

A Play From Script to Screen

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Imagine your theater-viewing experience looking something like this: you're sitting in front of your computer. The play is in the format of a digital presentation, and the stage is the open tab of your selected web browser. Each slide has the actors appear separately in their own rectangle with their personal rooms set up to fit their characters. Scenes were previously recorded using webcams and play automatically, but to trigger the next scene, the viewer must click the presentation forward. Such a scenario is far from the ideal theater experience, yet it is a creative approach that meets the needs of a pandemic.

Since March 2020 and for over a year, theaters had fallen silent in adherence with COVID-19 health precautions. Theater beacons like Broadway and West End were forced to close their doors, leaving no hope for smaller productions like pop-up theaters and student groups to stand against the tide of shutdowns. Against the still waters of the theater industry, Emory sophomore Willa Barnett and her team made a ripple.

Barnett had waited years to direct her own adaptation of the new play *Marry, Fuck, Breath of Water*. In the spring of 2020, she had been given the green light from Dooley's Players, one of Emory's student-run theater groups, to stage the show as a special project. But that was before anyone knew the pandemic would stretch far into 2021, and before Emory decided its spring 2021 semester would be online.

An online semester meant that rehearsals could not be in person. Production groups could not physically meet to build sets or read lines. There would be no live

audience for a production. A play shouldn't have been possible under such standards. Barnett had been a freshman and had just joined Dooley's Players. She had only began to feel part of the Emory community when the online transition email surged in on March 11th 2020.

When spring 2021 arrived and most in-person campus events still prohibited, Barnett was not giving. She was too eager to re-immerse herself in theater and bring the vision she had stewing in her mind for years to life. "It's hard, but I wanted to do it. And I wanted to make sure the material felt true and lived in." She personally knew *Breath of Water*'s playwright, Megan McKiernan. Their friendship gave them grounds to cooperate. Barnett asked McKiernan a few weeks after the new year, "Can we adapt *Breath of Water* for a virtual setting?"

Nothing derails plans like a global health emergency, and it is in such trying times that we, as humans, turn to stories, art, and entertainment for comfort. The paradox is that during a pandemic, the people and their talent struggle to gather to create and unveil the stories we sorely need. Television production slowed. Film releases have been delayed. Watching any sort of theater, be it a school production or a performance on Broadway was difficult and came with health risks. Some big-name productions have become available in film form on a streaming platform, such as the debut of *Hamilton* on Disney+. But smaller theater operations led by quiet stars and talented students do not have such resources or options. One solution was to shift the entire production process online, and that was Barnett's plan.

At the end of January, McKiernan decided that the story of *Breath of Water* could be transferred from stage to screen without losing its meaning. The play could be

performed digitally. The performance date given to Barnett was March 12th. The rush was on.

From script adaptation to online premiere, the entire production of *Marry, Fuck, Breath of Water* was compressed into two months. Core production took one month with all of its staff working remotely and virtually without a budget; the only investment was their time. The path was smoother than anticipated, with the exception of a tight turnaround that had the entire crew stressed and scrambling. The show would be filmed through Zoom recordings, edited, then put on a digital presentation. Distribution would be through an online sign-up. *Breath of Water* garnered a group of small but loyal supporters. Its completion, fueled entirely by passionate students, is nothing short of an artistic achievement.

Marry, Fuck, Breath of Water tells the story of two college girls, Sasha and Clara. Sasha is bold, uncompromising on her identity, and hopelessly in love with Clara, who is more cautious, and needs time to voice her true self. During emotional moments, the characters have the ability to retreat to a metaphorical space under the sea to “breathe water” and be themselves.

Barnett had met the original playwright of *Breath of Water*, Megan McKiernan, when they were both enrolled at a theater school, the National Theater Institute (NTI) in Waterford, Connecticut, in fall of 2018. McKiernan was an aspiring actress aiming for a career in musical theater when she took a playwriting class at the NTI just to test the waters. She had to write an original play as part of the class, and crafted a love story inspired by the NTI’s seaside setting. When she had to produce a reading of *Breath of Water* at the end of the workshop, Barnett had worked with her to bring it to life.

