetings to practice and prepare for my auditions. I had used Evan's monologue from *The Aliens* before, that was my first contemporary. Lynn sent me *Belleville* and I meshed some of Zack's speeches together into a cohesive monologue for my second contemporary. My classical pieces were Romeo's "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks" (which I first did in Jonathan's Shakespeare acting class in junior year) and Edmund's "Thou nature art my goddess", from *King Lear*. After I had decided on my four and had practiced many times in front of Avis and Lynn, I asked Nilaja to come to one of our meetings and give me feedback as well. That ended up being a very emotional night for me.

I know honestly that I don't take criticism very well, but I act like I do. I'm always very keen to do a peer review, or a reading of one of my plays and have people give notes. I'm extremely enthusiastic on the surface but deep down I dread them and they always just make me sad. I know in my heart and gut that people are giving me these constructive criticisms because they care about me and want me to do well and respect me enough to give their honest opinions. I know that they're not saying these things because I'm a terrible actor, but I can't ignore the part

of me that just wants people to tell me that I'm good. When Nilaja came to our meeting I performed my first two monologues back to back and then sang thirty seconds of a song. She asked me all sorts of questions, gave me a ton of really great and valuable critiques and notes that ultimately improved my performance so much and I am so grateful for that, but she also made me realize that I was unprepared. I had a lot of work still to do. I took all the notes, and thanked her and then we had to immediately go to another meeting on zoom about senior projects with the Fisher Center staff and all the seniors and faculty. That meeting was just the absolute worst. They told us "We don't know anything for sure and things are subject to change but... it's most likely that you can't perform in person without masks."

That was the first official time we had heard that, before then we were all optimistic and planning on a live performance in Luma, maskless. So to hear that that wasn't an option was heartbreaking. Everyone was in a terrible mood. The students were freaking out because we knew we might have to change our whole entire projects, and the Fisher Center staff was taking a lot of heat even though they weren't responsible, and probably didn't want to be the bearer of bad news. The professors felt bad for us but there wasn't a lot they could do to help. The meeting lasted about a half hour and everyone was upset and the sun had just gone down and it was cold and I was sitting there on my bed and I lost it. I totally broke down and left the meeting and cried. Avis came over and I told her I just wanted people to tell me that I'm good, and she was very helpful and told me that they wouldn't be giving notes if I wasn't good and they thought that I had a shot at getting in. If they didn't think I was good enough they wouldn't bother giving notes. It was a rough night but I felt so much better afterwards. Similar to throwing up, when you release all the tension and anger and sorrow and negative energy, you can finally forget all that and just focus on the future. I had a much clearer vision after that and I got right to work

implementing all the notes, and taking the necessary steps towards a more prepared audition, but it certainly took a lot out of me. As for the senior project, it was still scheduled for May so we had a lot of time to figure out our next move. Lynn advised me to not think about it as much and just focus on my auditions.

My first one was for Juilliard in early December and there were a ton of people auditioning. I did my two monologues and then waited, convinced I didn't do a very good job. Then it turned out that of the close to fifty people in my group, only one person got a callback, so I didn't worry too much about that one. The odds were really not in my favor. My next one was for NYU in mid December, and that one was much more successful. My first audition however I thought was worse than the one I gave for Juilliard. This was due mostly to the fact that my mother came downstairs and deposited something in the trash during my Evan monologue. This totally threw me off guard, as I could hear her every movement, and see her out of the corner of my eye. The whole monologue is Evan leaving a voicemail, so I'm holding a phone the entire time. Because of the distraction I missed a line that was my cue for me to put my phone on speaker and exhale as if I was smoking, which was a really funny moment that I was proud of, but the action wouldn't make sense without the line before. So I just held the phone to my head for the entire rest of the monologue which was all I could think about while performing the rest of it. So then after that one I couldn't stop thinking, "Well you already screwed up the first one so either way you're probably not going to get a callback", and instead of just focusing and breathing and doing the best I could on the Shakespeare monologue, I was freaking out and missed some things in that one too. They gave me no notes, and I left the meeting. I was really depressed and angry, but then miraculously an hour later I found out I got a callback. They had me perform my other two monologues for two different professors and that one went so

perfectly. I was in the moment, I was honest, I let things happen organically while also remembering everything I had planned. I remember finishing my Zack monologue and looking ever so slightly at one of the professors, as he nodded his head while writing something down, and proceeded to make a face that, to me said, “he’s pretty good.” So after that one I was feeling really confident and an hour later I found out I had gotten a third callback. I had made it as far as I possibly could on this day. My third audition went as well as the second, if not better because I was able to implement notes that the professors gave me. I remember the head of the program, Janet Zarish said, “Good, you can take notes.” And that was that. I was told I would have to wait for three months until they emailed me saying whether or not I was invited to the final callback weekend in March, but I was cautiously optimistic.

