

Project Design

This description is laid out in two sections. The column to the left is the actual description of the piece while the column to the right is scraps of text from the performance. These elements are presented together with the hope that they will give the reader a deeper understanding of the work that we created by pairing the literal with the figurative as we pair our left brain and our right brain.

In order to genuinely question the role that undergraduate education is playing in America I spent 6 months researching this topic with the guidance of my advisor, Zachary Dorsey. I obtained my sources primarily from JMU's library system and the Seattle Public Library. I recorded useful information in an annotated bibliography (See Appendix A). The first source I used, which helped ignite my interest on the topic, was a collection of scholarly articles titled *On Learning and Change*. Although these articles were from the 1970s, they presented a wide variety of perspectives on our 'intellectual situation' which hit home with me. It was from this book that I first learned the term 'meritocracy' and read an article on why this hierarchy is problematic. It was also from this book that I read an article on why the meritocracy is the only option because open admissions is a failure in our educational system. Another thing I gained from this book was my first reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar." This is a beautiful text that became a central part of our piece. It sought to describe who the ideal scholar is – a question that most of my sources didn't bother asking and one that intrigued my ensemble and I. Directly after reading this relatively positive commencement speech, a friend offered me an article titled "Death by Degrees: Against the Credentialed Class," which is a veritable tirade against the meritocracy and credentialism. This sent me down a rabbit hole of reading primarily pieces with titles like: *The Closing*

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we are not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, we are all. we are a priest, and a scholar, and a statesman, and a producer, and a soldier. we return from our own labor to embrace all other laborers. we are not a finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but a man.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we are informed and engaged.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because our career was a shitshow, we performed upwards of 9 times a week while battling ADD and depression, we were pulled to bits, we conquered the world, we are still working, we just came from the office.

of the American Mind, The Lost Soul of Higher Education, and We're Losing Our Minds. These intelligent critical perspectives were valuable to hear, but an overabundance of them led to a highly imbalanced first impression of the university. When my advisor and the director of the School of Theatre and Dance pointed this out I began seeking more neutral literature on the topic and came across multiple sources exploring the interesting subject of what the duty of higher education is within a democracy. With a fairly well-rounded understanding of the university under my belt, I now felt prepared to bring more people onto this project.

As soon as my senior year began I teamed up with my stage manager (Cailin Lindsay), scheduled auditions, and released an audition notice with my proposal and a description of the process attached (See Appendix B). At the auditions I asked my potential performers to begin with a physical warm-up that involved working against one another, then I told them to think of a story with a given theme and act it out with their partner, and finally I gave them text (See Appendix C) and had them add it to their story. I only had seven people audition but that was all I needed to cast 4 outstanding individuals (Chris Sanderson, Rebecca Klein, Zak Gordon, and Aubrey Siebels) and set out on a 5-month long process. On our first day of rehearsal we mapped out a calendar for our process (See Appendix D). As we progressed we recorded what we learned on scrolls of paper (like Tectonic Theatre's Paper Walls) that we could surround ourselves with and refer back to. The first semester (3 months) of our process I devoted almost entirely to mental and physical training.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we are good at test-taking.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we strive to understand the cloud of beauty hanging before our eyes

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we traveled to Israel on Birthright, and then immediately spent several weeks in Palestine to understand that perspective, as well. We took a semester off from college to do a journalism internship because that was more important. we are invested in American politics, and care about the future of this country and its people.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we steal pens from academic conferences

For the mental training, I divided the content of my research up into 5 modules. We spent 1-2 weeks on each of these modules (depending on how much information there was to cover). For each subject I would assign them 2-5 articles to read and they would be expected to come in with a Moment to share based off of that research so that we were constantly translating these intellectual concepts into the physical realm. That being said, it was necessary to spend the majority of these rehearsals talking in order to truly understand these complex topics. As we discussed these topics we were careful to acknowledge every side of the argument. My stage manager took notes and composed rehearsal reports for the majority of our rehearsals, which are available in the appendix.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we can address the unfairness of both our current system of merit and its wealth-driven definition of merit

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we still acknowledge it's a nice night after we get towed

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we play with fire and strive for a Utopia

Module 1: Our Devising Process (See Appendix E for Rehearsal Reports)

Articles Assigned:

