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Spring & a Storm

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Spring & a Storm

a Senior Project Paper by Colin Zachariasen

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PREFACE:

Spring and a Storm by Tally Hall, and more specifically Joe Hawley, is a song about overcoming feelings of overwhelming futility in a universe that ultimately doesn't care. We do not, and cannot, know what happens when we die, and for many people the concept of death as an end is the most frightening thing imaginable. It is the ultimate unknown, the opaque door, and fear of it is why afterlives were invented. Why would we bother doing anything if it will all have been for naught when we inevitably die? That is the question the speaker in *Spring and a Storm* is concerned with, and instead of answering it, the song asks a much better question in its place: why should that matter? And that, my dear reader, is the arc of nihilism.

People more qualified than I am have written extensively about nihilism, so I won't get into it much here. I am not religious, I don't believe in an afterlife, and I don't think humanity is here to fulfill any kind of cosmic purpose. I have struggled with major depressive disorder my whole life, and when you keep climbing out of holes only to then fall into others you couldn't see, it's hard not to resort to a pessimistic line of thinking. "Is this life?", you think. "Is life nothing but spiral after spiral with the only relief being death itself?"

During the Fall semester of 2022, I was in one of these holes. I've come to expect certain things of myself at this point in my life: idling boredom in personally uninteresting classes is a given, burnout by the fourth quarter of Spring is almost unavoidable, but to be completely burned out a quarter of the way through the Fall semester was a catastrophic occurrence. I ended up dropping two classes, barely scraping by on the third, and on top of all of it I had my Senior Project to worry about.

The choice to do a piece about overcoming depression was made whilst I was still in the thick of the worst bout of depression I'd ever had up to that date, but if given the chance I would make that choice again. The irony of a lot of art is that often the most personal and provocative art pieces are conceived when the artist is at their lowest point, but they can only be finished and shown in all their glory once the artists are in a better place mentally. Fall semester was a complete shitshow for me, but the flowers of Spring killed my doubt and steeled my resolve. Putting on this show was the most stressful theatre experience I've ever had, but it wasn't in vain. In the end, I am more happy with it than any other work of theatre I've created, but I didn't, and couldn't have, done it alone.

Eric Infanger, Frankie McNerney, Roo Tarantino, Aidan Kennedy, Harley Mitchell, and Jingyi Mao, you made this happen. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

THE FIRST DROPS:

When I started on my senior project in August of 2022, my vision for what it would be was very different. I didn't start with a story I wanted to tell, only a jumble of all the random ideas I'd had since I was a freshman. For weeks I was brainstorming ways to incorporate various senses into the piece. I was fixated on the idea of an in-person theatre performance which relied very little on visual storytelling, and far more on sound and feeling. In early versions, the audience would have been treated to a matte color projected onto the cyc, a sort of large projector screen at the back of the stage in LUMA, which would have changed depending on the temperature of the imagined space, and to a very lesser degree based on the imagined location itself. The sounds of rain on leaves and footsteps on a forest path would have filled the audience's ears as the thermostat in the theatre was gradually turned down to a chilly 60° Fahrenheit. Through some mechanism I had not decided on, the smell of petrichor would be dissipated throughout the theatre space. The idea was to create a theatre space of the mind, heavily aided and guided by what the audience was seeing, hearing, and feeling, but ultimately individualized to each audience member's imagination. It was my belief that what each person can imagine themselves would be far more powerful and emotionally provocative than anything I could devise for them onstage.

I was especially concerned with utilizing the audience's sense of smell to help create this internal world. Scents have an uncanny way of bringing back memories we didn't remember we had, of people and places we thought we'd forgotten. The smell of rain, petrichor, is special in that it cannot be fully replicated by any means other than water soaking into topsoil, especially if

that soil is warm. The problem I kept running into with it was the matter of actually dispersing the aroma throughout the theatre. I looked at perfumes, air fresheners, candles, and even creating it myself with a tray of dirt and a cup of water, but in the end I couldn't find any method that would act as I needed it to. Like that, the most unique idea I had was rendered unfeasible, and I was back to having just sound and temperature, not exactly a breathtaking combination of effects. The largest problem I faced though, as you can probably guess, is that while all of these ideas are great on their own, they only serve as vehicles by which a narrative is given to the audience, and I still didn't have a story to tell.

FINDING A NARRATIVE:

Devising a narrative for my piece was not an easy process, helped least of all by the fact that I at first clung desperately to the jumbled mess of ideas I'd been working with up to that point. If I left those by the wayside, I would have essentially been back at square one with nothing. After the aroma idea was scrapped, the sense of taste being inaccessible by default (especially after COVID), and other senses like balance and kinaesthesia being complete non-options, I wasn't left with much to go on. The idea of a theatre of imagination was falling apart, but what I did still have was the idea of rain as a motif.