Then I auditioned for Case Western at the end of December and I didn’t get a callback. In January I auditioned for Florida State. Again I gave a very solid audition that I was proud of, and this one was just in front of one professor. After I finished he said, “Yeah, you’re a good actor.” That was cool. Then he said something like, “It’s really hard to know who to pick, because there are a ton of applicants and it’s just one professor’s say over another’s. So I’m going to try to schedule a meeting with you and the head of the department so you can audition in front of him too.” So then on inauguration day I remember I got an email from the head of the department asking to set up a meeting. I was overly confident at this point, which ultimately led to my downfall. The email was vague enough so that I could imagine a dream scenario in which this “meeting” was him already offering me a spot.

A few days later I met with him and at first it was like a mini interview, he asked me why I wanted to go to grad school and what I wanted to pursue and I was able to ask him some questions about the program. Then he asked if I could perform a couple monologues for him,

which I had been prepared for, and I started with Evan. Then he asked for my Shakespeare and I launched into my Romeo monologue and about halfway through he stopped me and asked if I had a different Shakespeare. I said yes and I started with Edmund. Then about a third of the way through he stopped me again and asked, “Who are you talking to right now?” And I said, “He’s alone on stage, so he’s talking to the audience.” And the professor said “No, who are you talking to right now?” And I started sweating. And I was like “Uhhh, well he’s talking to God, and like, nature, and he’s sort of talking to his brother and about his dad...” And the head of the department at Florida State was getting more and more frustrated with me and just kept repeating this question over and over again, “WHO are you talking to right now!!??” Finally I just stammered and about five seconds of silence went by before he said, “You’re talking to real people, in the audience.”

I was stunned and could only squeak out “...Oh, oh yeah right right for sure for sure.” My head was exploding because I thought I had answered his question correctly the first time! I didn’t have a chance to contemplate the difference between “the audience” and “real people in the audience” because he immediately told me to start from the top. I did the whole thing uninterrupted and he thanked me and that was the end of it. A month later I found out that I didn’t get in. Then I auditioned for USC in February by sending in a self tape of my audition, and I didn’t get a callback. Then at the end of February I found out that I didn’t get a final callback for NYU. That one definitely stung. I knew that there was a chance of that happening, but I had given my best and hoped that would be enough. At that point I knew grad school wouldn’t be happening for me (at least immediately) and it was time to focus again solely on the senior project. At the end of the day it was more good audition practice, and helped in my journey from stage to screen acting.

IV. The Peppa Script

Rewinding to the start of winter break, we had another meeting with the Fisher Center staff and they told us definitively that we could not perform in person on Luma without masks. We really wanted to avoid mask wearing for our performance as much as possible. If the first semester taught me anything it was that acting with a mask is virtually impossible. The Fisher Center staff then told us that the only way we could perform without masks would be by filming it off campus. We opted for that choice. Over winter break we were imagining what this new filmed version of Virginia Woolf would look like. We had a meeting with Brian and discussed aesthetics for the film, as well as possible locations. We also started developing a working list of props we would need. At this point our plan was to have a finished version of the cut script by March, and then rehearse until the show in May. Then we got back from break at the start of February and we had another meeting with the Fisher Center staff and they told us that the Covid protocols had changed again. They told us we could not film off campus without masks unless every member of the project was part of the same household, including all cast and crew.

