

About the Music

In Conversation with Composer Lydia Arachne

How did you become involved in this project?

Fuse Theatre's Lara Morton has been a great friend and a great supporter of my creative efforts since we met in 2013. Most recently, we worked together on Fuse's 2020 production of *The Lion King (Jr.)* for which I was musical director. As that show came to a close, Lara asked me if I would be interested in writing some original music for her next project, an adaptation of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I said yes.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

The first thing I wanted to do for the show was to develop a unique musical language for the fairy world that would make it different from the human world... which just means I sat at the piano and tried out weird stuff. I didn't want to set Shakespeare's text to music just for the sake of completing the exercise, I wanted the music to be motivated and original - and to sound like me, and not, say, Stephen Schwartz (although, fair warning, the first song in the show is pretty Stephen Schwartz-y). In looking for ways to make the music weird yet accessible, I realized this show could also be a good way to introduce young performers to some more advanced ideas in music theory (quarter-tone transposition, non-standard scales, metric modulation) while still remaining mostly rooted in rock and pop music. As I sent around demos of the first few songs I came up with, I also got to see what other members of the creative team were working on, and that sharing process definitely helped the show become what it is: one of my songs might have helped give creative vision to a character or a scene (or in the case of "Disparage Not the Faith", it turned a scene into something far slower and more dramatic than that scene is usually played, whoops) - and then in the other direction, seeing the sets and costumes and performances of the individual actors helped inspire the rest of the music. "The Course of True Love" is a song I never would have written in that way if I hadn't already known and been working with the actors who sang it.

What inspirations/influences did you focus on in the early stages of your process of creation/design/writing/conceptualizing your contribution to this project?

For whatever reason, Genesis was on my mind a lot as I was working on the music for this show. In my mind I heard the voice of Peter Gabriel singing for Oberon, and maybe even Phil Collins singing the fairy solo in Act II. We made a conscious decision early on to avoid the Medieval England tropes that Shakespeare is so often saddled with, and I guess one way of doing that is by turning to 1970s England: Jethro Tull, XTC, The Police. Comparisons to Paul Simon, Stephen Sondheim, or Frank Zappa would also be both flattering and (I hope) not inaccurate.

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

For most of the songs, I stared at a small excerpt of the play and read it over and over, in my head and out loud, until a rhythm emerged out of the words, and maybe some hints of a melody too, if I was lucky. "Bottom's Dream" worked like that - that song was built from a scene that was purely prose, not even written in typical Shakespearean meter, so I had to read through it again and again until I could feel it intuitively divided into verses. Then I tried to force those verses onto this sparkly, mysterious guitar part inspired by "Pilate's Dream" esus Christ Superstar (because, you know, that's just what you do when it's a song about a character's dream) and that didn't work at all. So I went back into the text and

read it some more, and eventually I couldn't avoid the fact that in this line: "The eye of man hath not heard" - those last three words really want to be on syncopated off-beats, like a Latin jazz rhythm. And so, we can now present to you a Latin jazz-inspired "Bottom's Dream". The one big exception to this creative process was "Things Base and Vile", the song we're banking on to be the big crossover pop hit (I say with all the irony of an independent musician trying to make it in the age of Spotify). With that song, those words just fell right into this melody that I had written a decade ago but never used for anything. Good thing I didn't forget it, yeah?

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

So many things about this project were things I never could have come up with on my own, but this is a page about me, so let's talk about me a little more. The last album of music I put out into the world (Sister Administrator by Semaphora, look it up, you won't be sorry) took about three and a half years from start to finish - I don't think of myself as someone who works quickly. But for this show, I was somehow able to create eleven songs in six months, and it's really a credit to my collaborators - the rest of the creative team, and Shakespeare himself - for providing a vision and focus (and deadlines) that led to the production of practically an entire musical in a rather short period of time.

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

Let's talk about "On the Ground", sung by Puck at the end of Act III. It's only a minute long, and it's not the tune you'll hear the most, but it's what I think of as the central musical theme of the whole show. First of all, it's written mostly in what's called the acoustic scale, which is a major scale with a sharp 4th note and a flat 7th note. (It's also called the Lydian dominant scale, and, well, sometimes she can be.) The melody has all sorts of awkward interval jumps that are awfully challenging to sing - but then there are also points where it feels like the melody has moved somewhere new, when in fact it just took a big circle to land right back where it started. It's weird, and it's just my favourite. Out of all the music in the show, it's the piece where I feel I got the furthest toward my goal of creating something truly new and innovative.

What has it been like working with the FUSE Team on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream- The Rewired Musical'?

Phenomenal. Every member of this creative team is so great at what they do, the show has gone far beyond what I was expecting when I first signed on. Please watch this show. Tell your friends.

Your own words, is there something you want to talk about or share that we haven't covered in our general questions?

Climate change is a real threat that could critically endanger all life on earth within our lifetime. As individual private citizens we don't always have much of an opportunity to do anything about this, but if we keep it in our minds we can be ready to take those opportunities when they come.



About the Direction

In Conversation with Lara Morton

How did you become involved in this project?