“Reality Enchanted, Contact Mediated: A Story of Gob Squad” by Nina Tecklenburg

“Moisés Kaufman: The Copulation of Form and Content” by Rich Brown

I had them read about Gob Squad because this piece was inspired by Gob Squad’s *Work* and therefore knowledge of the original company and their style of “hyper reality” was necessary. I also had them read about the Tectonic Theatre Company because we would be using their method of devising. Said method involves making individual "Moments" and then putting those Moments together to create a fully realized piece. Once we read about these

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we don't watch reality television. in fact, we don't even watch cable. we certainly don't let our kids watch Disney, or go to Disney World. we would rather they travel the real world than traipse around a Westernized, commercialized tourist trap selling Americans' ideals of what other countries look like.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we didn't drink until we were 21

concepts it was important that we apply them to our ensemble and define them for ourselves. So, we went through what hyper reality, Moments, and elements of the stage mean for us. We came to the conclusion that we are exploring the question of the role of higher education in the United States through the lens of hyper reality (the practice of isolating and emphasizing important elements of reality so that they are made clearer), and building our piece with Moments. In addition, during this first week we spent time creating a list (See Appendix F) and composing short pieces based off of college stereotypes that are held by ourselves and others. Discussing these stereotypes was for the simultaneous goals of acknowledging what they are, the value that they have, and what they say about how society views the university, and listing them out so that we don't fall back on them without realizing it in the future.

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because we are a tree,
we are firm and gentle
and flowing and
bendable to whatever
happens. we will. not.
break. we let love flow
out of us like a river, but
we so easily forget how
to go slower in the dry
season.*

Module 2: Education & the Scholar (See Appendix G for Rehearsal Reports)

Texts Assigned:

“The American Scholar” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Closing of the American Mind by A. Bloom, pg 62-7

We're Losing Our Minds by R. Keeling & R. Hersh, pg 52-3, 34-5, 336-46

We had to begin our investigation with the question of what a scholar is and why they go to school. We used our texts to define and discuss subjects that one would normally assume the definition of, such as books. Then we discussed, using our texts, whether it is the university's responsibility to create a moral human and whether or not we think the university is currently doing that. As I

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because we have made
the world better. we used
our microphones for
good. we earned love
with our wet shirts.*

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because we are the
making of the future,
better aware of our aims.*

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because we have learned
to see and so we can
think for ourselves with
something to think
about.*

stated earlier, an exciting source for us was Emerson's "The American Scholar," particularly his definitions of "Man Thinking" (the scholar who thinks new thoughts and participates directly in society), "Thinker" (the scholar who thinks new thoughts but does not participate in society), and the "Parrot" (the scholar who does not think new thoughts but simply repeats others).

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we survived Nazi Germany as a child to come over to America when we were little. when we had to ration our food we would put an entire week's worth of butter on one piece of bread because we believe one should always be able to see one's teeth marks. we have taught multiple generations of kids how to make the best fried potatoes.

Module 3: The Meritocracy (See Appendix H for Rehearsal Reports)

Texts Assigned:

The Tyranny of the Meritocracy by L. Guinier, pg x-11

"Death by Degrees"

"Democracy, Meritocracy and the Uses of Education" by Aundra Saa Meroe

"Is meritocracy fair? A qualitative case study of admissions at the University of Oxford" by Rebekah N. Nahai

"Unraveling the myth of meritocracy within the context of US higher education" by Amy Liu

The university acting as a system that helps create and justify the meritocracy was the subject of many of the articles and books that I read, therefore we spent two weeks investigating the multiple perspectives on this issue. We began our discussion by attempting to define what merit is and who deserves it or is entitled to it. We then explored the other options for social organization besides a meritocracy (we found Kurt Vonnegut's short story *Harrison Bergeron* to be a compelling example of a terrifying alternative) and what democracy's relationship to meritocracy is. We also questioned whether the university

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we autonomously seek to complete learning even though we know that it can never be completed.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because when we get free samples at the grocery store, we save the disposable silverware.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we view education primarily as a public good.

system is truly meritocratic, given the impact of wealth. Finally, we wrapped up this module with a heated pro-meritocracy//anti-meritocracy debate. Pro-meritocracy won.

Module 4: Quantification of Education (See Appendix I for Rehearsal Reports)

Texts Assigned:

The Tyranny of the Meritocracy by L. Guinier, pg 12-25

We're Losing Our Minds by R. Keeling & R. Hersh, pg 1-27

The Lost Soul of Higher Education by E. Schrecker, 154-65, 177-186

As a degree is both a representation of work done / knowledge gained and a commodity, and a university is both a public service and a business, the question has to be asked: where is the line drawn between these two identities?