This was the worst news possible. Avis and I have been dating for two years now and practically live together, but Andrew and Emma and Brian were not part of our household. Plus we knew we would need to get more people involved for the actual filming process (a camera operator at least). Avis and I had a big decision to make. After about a week of deliberation, including meeting with Jonathan to go over our options, we decided to totally change our entire project. It was a huge disappointment at first because it felt like a semester of work was all for nothing. In the end we knew that trying to re cast with our roommates, or doing it with masks, or finding some loopholes in the Bard Covid guidelines would just be too much. At the end of the day we wanted a fun project that we would both be proud of. Doing *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

Wolf would have been a phenomenal experience, and I hope to be a part of that play in the future. Unfortunately the choice became doing Virginia Woolf not the way we wanted, or doing something different, and we chose to do something new. We would rather do something just the two of us exactly the way we wanted (under the guidelines) than attempt to pull off a version of Albee's classic work. Also we knew that the desired effect maybe still could have been achieved through a film (though a live version, maskless, with an audience would have been ideal), but it could not possibly be achieved with just Avis and I as the only actors. At that point the feel and the story would have been completely different.

We told Brian and Emma and Andrew the bad news and they were rightfully disappointed. They had put in time and work into these characters too. Though they understood our decision to do something else, since we couldn't do what we wanted with Virginia Woolf. So at this point it was mid February and we had no senior project. It was an incredibly stressful and anxious time because it seemed like the protocols were changing daily, and anything we wanted to do would eventually be shut down. I suggested doing something similar to Ella Bennett's senior project, and film a collection of scenes in which we got to showcase our range and styles as actors. I began looking through old scenes and old Google Drive folders to find something I wanted to work on. Then a few weeks later Avis said she might want to write something for the two of us and I was all for it. I hadn't found anything that I really wanted to do anyway, and plus Avis is a fantastic writer. She didn't tell me what it was going to be about, except for maybe something about Peppa Pig, which was a cartoon I had heard of but never watched. A week or so later she showed me this script called, *Give Daddy A Sprinkle Of Peppa: The Untold Truth of Peppa Pig*.

My first reaction was shock, mingled with amusement and fear. It was very much Avis's style, more than mine. It initially struck me as similar to her moderation project, "Garbage Rat", as if Peppa and Garbage Rat existed in the same world. It is not something I ever could have thought of, let alone written. It was hilarious and morbid and creepy and horrifying and totally original. The most important thing was for me to act with Avis, and have something we could be proud of, and even though it was certainly not what I thought my senior project would be, I had absolutely no hesitations diving in. In the spirit of this whole crazy year in which everything was falling apart and plans meant nothing, I thought to myself, "Why the heck not?" Let's do a film about Peppa the pig.

The story is about Peppa Pig's death. She was presumably murdered by her father. The first shocker is the fact that Peppa Pig is a cartoon for children and our film was going to be about her murder. This isn't a concept that Avis invented however. In 2020 an article gained attention over the internet that detailed an alternative reality within the Peppa Pig universe. It was an extremely dark fan theory that said Peppa had been euthanized by her parents. It said that Peppa was always a sick child and spent a lot of time in the hospital. Her parents, Daddy and Mummy pig, decided it was best to mercy kill her by injecting a lethal dose of poison. Again, this is a total fan theory, in the real cartoon Peppa never dies. This was half of Avis's inspiration, the other half being the real life story of JonBenet Ramsey.

Named after her father, John Bennett, and her mother Patricia, JonBenet Patricia Ramsey was born on August 6, 1990, in Atlanta, Georgia. She was the youngest of two children, the other being an older brother named Burke. She was a child beauty queen and sex symbol at age six. She was paraded in front of older men with her tall blonde curly hair, lipstick, and beautiful glittery costumes. Her mother had been a beauty queen herself, and won Miss West Virginia in

1977. Her father was a millionaire businessman, and the family lived in a luxurious house in Boulder, Colorado. On December 26, 1997 Patricia called the police after finding a handwritten ransom note on the stairs, which demanded \$118,000 for JonBenet's return. The police arrived but did not search the basement, where her body ended up being found. Her father went down to the basement and found her body sometime after the police had left. The autopsy report stated that she had died from asphyxia by strangulation, associated with craniocerebral trauma. She had been sexually assaulted and a garrote was found tied around her neck. The case is still open and no one has been charged with her murder, though her parents and brother are the most likely suspects. Most of the public viewed the family as guilty because of the bizarre circumstances surrounding the case. John Ramsey happening upon her body in the basement seemed suspicious, John and Patricia gave inconsistent stories to police and the media, and in interviews they appeared culpable. John especially was very stoic and did not show much emotion in talking about the death of his daughter.