The idea of doing 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' as FUSE Theatre of CT's second production came to me one night as I was finishing up the editing on the salvaged virtual version of our first production, Disney 'The Lion King Jr.', which was supposed to open to five sold-out audiences in March of 2020. "Man plans, God laughs", right? It has been a life-long dream of mine to start a theatre company and produce a musical, and "LKJ" was supposed to be that. When COVID hit and everything shut down, we held on to the possibility that we would be able to perform our show live at some point in June or July, but it became pretty clear that we were going to be quarantining for a while, so we decided to complete that show as a film using rehearsal footage, Zoom recordings and live video recordings of individual performers lip syncing their musical numbers in my backyard. When we finally released the show to our cast members and their families, we felt satisfied that we had achieved closure for them and for our project, but disappointed that we could not share the fruits of our labor with a wider audience due to licensing concerns. If we WERE to do a second virtual production, it would have to be something in the public domain, or an original project. We needed the freedom to show it how we wanted, when we wanted, to whomever we wanted, for as long as we wanted. 'Midsummer' sort of came to me one night as an option because a) it's Shakespeare, so it's in the public domain b) it's a comedy, because who needs King Lear or Hamlet right now? and c) the show itself is already "cohorted", with characters grouped into four main categories: The Athenians, The Lovers, The Fairies and the Rude Mechanicals. It seemed like a workable option in the event that we could only rehearse or film in small groups. Since we didn't know how Covid was going to play out, it felt flexible enough to fit whatever circumstances we ended up being faced with as the colder months set in.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

I'd love to take credit for all of the brilliant ideas this incredible team has dropped into the 'Stone Soup' pot since we first started meeting to discuss the concept, but I can only really lay claim to one— the idea of this show having a soundtrack. A friend and colleague of mine, Lydia Arachne, who had stepped in as Music Director for 'The Lion King Jr.', happens to be a virtuosic musician and composer, and I had become a huge fan of her band 'Semaphora,' for which she writes, plays, records and engineers all of the (highly complex and catchy) music. I felt like her style, which is hard to describe because it is such an eclectic mix of genres and influences, would really work for Shakespeare. At first, I was just thinking underscoring and a few songs, and I casually posed the idea to Lydia Arachne while she was in my backyard on my MacBook Pro, fixing the sound in 'The Lion King Jr.'

"So... I've been thinking. I want to do Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' and I'd like you to compose the underscoring and a few sung songs. Is that something you might be interested in?" Lydia is accustomed to my crazy ideas, and to her credit, she almost never laughs at them (at least not in front of me) She acknowledged that 'Yes,' she might be interested, but would need more details before agreeing to anything. I admitted that I didn't many concrete ideas, because it was little more than a vague concept at that point, but isn't everything in the beginning? She came back soon after with an "I'm definitely interested.," and I brought the idea to the FUSE Board, who were kind enough to trust the viability of my pipe dream (again), and we were a "Go"! Neither of us knew at the time that "underscoring

and a few sung songs" would ultimately turn into a full musical with more than ten original, fully sung songs using Shakespeare's text as lyrics. I suppose the other major conceptual contribution would be the identity of the forest itself as it made sense to our very digitally-oriented production. Because our show is set in summer, and we were filming in winter and early spring, an outdoor locale for the scenes in 'The Wood' didn't make sense. We spent a good amount of time ruminating on what 'The Wood' might be, and it finally came to me that maybe 'The Wood' wasn't an actual forest, but an estate owned by Lysander's dowager aunt, bearing that name. Finding a suitable location for this turned out to be a task and a half, but Jake Egan is phenomenal in a myriad of ways, including convincing people to be awesome and donate use of their gorgeous location to a small non-profit theatre company. They even fed us. Special shout out to our friends at Falls Creek Farm!

What inspirations/influences did you focus on in the early stages of your process of creation/design/writing/conceptualizing your contribution to this project?

I watched a few versions of 'Midsummer,' most notably the 2018 version with Lily Rabe and Finn Wittrock. It's a present-day interpretation set in Hollywood, though the Hollywood sign says "A T H E N S" and I was impressed by how they really flipped the play on its head and managed to keep the weirdness of it intact. I appreciated the originality of it, and was doubled over with laughter at the 'Pyramus and Thisbe' finale. I won't give too much away, but if you are a Star Wars fan (or even if you hate it), you must watch this version. I was already in a Shakespeare mode because 1) The Lion King is based on 'Hamlet' and 2) I had just completed two consecutive free virtual Shakespeare acting classes with many of the young performers who later auditioned for this show. That was convenient, in the end, because I didn't have to teach them the remedial stuff at the beginning of our rehearsal process. Aside from that, my main inspirations came from the creative team. When you have truly EXCELLENT, experienced and passionate people in a room together (even a Zoom room), magic happens. I've always wanted to work in a fully collaborative, "stone soup" kind of way. I've been trying to find that for decades now through involvement with other companies, but it has been elusive. In the end, I realized that if it was to happen, I needed to set that in motion myself, and invite folks I've worked with in the past who get me and can vibe with my way of working. I'm VERY driven and focused when it comes to theatre-making, especially educational theatre. Passion is not in short supply here, and that can be a lot for people to take sometimes, so the only way around it is to find others who have the same level of passion and be good to them, look out for them, make space for them, and accept them for who they are and help them to maximize their effectiveness by making them feel truly wanted and important. Because they ARE. We honestly had no idea what our concept was at the outset, because it was difficult to visualize a project that may or may not be filmed fully live, partially live, or entirely over Zoom. We were at the mercy of the pandemic and though we were fairly certain there would be a third wave in the colder season, we didn't know when it would start or when it would end. We knew we had to be open to whatever the benevolent universe had in store, so we tried to be patient with ourselves, each other, and the project itself. This was a one foot in front of the other kind of experience, and we gave ourselves plenty of time (October to May) to develop our show.