When Barnett was preparing the props for the reading, finding herself covered in sand and salt water in the brisk fall dawn combing the beach for seashells, she realized that she loved *Breath of Water*'s story with all her heart. She wanted to direct her own adaptation. When asked about what drew her to the piece, Barnett said, "I love how this play believes in the power of young woman in love." She also felt a deep connection to the story because was raised by a lesbian couple.

Barnett's passion for the story brought her and McKiernan closer together, and soon Barnett was comfortable enough to ask McKiernan if she could direct her own rendition of the play. McKiernan had been flattered and gave permission. It would take Barnett over a year to gain an avenue where she could direct the show. And then COVID-19 threw a wrench in those plans. Refusing to be defeated, Barnett and McKiernan spent the latter half of January 2021 working together on the first step of production: adapting a script meant for the stage into something fit for a screen.

The original script called for Clara and Sasha to hang out in a dorm room that was reproduced on the stage and the grand confession scene was a kiss. But actors would not be able to meet, so the script was changed: Clara and Sasha hung out for hours at a time over video chat. Video chat was chosen as the method of character interaction as Barnett was aiming for "intimacy over distance." The set would be the actors' own rooms and beds. Underwater scenes now included only Clara rather than both her and Sasha. The confession became an abrupt, passionate "I love you" from Clara.

Once the script was ready, auditions began in early February. After two weeks of sifting through auditions of nearly a dozen actors, the cast of two was set. Clara was

played by Emory Oxford campus student Maggie Whittemore, and the role of Sasha was given to second year Ash Aiken.

The first rehearsal was on February 17th, two weeks to the filming days of March 5-7th, and less than a month to showtime, March 12th. Rehearsals consisted of only four players: Aiken, Whittemore, Barnett, and Isabel Shubatt, the stage manager. Barnett praised Shubatt's timezone-management skills, since the entire production crew, save Barnett who was on the east coast, was based in Atlanta. The team hit the ground running on top of classes and other extracurricular commitments. Rehearsals twice a week, each two hours long. Warm-up, read through, a quick chat for a break, back to work. Barnett wanted the actors off-book by March 1st.

In the meantime, a call for a technical team went out from Dooley's Players. A separate call was directed to film students for footage editing. Responses were sparse, but a small tech crew was put together consisting of confused but enthusiastic underclassmen, members of the Dooley's Players executive board, and people who heeded the casting call but did not make the production. Almost everyone in the crew is serving their roles for the first time.

Costume and props were handled by Joe Ambarian, fresh off a costume design class. He proceeded to share that there was no allocated budget; all costumes had to come from what actors already owned. He, Barnett, and Whittemore had sorted through Whittemore's entire wardrobe looking for all the shades of blue. Ambarian recounts a moment during the process. They were searching for the perfect costume for Clara's underwater scenes. Nothing quite felt right until Whittemore lifted up a jean dress. Inspiration struck Barnett immediately, and Ambarian supported the vision. "The dress

looked really..." He struggled to find the right words. "Like really simple and not something that's worn everyday. Out of the ordinary, but still simple. It was perfect for the theatics of the ocean scenes." He thought of the perfect word minutes later. "Quirky!"

Sound design was done by Madison Martin, who was also on the Dooley's Players board and had auditioned for *Breath of Water*, but was not given a role. She had read the script and loved it, and immediately pursued a second chance with the project. Martin had a firm request from McKiernan that all songs selected for the show be performed by queer or women artists. The final product included "Make Me Feel" by Janelle Monáe and "Ocean Eyes" by Billie Eilish. Martin also spent at least ten hours shifting through files of ocean sound effects.

One month of production did not mean one month of rehearsals. It meant two weeks of rehearsals, a week set apart for filming, and a week to put everything together.

Previously established friendships helped keep the group together. Aiken and Barnett had worked on productions for Dooley's Players before COVID. Aiken said in an interview, "Willa is such a delight... it's great to connect with her in a format that is just *not* class. Meeting Isabel and Maggie was very good as well. It was nice to just chill out with them." Rehearsals felt less boggled by Zoom fatigue, and more like friends hanging out.

As filming approached, the next question was how to replicate an oceanic space for Whittemore. She had to use a housemate's room, set up a projector that would project an ocean background, and set up a portable lighting tool that she luckily had from a previous production. The lighting designer was also watching Whittemore's room

transform over a Zoom call. A little brighter. A little to the left. They sent endless updates to Barnett, who was in the middle of a road trip to Portland.