When I first read the script, I didn't know who JonBenet Ramsey was, and I had no idea about the Peppa Pig death fanfiction. After Avis explained it to me, I was even more shocked at what she was able to achieve within this script. The way in which she connects the two stories is masterful. I was aware again of the fact that there was no way I could have come up with anything like this, and how lucky I was to work with her. In one six page screenplay, she was able to create three intensely complex three-dimensional characters that melded real life with fiction, as well as provide a brilliant and harrowing commentary on the evils of child stardom, pedophilia, and abuse.

Scene one weaves the Peppa Pig fan story with details from Jonbenet's real murder. Knowing the backstory, in this scene we see how they are connected and essentially become one

person. Not knowing the backstory we see a girl/pig talking about their murder. Either way it is captivating and immediately grabs the attention of the audience. In scene two we meet Daddy Pig for the first time and the connection is made between him and John Ramsey. Daddy Pig is creepy and disgusting and by the end of the scene we get the sense that Peppa is scared of him. Not knowing the backstory the audience can assume that Daddy Pig may have been the murderer (as referenced in the scene before). Scene three deals with that exact question. We get a much bigger glimpse at Daddy Pig, as he assures the audience he had nothing to do with it. At times he appeals to the audience's sense of pathos, leaning into the grieving father narrative. Other times he blames Peppa for what happened to her. He says, "Sometimes I ask for a sprinkle and sometimes I pour on a little too much. I think I did that with Peppa. I think I poured myself into her, put all my time and energy into one little piggy, and she just couldn't handle it. I think that's what it was." The language gives the audience insight into the truth of their relationship- "poured myself into her" being an indicator of sexual abuse. By the end the audience is not convinced that Daddy Pig is innocent.

Scene four is Peppa alone again, like scene one. She talks to the audience about how she never received her dues from the critics until after her death. We get the sense that no one cared about her life, just her death. Knowing the backstory, this scene is heartbreaking, thinking about the real JonBenet Ramsey and how there was so much media attention surrounding her death. In scene five we meet Mummy Pig for the first time. She comes off as a stage mom, disappointed in her daughter's performance. She scolds Peppa throughout the entire scene, telling her that it was her fault she died, that she raised her better, and her murder was such a shameful way to go that brought a lot of negative light onto the family. At the end of the scene we see Mummy Pig break slightly, when Peppa asks her a logical question about how she could have possibly killed

herself, and Mummy Pig gives a flimsy response. Not knowing the backstory we see that Mummy Pig could have been involved in the killing as well, or at least she knows something. It can be assumed that Mummy Pig knows Daddy Pig was the murderer, but she refuses to believe/acknowledge it and instead resorts to blaming Peppa. Knowing the backstory and how Patricia was a beauty queen herself makes you think about all JonBenet had to endure as a small child. Perhaps she never wanted to perform but her mother made her. And now even after her murder, her mother is still sticking up for her father. Scene six is similar to scene three, in that it is Daddy Pig alone talking to the audience. He again makes it about himself, saying that he wanted to look after her and dress her up, but she took that away from him. We see how Daddy Pig was able to convince people of his innocence, even though we see through it.

This script is funny because it is told through the lens of Peppa Pig. Humor can be a very effective tool with which to address these topics, especially now, with the world having just undergone Covid and people being more emotionally vulnerable. I think it can be rude to force people to watch something intensely serious and potentially traumatize them further. When it's masked with some humor, people are more attentive to the story, they open their hearts to the project, they become more invested, and then people can really understand the story you're trying to tell. A very emotional, intense, gut-wrenching, recreation of JonBenet Ramsey's death would not have been as effective. Avis found a connection between Peppa Pig's death and that of Ramsey. Or rather, there were specific holes in Peppa's story (the article didn't include many details surrounding her death), that Avis filled with Ramsey's. She filled in the gaps in Peppa's story, much like we do when preparing for any role. She had been given a certain amount of given circumstance, and now she had to add her own answers. She was making informed decisions about the characters, and for that she chose to use the Ramsey family.