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

As the Director of this particular show, a big part of my creative process was being 100% in tune with every aspect of what was happening, and channel the energies and efforts in a forward, unified direction, focused on the art we were making together. It's alchemy. It's something I do well, even though most of it is invisible to the naked eye and I'm kind of terrible at explaining it (in case you

couldn't tell). For me, the first step was securing a great cast and making sure they knew they would be respected and honored as co-creators of a new work, and that their ideas and contributions would be openly welcomed. It took a little convincing, honestly, because most of the youth performers I had worked with in previous projects, including my improv company FOCUS Teen Improv and FUSE' first show, The Lion King Jr., were dealing with a lot with Covid and many if not most of them were fully virtual at school, for music lessons, driver's ed, dance classes, etc., and they didn't want to spend their weekends on Zoom. Totally understandable. In the end, they talked one another into auditioning, so we had enough talented youth to fill most of the roles. Our Costume Designer/board member Jake Egan O'Hara, teaches Theatre classes at a school in Massachusetts, and he asked me if his students could audition. Since we would be rehearsing virtually, I said "Absolutely, yes," and two fantastic young women came to us that way. After casting the youth, we decided to have adult actors play the adult Athenians, and serve as mentors to the youth cast. From November to the end of February, our cast rehearsed on Zoom every Saturday and Sunday for three hours, and while Lydia was writing the music based on video and audio clips of the cast members' voices, the creative team was meeting on weeknights to figure out what the concept and look for the show would be, I was working with the cast on Zoom to get them solid with their text, characterization, plot, rhythm, etc. We knew we had to have everyone and everything ready by the first weekend in March, because we would need a full two months of filming dates on weekends to get our show finished in time for our May 21st, 2021 premiere. In early January, we started getting the demos, sheet music and rehearsal tracks for the songs, and Lydia would work cast members individually on Zoom to teach them their parts, while I, Noah and our Executive Producer Elizabeth Santaus supported her efforts by sharing audio tracks and helping the kids with their pitches. We recorded every rehearsal on Zoom and uploaded it to our Vimeo and sent the links to the cast so they could practice during the week. At least, that was what we hoped would happen. The first time Lydia would actually get work with cast members in person would be when she recorded their vocals in my home studio and on location in Massachusetts where we recorded Puck and Starveling/Moonshine's vocal tracks (an endeavor very nearly thwarted by a three hour power outage!). Once the writing process of the music was finished, we brought on new board member Lyndsey Chance Simmons, who conceived of the choreography and somehow managed to teach it entirely on Zoom from her home in New Jersey, sometimes from her car because her house was being shown. I have no idea how she managed it, but she did. Because she's Lyndsey, and she gets.the.job.done.every.time. Neither Lyndsey nor Noah ever worked in person with any of our cast members. Noah attended every single rehearsal, sometimes two at once, and was present via Zoom for every filming session. It was a surprisingly effective way to work, as Noah had a controlled, organized environment with excellent notes and outlines at his fingertips, while I was up to my ears in make up, costumes, green screens, ring lights, tripods, face masks, Lysol, hand sanitizer and teenagers most of the time, making it impossible to carry out our filming plan without forgetting half of what we needed to do. We somehow managed to make it all work, and I usually had help on hand between April (Scenic/Makeup), Nightwing (Costumes) and Jake (Costumes). However crazy it was, it was a ton of fun and I wouldn't change a thing.

What were your greatest challenges throughout the process?

COVID - This project was a beast, and we were always operating a little bit in the dark because we didn't know what the Covid Monster had in store. We knew we needed to keep everyone safe, so we put a lot of thought and effort into figuring out how best to do that while also creating an excellent show. Also, a lot of our kids have been a bit fragile through this really awful time, so I was a lot less strict with them than I normally would be. This resulted in a lot of issues with lines memorization.

It's easy to fake it on Zoom. Not so much on filming day. We managed to make it work, because that is what we do in the theatre.

COMMUNICATION - For the most part, I think we handled this well, all-considering, but it was hard to stay on the same page sometimes because the 30 people involved all have different personalities and communication habits. I am a director who takes great care in crafting thorough communications and staying on top of details. I struggle when the recipients don't read emails, answer texts, or respond punctually with at least a "Got it!" so I don't have to wait two weeks to find out that a critical piece of info was sitting in a spam folder. Timing is everything! Handle your business.

SCHEDULING - I have a love-hate relationship with scheduling when I'm directing. I spend an insane amount of time on it, and it can be maddening. This show was particularly crazy to schedule, for reasons I'm sure you can well imagine. Taking safety into consideration, we had to think everything through to the smallest detail, and I give a lot of credit to the parents of our youth cast who rolled with the constant changes, sometimes last minute, for nearly six months.