It was around that time I'd been listening to Tally Hall a lot, and one of the songs that I really connected with was the 9th track on their debut album, *Spring and a Storm*. The actual text of the song reads as being about how someone caught up in a loop of nihilistic pessimism learns to overcome feelings of complete futility in the face of the onward march of time and appreciate life, but as many of us do with our favorite songs, to me the track has a slightly different focus. For me, *Spring and a Storm* is a song about overcoming clinical depression and learning to live in an imperfect world with an imperfect self. At the end of the song, the speaker *has* overcome, but their problems aren't solved, and the world doesn't care for them any more than it does when the song begins. It is about learning to live in *spite* of chronic mental illness, not about being cured. It's that refreshing take on mental illness in music that endears the song to me so much. I decided then that I wanted to find a narrative within it, and if I could, write a performance out of it.

The first versions of this new SProj were very music video-like. I remember listening to it on repeat and fleshing out a vision in my head for a narrative within the framework of the song. Once I'd decided on various mental images for different parts of the song's runtime, I wrote them down, and even sketched a few out. The first version of the piece I wrote, an actual *script* this time, was based on these mental images as well as an actual plot. It had become about a wimpy flower growing in a park drain getting blown away by a storm. In this version, the character of the Moon would catch the flower as it floated down the drain and imparted its wisdom onto it. The flower would then grow up from the ground into the sky, the piece ultimately ending in a psychedelic fly-through of the universe. Finally, the flower would grow back down to its original size and go to sleep, now knowing its capabilities. This initial concept's main problem was that it didn't translate very well to the stage. They were powerful and evocative images, yes, but there was no way to adapt them for live performance, to be acted out by human beings. Rewriting it meant I had to take these things into account, which was difficult because at that point in time I was sort of married to my more music video-like ideas. After weeks of thinking and deliberation (and a lot of procrastination), I sat down to write the second and final version of the script, this time with performers and stage directions. The main character became the Plantito, a little plant whose name I ~~shamelessly stole~~ borrowed from my advisor. Two more characters were added to the cast, a cheerful ensemble of flowers who serve to balance out the downtrodden nature of the Plantito. And finally, the Moon became Mr. Moon, a named character straight out of the song. In this new version, the audience's attention would be divided equally between the stage and the video behind it, each working to support the other in a kind of perfect synergy, and the main set piece was a staircase in the middle of the stage that the Plantito would triumphantly climb at the end. It was, in my mind, a multimedia theatre piece I could be proud of.

PRESENTING NOTHING:

My whole first semester of Senior Project was an exercise in lowering expectations. My first ideas were, of course, a safari of the senses as it were, then a music video, then a live music video, and one I wouldn't be able to actually put on until the second semester. But for a great deal of that first semester I was still holding out under the notion that so long as I was able to finish it in time and get a cast, I would be able to show a work-in-progress of the piece come performance time. As the semester drew on, however, and I missed more and more deadlines due to procrastination, being depressed, or some combination of the two, fewer and fewer windows remained open. About halfway through November my Senior Project advisor, Ash Tata, whose help was indispensable throughout the entire process, essentially sat me down and told me very bluntly that my best option at that point was to do a script reading for the Fall showing. This information hit me like a ton of bricks.

A script reading! After all that work, all those tribulations, there was no way in my mind that a script reading could be a triumphant end to the semester worthy of my story. To me, merely doing a script reading was the same as presenting nothing. Not even a work in progress. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized they were right. I *had* to consider that a win. There was no feasible way I could present anything else, not at that point.

At the first tech rehearsal, I remember being very nervous. I was in the process of writing the second version of my script, but it wasn't finished, and it wasn't ready yet for human eyes. I had to go onstage and recite that *first* version, the one that was more like a music video than a

traditional play. I knew it was only the crew, and that they didn't care what I was presenting, they would tell me I did a good job anyway, but it was still exceptionally uncomfortable. I made sure that when the next rehearsal rolled around I brought something I'd be less nervous to share.

Just because I was reduced to doing a script reading though didn't mean I wasn't concerned about its appearance. I'm on the heavier side, and during that awful semester when stress eating was an almost daily occurrence, I was even heavier. I'm very conscious of the way my body looks, especially onstage. It's why I voice act. So when I set out to write this thing I knew, from the beginning, I wouldn't physically be in it unless there was no other option. Yet another reason why doing a script reading was difficult to consider a win. But I'd made my peace with it by that point and I wanted it to look as good as it could, so when it came time to do the lights I opted for "dramatic". The cyc behind me was lit a pale blue, while I was bathed in a deep red. It made quite a striking juxtaposition.



People liked it, I was praised, two of my friends even offered to be in it when I saw them after the show, but more than anything else I was just relieved to be done.