I would be playing Daddy Pig, Mummy Pig, and the narrator. The script, it said that the same actor who plays Daddy Pig should play Mummy Pig, but it was also out of necessity. We had been told we couldn't work with other people outside of our household, so Avis and I could be the only actors. My first step was to read up on the Ramsey family and the circumstances surrounding JonBenet's death. Then I became a bit more familiar with the Peppa Pig cartoon. I watched a few episodes, and it's similar to a lot of children's shows. It is very brightly colored and the main character Peppa lives with her Mom and Dad and brother and she has all sorts of adventures while learning the morals of life. It's a British cartoon and all the characters speak in accents. I tried to study the voices of the Dad and Mom as much as I could, but I didn't want to copy them fully. With Virginia Woolf the challenge was to portray a married man in his fifties, and now the challenge was to portray a gluttonous abusive father who in every sense of the word is a pig, and a pageant mom.

V. The Peppa Film

Because Avis wrote the script I felt a responsibility to take the lead in terms of the film production. After I had analyzed the script and had a fairly good understanding of the characters, I came up with the initial shot list for each scene. Having acted in a number of films and reading shot lists, I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted for each scene. On the actual day we filmed, that list changed a lot (as it always does), with Avis and Gavin McKenzie adding more shots as they thought of them. After I did the shot list I connected with Kaitlyn McClelland who is a film major and friend to Avis and I. She and I came up with a list of all the equipment we would need (camera, lights, microphones, black flags, etc). Kate was enormously helpful throughout this process in teaching us how to use the equipment, and without her connections with the film department we might not have even been able to rent any of the equipment at all. Then Avis and I reached out to Gavin and asked him to help with lights and sound and filming on the day. Gavin and Avis live together so he counted as being part of the same household. Avis and I also worked together to come up with a list of props and costumes. We did a ton of shopping over the next few weeks and once we had everything we filmed the whole project in one day.

I had only directed one other project in my Bard career, and that was my moderation piece two years ago. Most of the job in being the director on this project was in regards to the specific shots. We would set up the shot, I would look at it through the camera and we would adjust. Sometimes we would want to change the lighting or the spacing or the speed of the camera. As I would watch the moment unfold through the camera I would cut and change something. I would give blocking notes and tell Avis where to walk and where to stop, but I gave very few acting notes. It actually went smoother than any of my experiences on set. I think the biggest reason was that even though I took the lead in terms of direction, I didn't consider myself

to be the only person in charge. Avis and Gavin and I all worked together to create the project. It was truly a collaborative effort. All throughout the day when anyone had an idea we would just roll with it. No one ever said no to a potential idea. In terms of giving notes no one felt offended or scared to speak up. It also went smooth because we all knew, liked, and respected each other and had worked together before so we understood each other's styles. While doing something very silly, there was an enormous level of professionalism that day. I had already come up with the shot list which we used as a baseline, and as we made our way through the script I would be looking at each shot through the camera and making sure it captured the essence I wanted. The scenes in which I was acting, I obviously couldn't watch as it was happening, but I was able to watch it right after, and make sure I was happy with it. Avis had the same opportunity too, after any take she was able to watch it and if she didn't like it we did it again.

Scene one in the film is Peppa painting alone on the floor. Peppa is styled after the real JonBenet Ramsey, her hair is in curls, she's wearing a pretty white dress with flowers, she's wearing makeup and fake eyelashes and fake piggy ears. Avis and I wanted to create a heavenly atmosphere, as if Peppa is talking to us from beyond the grave. We were inspired to do it in a clean empty house, with a lot of natural light coming in through the windows. We also wanted to shoot it in a documentary style, as if she's being interviewed. This is the story Peppa/Ramsey never got to tell. She's talking right to the camera, and we also hear a narrator who is giving us some context into her death. The upbeat sound of the narrator's voice and Peppa's bubbly and cheerful cadence, coupled with the actual lines where they describe her last days and death is a really jarring and hilarious contrast. We wanted to incorporate elements of humor and absurdity and ridiculousness right from the beginning. Peppa is sweet, smiley, charming, and innocent, which makes the audience care for her.