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

So much has surprised me, in the best way. I admit I had a much smaller idea of what this show could be when I first conceived of it- I had seen other virtual Shakespeare productions and knew we could elevate the game a bit, especially with the original music angle, but I had no idea just how much. Noah Golden's beastly production design, video editing and eye for continuity has been the biggest surprise. I had worked with him before (in a singing group) and knew he was incredibly pleasant to work with and quite multi-talented (acting, writing, journalism, directing, singing, piano, percussion and video editing), but I had no idea that what he did with our iPhone and Zoom video work was even possible until I saw it. Even the very remedial storyboard video he made for the team using mostly stick figures and audio from cast read-throughs and demo music was mind-blowing, but it pales in comparison to the final product. I really cannot wait to hear what people have to say about this show, especially Noah and Lydia's extraordinary artistic contributions. It's like chocolate and peanut butter.

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution (one design, one song, one costume, one scene) that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

The casting was spot on. Every actor brought their character to life in the most interesting, compelling and hilarious way. I'm super proud of the level of work this cast of mostly youth actors (ages 12-17) has reached, because no matter how beautiful the costumes and settings are, how well-written the songs are, how imaginative the editing is, if the acting falls flat, the audience cannot fully connect and invest in the story, and the story is literally "what it's all about."

What has it been like working with the FUSE Team on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream- The Rewired Musical'?

I feel like I've said this already, but it's been a Dream. We had our moments and misfires here and there, but we have persevered through what others may have dismissed as impossible and we were only able to do that because we all truly cared about what we were creating together. We could have sat this one out, licked our wounds after Lion King and let the pandemic end before attempting another show, but we tackled it like the bosses we are. I absolutely love them all and want them with me for every project. Noah, April, Elizabeth, Jake, Nightwing, Lyndsey and Lydia, you are all so dear to me and I will never forget all that you did to make this crazy pipe dream of mine into a beautiful work of art.

About the Tech

In Conversation with Editor Noah Golden

How did you become involved in this project?

I met Lara several years ago when I joined a singing group she had formed. I found an ad on Facebook, cold-called her and ended up joining her group. We've stayed in touch over the years, and in 2020, she asked me to join Fuse. I loved Fuse's mission and was looking for new theater opportunities, so I jumped at the chance. In terms of "Midsummer," I was part of the process since Lara suggested the show around August of 2020. I was a little reluctant to jump in at first - I've never really been a Shakespeare fan and I've avoided working on Shakespeare plays in the past - but I decided to do something that intimidated me and quarantine was the perfect time for that. I'm so happy I did. While I'm still not the biggest Bard fan, I can say that working on "Midsummer" was the most challenging, rewarding, collaborative and creative process I've ever had working on a theater piece.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

I brought the idea to the team to set the show in quarantine and on digital devices. At our first production meeting, the first question someone asked was, "why this play now?" There's been ten million "Midsummers" before us and will be ten million after us. My answer was to literally pitch the idea of setting it now. The play is a pretty silly comedy, but there are themes of feeling isolated and feeling disconnected that I think we all resonated with. After that, it was an incredibly collaborative process of figuring out what this world would look like.

What inspirations/influences did you focus on in the early stages of your process of creation/design/writing/conceptualizing your contribution to this project?

In terms of the adaptation, it came from trying to turn our limitations into creative solutions. Even with in-person theater, I find restrictions force us as directors to be more creative and original. When we were first developing this show, it was around August of 2020 and I had seen a lot of theater companies do play readings and Zoom productions where the actors would put on costumes, use digital backgrounds and pretend to pass props back and forth. There's nothing wrong with that - anyone who takes the time to make art, especially in such hard times, is to be applauded - but that style wasn't something that the other creative team members or I were very interested in. So, the next logical question was, how do we stick to COVID guidelines and stay distant but do so without pretending we weren't? It was a natural step to think, "well, our show will just be set in quarantine and the characters will communicate the way we are all communicating - Zoom, texts, FaceTime, etc." The Pyramus and Thisbe section was a perfect fit for parodying all the bad Zoom etiquette and Zoom theater we've seen this year. Thankfully, "Midsummer" is a very flexible show. You can mess with the structure quite a lot without changing one word of text. I also watched "Searching," "Unfriended," and "Social Distance," which are all movies or TV shows that take place entirely within a computer screen. While our show is very, very different from them thematically, they helped see how far you can push the concept and how to help create rhythm and momentum without traditional editing techniques.

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

Once we had a basic concept, the next step was spending many hours with Lara pouring over the script in a Google doc. We went over every scene, every line, first to make sure we really understood the play and then to make some cuts. I think in the end, we cut about 45 minutes out of the runtime. We only cut one whole scene. Most of it was streamlining and cutting long poetic passages that were hard to understand and didn't really have a purpose plot-wise. We wanted this show to be very approachable and that meant making it as efficient and understandable as possible. We also figured out where each scene would take place and how our characters would be represented. Some of that was easy. We knew the Mechanicals would rehearse on Zoom. We knew we wanted Helena to use YouTube and IG Live. There's a scene where Demetrius is yelling at Helena for following him into the woods. I really wanted Demetrius to be streaming some video game set in the woods and have Helena show up in the game. Same language, different context. The hardest part was figuring out the fairies and how not to break the rules we set up. If everything we see is on a computer screen, how do we show people sleeping? No one goes on Zoom and heads to bed. Having four people vlog at the same time felt messy. So Lara came up with the concept that our version of The Woods wasn't a forest but Lysander's aunt's summer cabin. The cabin had security cameras so we could show the whole Act 3 sequence without breaking our conceptual rules. For the longest time, I couldn't figure out who the fairies were. The decision to make them computerized beings that lived inside our tech and ran our digital life came from a group-think meeting. After that, everything fell into place pretty easily. Oh, the fairies can turn on the security cameras. Oh, they can watch the Twitch stream. Not to give away too much, but having the fairies be non-human and digital was a blessing because it allowed for some misdirection and sleight-of-hand in terms of pulling off the tricks needed. When the script was done, I was a part of auditions and rehearsals. Then, around my winter break, I edited a version of the film using audio from a read-through, still images of the cast and stick figures. It looked a little crazy, but was very, very helpful. It acted as a storyboard, so the rest of the creative team could better contribute to the process and, when filming came, we knew exactly how what we needed. Eventually, we filmed both in-person and over Zoom. Because we wanted to keep numbers at a minimum, I did all the filming over Zoom. Lara would be in-studio with an actor and I'd be on Zoom reading lines and giving direction. Out of the 25+ people that worked on this show, I think I've only met four in person. After filming, I got to work editing it all together which is a fun but terribly unglamorous job that mostly involved me muttering and swearing at my laptop.