How does this dual nature impact the university? These are the questions we asked in this module. We discussed every issue our texts raised from grade inflation to the amenities arms race (the competition between universities to have the best facilities and the most perks). Then, we discussed how this relates to the idea of a testocracy and how the testocracy relates to the idea of the 'old elite' vs the 'new elite'. In addition to the information that our sources supplied on the testocracy and the SAT, we explored more current patterns with universities relying on SAT scores less.

Module 5: America and the University (See Appendix J for Rehearsal Reports)

Texts Assigned:

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have never been seen in public in sweatpants. we don't file our nails or pick our teeth in front of other people. we always stand up straight, and our voice is articulate and crisp. when we eat ice cream, we finish each spoonful in one go, so that people never see food that has been inside our mouth. needless to say, we know the proper way to set a dinner table.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have come decisively to grips with the worldwide crisis of mankind.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we understand the gravity of the things we do and say and how they can influence people who look up to us and don't abuse it. we buy local.

Higher Education in America by D. Bok, pg 5-23

A History of American Higher Education by J. Thelin, pg IX-XVIII, 539, 546-551

Higher Education for American Democracy, A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education, pg 28-43

The Closing of the American Mind, by A. Bloom, pg 25-7, 43-60 82-8

The Tyranny of the Meritocracy, L. Guinier, pg 28-41

Higher Education for American Democracy, pg 1-4

Since my question was about the relationship between America and the university, it was essential that we learn about what makes this relationship different than that in any other country. We read about the history of the university in America and about the public's impact on the university. Multiple sources stated that higher education produces and reflects the culture that it exists within so we also made a long list of cultural texts that define America.

In addition to these rehearsals, I led a weekly open movement workshop fall semester, based off of Viewpoints exercises and techniques, to help my ensemble gain physical range and fall into sync with one another. In addition to this physical practice, I assigned them a chapter a week to read from the Viewpoints book (See Appendix K for Viewpoints rehearsal agendas).

After we completed these modules we began to work towards putting these concepts on their feet. (See Appendix L for Rehearsal Reports. See videos of short compositions at <http://www.makemelissacarter.com/school-videos>) We

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we work with persistence and dedication to our craft that ultimately results in near-perfect results. when it doesn't, we try again, and keep trying. we may come across as stern, we may come across as too serious, and we may come across as unfriendly, but we have had enough experience to ignore it and focus on the experience we are creating for our customers. we cook multiple eggs at a single time, all starting with a uniform crack on the edge of the grill and ending with a well-served sunny side up or over easy.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we use the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs.

began by staging *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut. This story involved dancers so we broke down all of the elements of how the university defines merit and what these elements really represent and then translated these meanings to dancers (See Appendix M for merit chart).

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we remain strong in hard times and still take the time to lead others. on election day we wore a pantsuit.

We found ourselves somewhat stuck, overthinking everything we made and trying to encompass too much. So, for the rest of our rehearsals from this point until winter break we stopped trying to blindly make content around our research and started defining what ingredients we needed for our actual piece and attempting to create those (See Appendix N for Rehearsal Reports).

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we get black coffee at McDonalds because we don't eat any of their food but we enjoy talking to the employees.

We narrowed down what, out of all the aspects of the university we learned about, was truly implicated in our question of the role of the liberal arts institution in America (See Appendix O for subject chart). Then we went looking for more source materials, I encouraged my ensemble to bring in everything they thought would be relevant and brought in many of my own sources as well (See Appendix P for list of source materials). We then turned to Viewpoints to think about how to start shaping all of this content into a show.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have accomplished very little on our own.

According to *The Viewpoints Book*, now that we had an anchor and a question what we were missing is a structure. So, we brainstormed a list of frames (See Appendix Q for list of frames), narrowed these frames down to our favorites (which were: school in the normal school day structure, school as kid's educational TV show, and school as an organism within an ecosystem which we as researchers were studying), and experimented with making pieces within these frames (See videos of short compositions at

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have such tremendous focus that when we are typing the simplest email the rest of the world seems to dissolve around us. we can finish an exam in under fifteen minutes. we can write an essay in under ten.