Then we cut to scene two in which Peppa had just given a big pageant smile to the camera, and then her face totally changes. Now she's scared and uneasy. The lights are darker, there's a television on in the background, and we are immediately aware that this is a different location. We wanted to play with light a lot in the film, with Peppa being lit brightly and Daddy Pig having more shadows. Peppa is talking directly to the camera, but Daddy Pig is not. In this way we get the sense that Daddy Pig is authentically himself in this scene. He is not acting for anyone. As Peppa talks to the camera and Daddy Pig is out of focus, the lights go black when Peppa quotes her father. We wanted the first impression of Daddy Pig to be disgust. Throughout this scene I am eating pork rinds in the grossest way possible and have frequent fits of snorting. The humor in this scene is mostly due to Daddy Pig's lines and mannerisms. Towards the end of the scene Peppa refers to herself and friend Suzie Sheep as "bedwetters". One of the most common regression symptoms of children who have been sexually abused is bedwetting. This theme is brought up later in the film, as Peppa is scolded by her mother for wetting the bed, when in reality it is a symptom of her abuse. In scene two we see what Daddy Pig is like on a normal day. We don't see the real abuse but from the way he acts towards her, we see where it's headed. We get the sense that Peppa is scared of him, but helpless.

In scene three, Daddy Pig is trying to assure the audience of his innocence. This time he is aware of the cameras and talks directly to them as if he's being interviewed as well. He starts as if he had just been asked a question like, "Did you kill her?" It is essential for the audience to see the two sides of him back to back, one where no one is watching and one where they are. He denies having anything to do with Peppa's murder, and says he had no idea why he went to the basement and found her body. He refuses to take any real accountability, and instead blames his daughter by saying that she couldn't handle all his love. All the while, Daddy Pig is munching an

enormous plate of ribs. The language, the fake pig ears, the costume, the makeup, the ribs, and the accent all contribute to the comedic nature. On the other hand it is wildly inappropriate and creepy. As the actor, the question I was thinking about during this scene was how did he convince people that he had nothing to do with it. In approaching this scene I watched a few interviews of the person the character is based on, John Ramsey. He is very stoic, and rarely emotional to the point where people thought he must have done it. I wanted to channel aspects of that, not cry or appear choked up, but be more serious. Then I also wanted to include aspects of the Daddy Pig cartoon character who is very animated. There ended up being very little rehearsal process, because time was of the essence, so the pressure was on us to do all the necessary work. In terms of the direction of the scene, we wanted it to appear like a police interrogation room, and also like a documentary film crew asking him questions. The lighting once again is dark, as opposed to when Peppa is alone. We did multiple takes of me performing the whole monologue, and then cut it together in editing. We see how he would have interacted with police/media and we are led to believe that he is capable of talking himself out of sticky situations. He doesn't get nervous under suspicion and he knows how to talk to people. We see a clever side to him. To get away with something like that you have to be a smart actor, and in this scene we see him in full performance.

Scene four is similar to scene one, Peppa is alone in an empty church-like house. It is such a short scene, with little action going on, and Peppa is the only character. As the director for this scene I was more focused on the aesthetics, trying to make Peppa seem as heavenly and ghostly as possible. Scene five we are first introduced to Mummy Pig and I wanted that reveal to take as long as possible. We decided that this scene could exist within Mummy Pig's imagination as her daughter's future wedding day. Peppa is wearing a wedding dress, and Mummy Pig is

combing her hair, and making final adjustments. I also watched interviews of Patricia Ramsey in preparation for this scene, as well as watching Mummy Pig in the real cartoon. I wanted to create a three-dimensional character who is aloof and naive, but also lives in fear. Parents who force their young children to participate in beauty pageants are able to live with denial. I don't think Mummy Pig realized the horrifying reality of what she was doing, which was parading her daughter around for older men to sexualize. She is also grieving for her daughter, and doesn't know how to handle that trauma. I imagined that Mummy Pig lived a comfortable life (like Patricia) and her world was totally shattered by this murder. Instead of dealing with that pain, she reverts to the life she knows. I imagined she was the kind of person who cared about status and how the world saw her and her family, so she chooses to rebuke Peppa for shaming the family. Mummy Pig is probably aware of the truth, but is afraid of Daddy Pig herself, so much so that she doesn't risk turning him in. That fear is so ingrained that she blames her child for her own murder. She doesn't want to believe the truth so she creates an idea in her head of what happened, and convinces herself it is true. Peppa committing suicide is far preferable than what really happened. In this scene we see Peppa at her most sad, as her mother scolds her for dying. Perhaps the most important moment in this scene comes when Peppa asks, "How did I cover my own dead body?" Mummy Pig's face changes, as if she had just realized the truth, and for a second the audience wonders if she will take a stand, but then she recovers and reverts back to the story she concocted in her head. It is tragic to watch this unfold, for Peppa knowing that not even her own mother will stand up for her, and for Mummy Pig knowing what fear she must live in to convince herself of this alternate reality of Peppa's suicide. At the end of the scene Mummy Pig puts a veil over Peppa to symbolize her death, and in Mummy Pig's fantasy, her wedding that would never happen. For Mummy Pig, this serves as a hopeful reminder of what could have

been. She convinces herself that she was a good mother, showering her daughter with beautiful dresses and giving her a comfortable home life. It also haunts her, when the Peppa in her imagination asks “How could I have done it?”, and Mummy Pig is exposed to the truth. But then at the end of the day even though the truth is staring her in the face, she goes back to her story in her head.