What were your greatest challenges throughout the process?

The biggest challenge was probably the most obvious one - COVID. We couldn't film with a crew. We couldn't meet in person. All of us on the team are theater people, not filmmakers. I'm a professional video producer/editor, but my training and experience are in journalism and non-fiction. Editing a news package is very, very different than a full-length musical film with green screens, visual effects, etc. So that was a challenge, personally. But as a group, we had minimal filming experience and our crew was often one person with an iPhone, ring light and tripod. For the Mechanicals scenes and a few others, we filmed them totally on Zoom. So we had to work with whatever their background was, their lighting, their WiFi, their dogs barking in the background. In some scenes, the actors read together, but sometimes it was them talking to me over Zoom and building the scenes later in editing. It was also a challenge because we made a game plan but then retreated to our corners to work, so making sure we all had a unified vision was tricky at times. Luckily, the team is very collaborative and flexible.

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

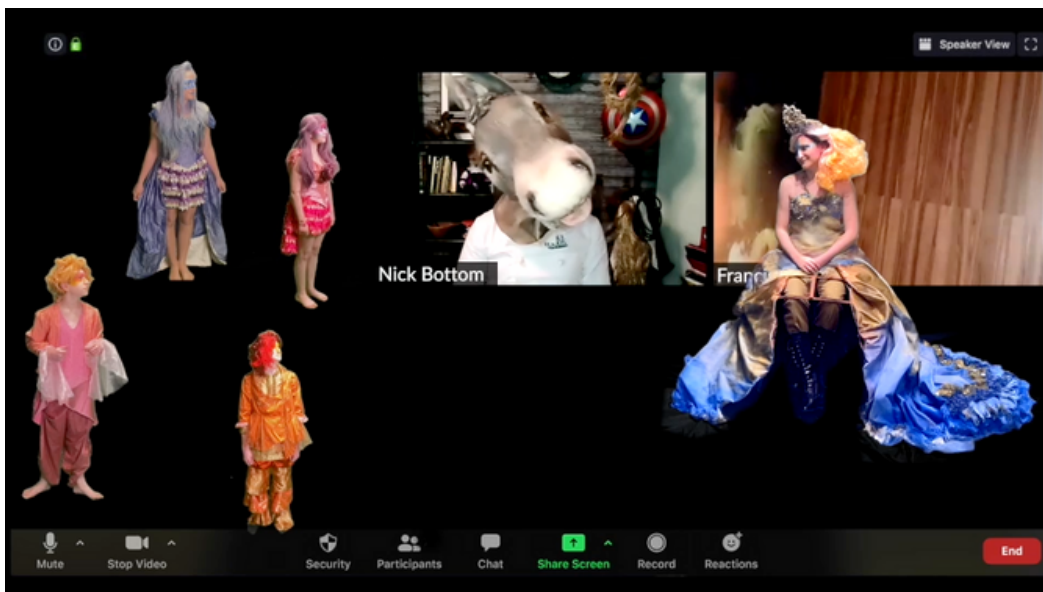
That we have a finished, polished show at the end. I don't say that to doubt our work, but we spent many months brainstorming this amorphous thing. It went from a show with one song to an entire musical. There were many times I just had to trust that it would come together...and it did. We didn't play it safe. We didn't go the easy way. This is a go big or go home project. It's now up to the viewers whether that gamble paid off and our choices resonate with the individual audience members. I hope it does. I think it will. But I'm so proud that we went big and that we made something unique.

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution (one design, one song, one costume, one scene) that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

I love the transition out of "Philomel" and into The Woods sequence. It's was a bit of exposition we needed to cover without any dialogue. Through texts and visuals, we're able to set up a lot. I also love moments like that (or the scene where Puck turns Bottom into a donkey) where the real people and the fairies mix. One of my first visual ideas was Titania sitting on the edge of a Zoom box talking to Bottom. I think my favorite scene is Pyramus and Thisbe. It's just so funny to watch and I loved adding all the "bad" elements: poorly functioning green screens, WiFi interruptions, April's terrible Microsoft Paint backgrounds, stock iMovie effects. That scene was a beast of a puzzle with a thousand pieces, but I love the way it came out.

What has it been like working with the FUSE Team on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream- The Rewired Musical'?