The rehearsal before filming had the actors off-book, and the two-week turnaround time had the actors with their heads above water. Barnett hesitated before deciding that she would allow the actors to have the script pulled up on their screens during filming. She would rather the actors be completely in the scene rather than worrying about memorizing lines, and Barnett had wanted to keep McKiernan's phrasing intact.

The morning of filming day, Barnett had a few minutes to spare for a chat. She showed up for a Zoom interview in a grey sweater and frizzy hair. Her words jumbled in her mouth, her shoulders were jittery, and at one point she lost her train of thought and went, "Bloop, bloop, bloop." Her attention hops from the screen to housemates that keep distracting her every few seconds. She turned back to her webcam for the interview. "Do I know what I'm doing? No. Am I faking it until I make it? *Absolutely.*"

Five hours later, Whittemore appeared on screen and kept fiddling with her wig; her usual hair wasn't long enough for the image of Clara. Then she fiddled with her lighting set-up to make sure there was no horrendous glare. Aiken arrived late and had to prepare their room for filming, such as peeling the labels off the sparkling grape juice needed for a shot and closing the blinds when needed to mimic a darker room. Aiken and Whittemore also changed their Zoom names to be Sasha and Clara respectively.

Once everything was set up, Barnett led a warm-up exercise to shake off the nerves. "Awesome. Brilliant. Beautiful," she said to the actors. Then the in-screen cameras rolled.

The stage manager recorded the Zoom sessions, which would then be sent to the editor. The play was recorded mostly in script order, with the exception of Clara's ocean scenes which were shot back-to-back, and each scene had at least two takes. Barnett would choose one. In one take, Aiken accidentally stuttered a line from drunk Sasha. That take was used in the final product. The entire filming process took three days and over ten hours.

"It was just good to do theater again," said Aiken in an interview the day after filming was completed, and after finally managing to get ten hours of sleep for the first time in over a week. "Even if it's not in the way that I have ever done theater before."

Once all the pieces were in place, post-production was down to Barnett and the first-year prospective film major editor. Everything was stitched together in seven days. The final product was a Prezi, an online presentation tool. The first thing a viewer sees on arrival is a title screen and the name of the first scene. Each scene is embedded as a video into a slide decorated with photographs of the ocean and its waters.

On March 12th, the link to the Prezi went out to 60 people that included the cast's friends, family, and various members of the Emory community. However, the sign-up only had the email addresses of the people that received the link. There was no way of tracking if anyone clicked on the link, let alone watched the entire show.

Barnett's intent in making the performance a Prezi was to give viewers a more active experience, to move the play at their own pace. For some, the audience's pace was close the window.

One student didn't find the show to be particularly interesting. She said, "I had to put the effort to keep pushing to go to the next slide. If it was just playing on its own I

would have seen it, but the fact that I had to also put in the effort to make it keep going on my own?...It emphasized the fact that I could end on this slide. It did make me feel like I was in control of my experience, and I decided to exert that control by not watching any more."

The same student compared *Breath of Water* to another digital Emory production, the Viral Plays from the previous semester, which were ten minute shows that were much better at holding shortened attention spans.

Kimberly Belflower, one of Emory's playwriting fellows, adored *Breath of Water*. "I was blown away by the way it utilized the digital medium. I've been so fatigued by Zoom theater this year, but this felt fresh and specific."

More positive reception rolled in from the staff. Barnett and the technical crew were happy with how the final product came out. Many students was delighted by the casual yet poetic dialogue. In fact, the student that voiced her dislike for *Breath of Water* doubted her own opinion a little because everyone around her kept talking about how good it was. In the end, the scope of the true audience and the divide in the play's reception remains unknown.

But that was less important to Barnett. "I am very much process over product. What I love is discovering the piece with everyone." She had mentioned at the first rehearsal that she had no idea how many people would see it, and that she didn't mind the show not reaching a wide audience. No matter how little they are, their production is still contributing to the larger literature of queer love stories in theater.

The fact still stands that this small team of students managed to produce an entire play digitally in a month with virtually no serious hiccups. The work behind *Breath*

of Water shows that theater and passion is resilient enough to withstand the unpredictable storm surges of a pandemic.