We decided that scene six would be as if Daddy Pig is talking at Peppa’s funeral. Before he starts talking however, we see the basement where Peppa was murdered. We see a ring of candles on the floor to commemorate the location, as well as the veil that we saw in scene five. It is dark and spooky, with light from the flames and a single lightbulb. The cameras are rolling and Daddy Pig doesn’t disappoint. He gives a rousing send off speech, saying how Peppa was perfect and beautiful and was taken too soon. This is another instance of Daddy Pig acting. Deep down he really doesn’t feel bad, but he has to convince everyone that he is heartbroken. Again I didn’t want to go the route of being super emotional or crying, but I wanted to play into the idea of someone acting like they’re choked up. Daddy Pig gets a sort of sick pleasure out of playing this role of the grief-stricken father, and that shows. This is the final scene of the film, and the audience finishes knowing that Daddy Pig will likely never be convicted.

Once we finished filming the final step was to edit, and Gavin was enormously helpful with that. He knew all the editing software and really took the lead with editing, though Avis and I were with him throughout the process. We were able to look over the footage and decide which takes we wanted to keep. Gavin had a ton of ideas, all of which made the film that much better. It was his work that really made the finished product. The process was smooth for the most part but it took a long time. I now have much more respect for editors as it is such a hard and tedious job.

VI. Conclusion

My first idea for my senior project was to focus all my attention on just the acting. I found out through this process that “just the acting” actually requires an incredible amount of work. Whether it’s for theater or film, the actor has an enormous responsibility to understand every aspect of a character. The job becomes even harder when you are portraying someone evil, as you have to still be able to humanize them. Even if you don’t agree with what the character is doing or feeling, you have to open yourself up to the possibility. Only when you can answer any question about the character, only when you understand where they’ve come from and what they want, can you begin to portray them accurately. For me another great sign is if I am able to improvise as the character, then I know I’m ready. When I’m doing improv, the character takes over and works through me and I know at that point I am not just relying on the lines. For this project there ended up being very little rehearsal process, so the pressure was on me to do all the character work. I didn’t have time to workshop it in rehearsal and let the other actors or directors give me the answers. Before we filmed I needed to make sure I had all the answers. And if the answers weren’t in the script, I had to make them up myself. In those moments however they still needed to be as clear to me as those things I took directly from the source material. This was great practice for when I graduate, as I will channel what I did here to all future projects. This project also taught me that “doing the work” doesn’t make it any less fun, on the contrary the acting becomes more fun because it is more specific.

Looking back over this project I wouldn’t have changed a thing. There were parts that at the time I absolutely wished had gone differently, but at the end of the day it was an awesome learning experience. All my time at Bard has been like that. There have been moments of intense triumph and joy, and moments of unbelievable pain. These past four years have been the best and

worst years of my life. I can acknowledge the bad moments from my time at Bard and learn from them, while also being grateful for how they've shaped me. Without all the terrible moments, I would not be who I am today. Without all the terrible moments this year, we probably never would have come away with this film. This terrifying short film deals with themes such as trauma, grief, and child abuse. We blended comedy with horror, real life with fiction, to create something that will grip the audience and make them laugh, but also really make them think. I think this project was less about having one message that was given to the audience, and more about telling a story. The audience can take away whatever they want from it. Especially being the actor, my job first and foremost was to convincingly portray a character, in this case two characters who were well outside my comfort zone before now. I think I was able to showcase my range and break out of the typecast I usually find myself in. I am immensely grateful for this year and for my whole Bard theater experience. I have been able to take all that I have learned from my theater classes and apply it to on camera acting. I move on with the knowledge that sometimes the best things come out of great uncertainty. Things will not always go to plan, but that's not always a bad thing.