I've loved working on this show. The team is so kind, smart, dedicated and, above all, incredibly talented. None of us thought, "oh, a show with teenagers over Zoom, let's take the easy way out." Everyone put in the same level of thought and creativity they would if our show premiered at Long Wharf or Goodspeed. That's really rare. It was also so collaborative. We were given the freedom to pitch ideas for any aspect of the production. April, our set designer and painter, contributed ideas for music. Our treasurer Elizabeth came up with comedy bits. I gave ideas to Lyndsey, our choreographer. It was so fluid and collaborative. The cast is also so fun, friendly and helped us shape the piece. There were no egos, no tantrums. Everyone was trying to work together for the best possible show. I've loved this process and am totally on board with whatever is next. Unless that thing is Shakespeare. I might need a little Shakespeare-cation.



About the Scenic Design, In Conversation with April Chateauneuf

How did you become involved in this project?

As a member of the board of directors and a set designer, it seemed an obvious choice to become involved in *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Rewired Musical*.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

I am the scenic designer and scenic artist for the show. The overall concept was a very collaborative effort amongst the production team. During an early board meeting, the board was having a very organic discussion with many ideas being thrown out. Eventually we stumbled across the framework of the current concept and it seemed to stick. As time went by, it became fully fleshed out. As for the design concept, I honestly had no idea what I was going to do as this was such a foreign concept to me. When I was asked to do the poster, well before any designs were set, I panicked a little. I had a few must-haves that needed to be in the poster and other than that the rest was up to me. I wanted to convey a sense of nature by using organic shapes and soft edges. But underneath that, I wanted a hidden world of circuits and wiring. It's very subtle in the poster and tends to be a bit more obvious in the backgrounds in the film. That early poster set the stage, so to speak, for the rest of the design for the production.

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

Early on, I was very focused on trying to create a forest-like setting in a virtual world. Eventually that transitioned into taking inspiration from natural colors and textures of a forest and melding them with the hard lines and metallic grids of a motherboard. I still wasn't entirely sure how I wanted to incorporate the two different worlds. Right from the start, Jake Egan, our customer, had a very clear idea of what the fairies should look like. He went full speed ahead with selecting patterned fabric and draping intricate and unique silhouettes. He and I wanted to have a cohesive look for the total design of the show. We worked together to find a balance between my ideas and his. In the end I drew a lot of inspiration from the actual patterns on the fabric as well as colors. The fairy king and queen are inspired by peacocks. I chose to include those same colors into my backgrounds. Well it may be hard to see on screen, many of the patterns and shapes created by the circuit board motif echoes the same patterns that are in the costume fabrics. This became our fairies' playground. In many ways, the lovers' backgrounds were so much easier for me to wrap my head around. They are the real world. I know the real world. Again, through discussions with Jake I began to understand his vision and view of each character through costumes. It was obvious to me that Hermia is softer, flowy fabrics with light colors and very feminine touches. I immediately landed on a cottage core vibe for her. Hermia has a bit more floral, crafty decor. Helena on the other hand is a bit more boho chic with brighter, louder colors. I tried to show their close relationship through similar decor. Well still trying to use their own colors and styles to keep it specific to each character.

What were your greatest challenges throughout the process?

The absolute greatest challenge with this particular production was the physical distance of my co-collaborators. While we all worked together very well, this past year has been very different than any

year prior. A pandemic-era production meeting via Zoom was a very new experience, indeed. It's had its challenges. Another challenge was the digital aspect of the final product. As a Scenic artist/set designer, I am very used to creating large backdrops and full sets for the actors to work within. As a set designer, I am creating the physical world for our characters. In the case of Midsummer, I was a bit thrown at first with how to create a two-dimensional setting for them. In the end we settled on green screen and physical props that could be filmed in real time with the actors. It was definitely a learning experience with many speed bumps along the way. However, I am very excited for the final result.

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

The editing and overall look of the individually shot scenes has far surpassed my expectations. I'm quite excited for the final product.

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

I absolutely love the evening forest background. I'm very pleased with the night time feeling that the blue conveys. I'm also very happy with the motherboard wiring that drips down from the top like a tree canopy.

What has it been like working with the FUSE Team on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream- The Rewired Musical'?

Working on A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Rewired Musical has been rewarding, fulfilling, exhausting and even sometimes frustrating. Like any successful project that you pour your heart and soul into, there are a whole range of emotions and experiences that come along with it. I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm so very proud to see this very unique production come to fruition. I'm proud of each and every one of the cast, crew, and production team members (some of whom have been pulling triple duty) who have been working tirelessly to bring life to this production.



About the Choreography, In Conversation with Lyndsey Chance Simmons

How did you become involved in this project?

Part of my job, in terms of storytelling, was to create a perceptible link between the Shakespearean sphere of the text, and the visual world of the re-imagined-as-COVID era-musical concept. Bringing these two cultural spaces together as a unified, thematic core for the production was one of the challenges in shaping the style and spirit of the movement. In close cooperation with a marvelously collaborative team of artists, I was able to determine the scope and setting of each number (ie: a rock music video, a Tik Tok or Youtube trend, a Zoom meeting), and creatively implement movement and dance into the online environment of the production. My work contributed to FUSING (pun intended) the fantastical narrative, the renowned text, the original score, and the unique re-telling of the tale by utilizing the visual voice of cohesive choreography, holding together the fantasy of cyberpunk fairies in a high-tech virtual wood, tantalizing love-dazed, Pandemic age mortals searching for transmittable truth.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

I focused on contemporary movement and media trends across social media platforms such as: Youtube, Tik Tok, Instagram, etc. I also examined themes in pop culture, such as popular music, celebrities, relevant TV & movies, etc.