<http://www.makemelissacarter.com/school-videos>). I also sought help from my readers who advised me on my next step. Some of the most impactful sentiments I came away from these meeting with were a warning not to try to teach your audience but to try to engage your audience, and a question of what our main conflict in this piece is and who it is between. Finally, my ensemble and I gathered to narrow down what was exciting us the most, what works the best, and what our main conflict is. During this discussion we realized that we could not define a conflict but we did know that the primary element we were all interested in exploring was making our piece durational. So, we needed to investigate a company that creates durational theatre. The most accessible company to my knowledge was Forced Entertainment. In order to know whether this was the right road for us to go down, I decided that my ensemble's next assignment was to watch some videos of the Forced Entertainment's performances that I sent to them and take a structural element of one of these long-form games and add our content into it. This went well so we decided to pursue using Forced Entertainment as a structure. Then, of course I needed to do more research on the company itself. Luckily, at this point we had reached winter break and I had a few weeks to go home and research on my own.

When selecting sources on Forced Entertainment I focused on those that gave practical information on what they did and how they did it. The texts I selected to share with my ensemble were:

“On Performance Writing” by Tim Etchells

“Third-hand Photocopies: Forced Entertainment by Greg Gieseckam

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we only watch TV when we exercise. we exercise every night and every morning and every 20 minutes at work. we made an interactive sculpture about goats crossing a highway. we sacrificed our dreams for our children.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because when we have run out of thoughts to think and sayings to say, we return to books.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have made it our mission to reconnect every single lost glove in NYC to its rightful partner.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we masterfully combine the destruction of endangered animals' resources and the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs symbiotically with a #vegan lifestyle. our own brand is built on hypocrisy. we are beautiful. we have told the public to put rocks in their vaginas.

“Performing love: a week’s discourse with Forced Entertainment” by Frances Babbage

In addition to these texts I shared a chart I had made of everything that we knew already, everything we still had to figure out, questions that we still had, and my own stab at what our main conflict is (See Appendix R). I also shared with them a list of endless games I had brainstormed with my friend on a long car ride (See Appendix S). I asked my ensemble to do the same, to brainstorm infinite games (See Appendix T for list). Out of this list we selected the ones that we thought would work the best with our content and tried them out for the next week’s worth of rehearsals (See Appendix U for Rehearsal Reports, See <http://www.makemelissacarter.com/school-videos> for videos of games).

At the end of this week we looked at what worked and what didn’t, we laid all our old Paper Walls on the floor, combed through our research again, and we discussed once again where the main conflict is and what our structure should be. We came to the conclusion that our conflict is between how the university needs society to shape a scholar and how society needs the university to shape a citizen. We also decided that our structure should be composed of 3 games: pre university, in university, and post university.

At this point we had six weeks left until our performance (See Appendix V for Rehearsal Reports. See <http://www.makemelissacarter.com/school-videos> for videos of developing games). During this time my stage manager found all the furniture we would need (See Appendix V1 for my chart of furniture for each game), and I reserved

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we could pass a citizen test if we were allowed to take one.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we have a shrine dedicated to each of our eight grandchildren. we leave peanut butter jars open with the knife still stuck in them because we got distracted by something we were doing for somebody else. we got stuck for three days in the blizzard of 1987 because we were at work, at the post office.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we never sleep until noon.

we are the ideal democratic citizens because we can imagine more than a perfect body, we can imagine the perfect soul.

a lecture-style classroom with the help of my advisor, collected all of the props we needed, and created publicity materials for the event (See Appendix W for publicity materials). In rehearsal we had one week dedicated each of the three games and a week for choreographing the beginning, the ending, and the transitions between games. We had our only full run of the show in the space a week before the performance and then spent our last week of rehearsal making final tweaks and selecting / editing the text that the audience would be receiving (See Appendix X for audience text). Finally, we were ready to go to *School* (See Appendix Y for School full script, See Appendix Z for notes on the performance, See <https://www.school.makemelissacarter.com/> for pictures of the performance, and See the video of the full performance on the “School Performance” Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/schooladministrationn/>)

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because we ding a bell
every time something is a
good idea, amuses us, or
most importantly every
time there is an awkward
moment that we are
attempting to skip over.*

ding

*we are the ideal
democratic citizens
because when we have
exhausted our materials
we return to the simple
act of living. the stream
retreats to its source.*