HOME MOVIES:

The next big step for me came during the Spring semester, when I had to actually sit down and make the background video for my piece that I had so meticulously detailed in the script. This was an arduous process that I accomplished within the span of about 12 hours of near constant work, which I, of course, put off for almost as long as I could before the video deadline arrived. It was made in Adobe Premiere Pro, an application I had not touched for years at the time, out of a whopping 68 separate videos I found on YouTube. Most of them were “Rain sounds to fall asleep to”, or some variation on that, and a few of them were documentaries about space. The song having a total runtime of 4 minutes and 47 seconds meant that most of the clips from each of these source videos, with a couple of exceptions, were only a few seconds long, with some of them being even shorter than that. This was made difficult by the fact that I didn’t have a convenient way of taking short clips from said videos without downloading the entire thing, a prospect I did not enjoy the thought of, seeing as many of them were roughly 10 to 24 hours in length. I tried four different online clip editors, none of which worked for one reason or another, before finally deciding that my best option would be downloading them. Due to Bard’s wifi not being the fastest, as well as the length of the videos in question, this process took a very long time. I was forced to edit my video while others were downloading at the same time, which made Premiere Pro rather unhappy. Something I kept in mind while making it was that The audience’s attention, at least for most of it, couldn’t be divided between what was happening in the video and what was happening onstage. I deliberately chose to hold back during certain parts of the video where I could have made it more visually interesting, but didn’t because it would

have distracted from the actors' performance. It was a fine balance I struck, but in the end I was extremely happy with the way it turned out.

FISH OUT OF WATER:

Casting was also something I put off for as long as possible. I'd never directed something like this before, and had no idea how to hold an audition for a mostly dance and physical theatre piece. I was given suggestions by my peers, but when it came time to send out a casting call I just asked for people who had a background in those things. I got responses from five people in total, two of whom had backgrounds in dance, but when the audition day came only three people showed up, and they all got in by default. Beggars can't be choosers.

The greatest asset I had was Eric Infanger. Eric and I had known each other since freshman year, and we'd been roommates and suitemates each year since. They're a dancer by training, a performer to the core, and had agreed to be in my Senior Project since the beginning. They helped me transcribe my script into something more dance-oriented, with specific moves on counts of 8 and 3. When someone dropped out of my cast, Eric was the one who helped me find a replacement. I couldn't have made any of it happen without their help and support.

This was especially apparent when our rehearsals rolled around. My experience is almost entirely with traditional dialogue-based theatre, and adjusting to directing this sort of thing was an exercise in discomfort. Those first few sessions were full of nervous laughter, near constant mental buffering, and clumsy, clumsy direction. Not being a dancer, I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted my actors to do for many parts of the song, and for the parts I *was* sure about it wasn't easy expressing what I was picturing. Like I said before, none of it would have been possible were it not for Eric Infanger.

A PLANTITO SPRINGS FORTH:

Gradually I grew more comfortable with my actors, and the thing was actually coming together. By about halfway through the rehearsal process we'd abandoned the script entirely, working instead off of timestamps in the song and a memorized routine. That doesn't mean it was perfect, though. There were plenty of areas that needed lots of improvement to make work. I remember one of them being this part at the end of the second verse where, in the video I'd made, there was a montage of hurricanes, and I wanted the flowers and the Plantito to brace themselves against an invisible wind and hold onto the staircase for dear life. The problem was that my actors didn't know quite what I wanted them to do, and instead just rolled around on the floor while the craziest hurricanes you've ever seen raged behind them. It was very silly. I ended up doing it with them several times, showing them physically the sort of thing I was going for. They still didn't quite get it, but it was good enough.

Even as the final rehearsals were upon us there was something that just wasn't working. I had been telling Jingyi Mao, the lovely dancer who played the Plantito, not to be very animated, because the entire point is that while the flowers are frolicking and having fun, the Plantito is left out. The flowers dance. The Plantito doesn't. She kept asking me if I wanted her to do anything during various sections of the song, and I kept saying no. To be fair, she asked to be the Plantito, and I told her at the beginning that the Plantito is the least dancerly part, just to make sure she knew what she was asking for. Of course, I was wrong.

I knew when I wrote the play that I wasn't going to act in it, but at the same time the Plantito was written to be a stand-in for myself. The Plantito's triumph, and by extension my own triumph, was climbing the stairs. Climbing them as though it were climbing a mountain,

through a furious downing wind, losing its footing time and time again, but continuing to climb. In the script, it's a very poetic moment, and one I was very much attached to, but it just wasn't working for Jingyi. I realized two days before opening night that I had been wrong the entire time. My moment of triumph would have been climbing the stairs, but Jingyi's moment of triumph was dancing. I told everyone that after rehearsal, and asked her if she would be able to come up with a dance to do during the final segment of the song, and she didn't disappoint. I remember watching it each night prior and dreading the showing, but the night I saw her dancing I actually cried tears of joy. Finally, it worked. She *made* it work. And I can't take any credit for that. That was all Jingyi.

Spring & a Storm was very much the sum of its parts, and was only possible thanks to all the lovely people who put their time and love into it. It is my Senior Project, yes, but I would say that it belongs in equal part to each of us. Eric Infanger, Frankie McNerney, and Roo Tarantino as the flowers, Aidan Kennedy and Harley Mitchell as Mr. Moon, and Jignyi Mao as the Plantito. This was a triumph, thanks to you.