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

My first step is to undergo a traditional script analysis, relevant to pre-production rituals of even non-virtual shows. I critically examine plot, themes, diction, characterization, etc. My next stop was a deep dive into Lydia Arachne's transformative score, immersing myself in the mood, timbre, rhythm, and genre of each piece. I worked closely reflected on the picture it created in my imagination, and then I dove into couching that creative vision in a virtual platform that cohesively expressed my discoveries. Once the platform has been determined, I decided on a relevant style of movement and set off to create "acting through steps."

What were your greatest challenges throughout the process?

Teaching and communicating the spirit of choreography on Zoom is an entirely new challenge that is a very precise, yet nuanced undertaking. It was quite a learning process. On top of that, making sure that the health of teaching artists and performers was absolutely prioritized, while creating connections between characters (with masks!) was a real balancing act. It forced me, through trial and error, to reinvent my rehearsal process.

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

While working without the traditional elements of theatre production (such as a physical set, lighting, etc.) can be extremely challenging, the wonders of technology (and the unbelievable Noah Golden at the helm) bring entirely new possibilities into the foreground of choreography. Our ability to dream big and have characters interact, through choreography, with the invisible, virtual world was a real treat, and I could not believe the end result!

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution (one design, one song, one costume, one scene) that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

Jake Egan created some absolutely phenomenal costumes for this piece, two of which were the exquisitely detailed (and incredibly heavy 😊) garments worn by Oberon and Titania. At our first dress rehearsal, I discovered that the partnering choreography I had originally taught would be impossible. However, some clever "re-wiring" (I did it again!) and two dedicated actors lead to an even better routine with moments of fun, flirtation, and elegance.

What has it been like working with the FUSE Team on 'A Midsummer Night's Dream- The Rewired Musical'?

This team of consummate professionals, with impressive resumes and achievements, has dedication, generosity, and "I Can" attitudes to spare. It was an absolute joy to create something new with such an enthusiastic team of artists.



About the Costumes, In Conversation with Jake Egan O'Hara & Nightwing Whitehead

How did you become involved in this project?

Jake Egan O'Hara [JEO]: My involvement with FUSE as an organization began in the Fall of 2019 when I was asked to become one of their costume design partners for their first production, Lion King, Jr. Throughout that process, I was continually impressed with the company's artistic vision and dedication to creating meaningful work that exceeded expectations and delivered truly sensational experiences to their young cast. I joined the Board in the Spring of 2020. When the opportunity was offered to design A Midsummer Night's Dream -- and as a musical no less-- I was thrilled. This concept and the creativity involved with making it a reality was just too exciting to turn down!

Nightwing Whitehead [NW]: saw a mention of it on Facebook and, as I love Shakespeare, reached out to see if they needed costuming help. Also, I was intrigued at the idea of the new theater; I wanted to be a part of it all from the ground up, if I could.

What was your specific contribution to the conceptual aspect of the show as a whole?

JEO: Those familiar with my costume and wardrobe work I think would definitely agree that the phrase "Go Big or Go Home!" would be a rather prominently understated evaluation of my approach to design and conceptual creativity, and what I create as a result. I'm immensely inspired by and connected to historical influences and period fashions, especially those that have high levels of drama, immaculate embellishments and imagination, as well as larger-than-life elements or aesthetics. Shakespeare is really exciting for me as his works tend to have some if not all of those traits. As this production is set in the [very] current time period, and is presented through a "rewired" modern and technology-based concept, I would like to think that I was able to create a balance between the world the Bard first conceived and the world in which our updated characters found themselves. It was important to me that our characters were dressed in ways that held connection to both time periods and their respective imagery. I'd like to think I was successful in that endeavor.

NW: I helped develop the idea of the fairies being *in* the computer. My personal contribution was the idea of the Rude Mechanicals being frontline workers. It was also my idea that the costumes for Pyramus & Thisbe be left over costumes from plays cancelled due to COVID

What was your creative process? Please give examples.

JEO: For me, the creation and design of wardrobe for characters begins with the author's text and the visceral or emotional reaction I respond with. That reaction can come from a multitude of textual offers. A single line, a character's entire arch, or simply the emotional response I sense from the manner in which a character is written. I focus on thematic and arching questions. Are they directly themselves (i.e. are they truly who they present themselves to be? Are they outwardly one way but internally another, etc?)

For 'Midsummer', I narrowed those research questions and thoughts down to representing through wardrobe, the concept of "presentation vs. representation"— particularly through the lens of the Mechanicals' mode of "play within a play"/presenting oneself as wished to be vs showing oneself as one really is. For the Fairy court, I focused my view through animal traits; for the lovers I saw them through the creation of color palettes; what internal colors and moods they wished to show others while publicly displaying a fashion sense that played to their external roles in society and their own lives. Obviously, we were in this modern techno/gizmo environment, so it also became a game of matching characters to their "social media" or web-based environments. For example, Lydia's compositions for Helena gave me a very old school "LiveJournal" vibe; she was complex, emotionally textured. Helena was layered; a mix of eras and deep colored thoughts and dwelling emotions— often a bit conflicted at heart but tied together in emotion. Oberon, on the other hand, became all about status and the vital complexity of a successfully written "status update"— I based my vision for him on the animal ego instinct matched with attention-grabbing focal interest. Basically, he's a social media Peacock. Showing off the great things, the successes, the status of popular opinion, glamour and intrigue; he's the walking importance of self and experience/accomplishment. Everything about is showy, grand, luxurious. With each step, he gets 1,000 "likes". He's your typical #honoredandblessed Facebook status: exclaiming his power; hiding his insecurity and all about the show.

NW: In the earliest stages, my mind was wandering around Olde England, looking for a playwright and I found these lovelies, who said they could help. Once we began talking about it being computer based, I turned to images of friends and such. I started out thinking in terms of what the fairies should look like. But when Jake showed me his ideas, I realized he had everything there under control. I became his handy sidekick, doing the fittings and alterations, and using my own magic to make it all work for the project. Jake and I worked together on the sets of Lovers, to come up with the looks for each of them. We had originally been exploring the looks of such artists as Erté, but it evolved to a more modern and preppy look. I had complete freedom with the Rude Mechanicals. I wanted them to reflect "the Common Man" as they were representatives of Duke Theseus' peasants. Making them frontline workers worked better than I could have dreamed, and using costumes from cancelled plays was an obvious choice once it started coming together. I am so happy for having the chance to create them!

What were your greatest challenges throughout the process?

JEO: I think the greatest challenge of this project was creating designs that could sustain the critical eye of those audience members most adept and in tune with the culture and media in which the show is set, while holding true to the visual archetypes most familiar with less techno savvy audiences. It's a tough question, you know? "How do you keep Puck the Shakespearean clown while also allowing for modern punk accessibility and also making the costume a style that is modern, timeless, historical and equally understandable for every demographic?" Or actually all of the magical characters— Keeping the techno/gizmo theme while showcasing the idea that that very same techno mystery of how the internet or wireless technology works is the sand mystery that "baseless magic" felt like to the foolish mortals of Shakespeare's audiences? You know? You don't— you can't force one theme or or focus down someone's throat, not only because that's just not kind, but also because it puts another demographic out of balance or connection to the story. It has to be equal parts, and that can be really hard.

NW: Communication between people that I never heard about, but that was vital to what I was working on. This got better as time went on but I would have to say that communication was my biggest challenge. Everything else was the same familiar thing- creating magic with no time and no money. And we did it!

Has any aspect of this project surprised you? If so, what was it and why?

JEO: I think the best and most surprising nature or I guess result for me of this show has also been the piece I was expecting and excited me the most from the start. Due to the pandemic, obviously so much of this show, the performances and the aesthetics have been crafted and built through distance, limited interpersonal exchange, and have relied on collective faith and trust in and of the work others are doing, based solely on sort of shared imagining and descriptive sharing. I'm in Boston, our editor is in CT; some actors are here, others are there; I'm building and designing costumes based on songs that actors have yet to learn— and learn and interpret via ZOOM- rehearsals are sometimes one-on-one, sometimes via video groups and sometimes in person in small groups. We're basically 17 different departments functioning totally out of order but simultaneously. I mean, welcome to COVID, right? But what's incredible is that it's worked. And it's not like we created this incredible and unique and trademarked communication style or formula. We just knew when and how to trust collectively or when to just go with our own instincts and direction without a formula— and the nature and cohesive adaptability of the group made it all work. One would push forward as one pulled back, or vice versa. For a very theatre oriented and educated group intent on a singular goal, we functioned naturally like a multi-international film project. Costumes were in Australia 18 hours ahead while Scenic was in Canada 12 hours behind, Camera was in real time wherever the actors were between their time constraints, and Choreography/Movement was up 24/7, adapting to whatever insanity (37lb skirt) I had just built and shipped for Titania!! That kind of fluidity— it's rare. But it's amazing when it happens.

NW: I was completely blown away by how open everyone was. There was no infighting or stuggling for power. Brainstorming, for example, was truly everyone talking at the same time with excited ideas about how to accomplish each goal. Everyone had an equal voice, and all voices were listened to.

If you could choose one aspect of your contribution (one design, one song, one costume, one scene) that you are most satisfied with/proud of, what would it be and why?

JEO: This is kinda unusual for me. Normally, there is "The One", but I don't see a particular coup. Each design and finished costume represents a true part of this crazy journey. If I'm forced to say the one thing I'm most proud of? It's that despite the huge disconnection from interpersonal connect that we in theatre most rely upon, the show is "of one"— the costumes make sense next to each other; they tell a continuous narrative. They're a connection each actor has been able to rely on in telling their own story, and that they've been able to access collectively and extensively in thought, theory, effort and creativity. When working in film, your closest audience is no longer 20' away— they're as close as their screen and HD status allows. With this show, and the product, I'm good with that, ya know? Pull up your 1080 lens, 225" screens— you'll love it!

NH: The Rude Mechanicals were my pride and joy. I loved how well I was able to match the occupations to the individual personalities. My favorite costume, if I had to pick just one, would be Thisbe's for the play within a play. Thisbe was *exactly* as I'd envisioned her, mostly due to the incredible actor (Theo Zucconi) who stole the stage with an innocent look, a proud figure, and bouncy curls.

