

RESEARCH JOURNAL

Magellan Apprentice Recipient: “*Little Fishmaid*: From Pen to Performance”

Carrie Chalfant

2016

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It’s spring break! Well, almost a break. Right now, I’m working on a show I will be directing this June at the Columbia Children’s Theatre (CCT), a children’s parody called *Little Fishmaid*. (Bet you can’t guess what that’s a parody of, can you?) This is a labor of love, though. I’ve never directed / produced / set designed / costume designed / hired people to work for me before, so I am more than happy to spend the time it takes to set things up as clearly as possible, way ahead of time. The thing I am prepping for now is auditions on April 2nd, my first tech meeting (which will happen on auditions day), and design concepts to bring to the table to see what I can borrow from CCT before I make or buy anything myself on my shoestring budget.

Luckily, I’ve got really good people to help me.

I will be working under a research mentor, Cathy Brookshire, a professor at the University of South Carolina, to complete this Magellan Apprentice research project. Cathy has taught both of my sisters Shakespeare, and she trained at the Globe Theatre at one point in her career. She is incredibly professional in her work style, and I am very excited to be working with her.

Since I was 16, I have been acting at the Columbia Children’s Theatre, both professionally and with the youth program. Because of my time there, I asked Jerry Stevenson, the Artistic Director, and Jim Litzinger, the Technical Director, to help me out. I had been trying to secure a space at a different location for a long time so I could spend time turning the script into an adult script (ie, adult jokes, not worrying about a clean show for children). Besides garnering more hours for my research, which I later calculated to be unnecessary, I was no longer attached enough to this dramaturgical idea once I found out that CCT was available. (And, then I picked it up again: this fall, I will be taking an independent study course to turn *Fishmaid* into an adult script, so I can further avoid Disney copyright if I ever want to produce *Fishmaid* again.) Besides, the other location never wrote me back, even after multiple emails and an in-person visit; tenacious though I am, I eventually got the hint. I was relieved in the end to be back to my high school home away from home, even though my show will take place the weekend after another show closes, always a tricky situation; CCT will likely have most of what I need, and I know how things work there. Plus, no other place in town is as affordable and well-known for their children’s shows.

Sallie Sargent, the president of our USC Gamma Tau chapter of the theatre honor society Alpha Psi Omega, has graciously agreed to stage manage! I am so glad to have her on board, she assistant stage managed my first show at USC, and she knows her stuff. Besides, she helped with a charity benefit with our chapter at CCT, through the CCT S.T.A.R. Program, a program that my family founded to put on arts showcases for charity. So, she is familiar with CCT now, too.

And, my family is also on board. One of my sisters is auditioning, the other will be there for moral support, my mom will be helping with auditions, and my dad has already discussed potentially building set pieces with me (he is a chiropractor by education, and a house-flipper by self-education. Long story short, he flips houses now).

As a brief side note that is somewhat related, this project is a coming-full-circle kind of thing. I worked with both Jim and Cathy this past summer writing grants for the Columbia Children's Theatre. While we weren't able to hook anything, I feel strongly my experiences there helped me better understand how to win this \$1000 Magellan Grant, and another grant whose story I won't go into at this juncture. I am glad to be able to hopefully give back to CCT with this show. The tickets are \$10, and \$5 of that goes to CCT. \$2 goes to me, to help offset what I project to be very limited costs. \$3 goes to Curing Kids Cancer, a charity my family has worked with a good bit over the past couple of years. So, a lot of parts of my life are coming together with this one show. I hope I can make it count.

How did all of this start? I had Jerry read over the show in about August. I had worked on it from about December 2014 to August 2015, on and off between activities. One of my good friends at college, Ryan Stevens, was doing great things with writing and directing (he wrote and directed my first play at USC), and I wanted to follow his example, if in a slightly different direction, so had decided I had to write a play before the end of college, and I did. Jerry gave me such great advice after he looked at it! Then, right before my junior year started in August, I began planning my entire summer 2016. (Because I am a nutjob.) I wanted to research and travel. Then I separated the two. Now, I was looking into research grants at USC. At a leadership retreat for becoming VP of Social Affairs on the Capstone Student Programming Council, also in August, I took the opportunity to ask the Capstone principal, Dr. Hickey, which grant I should go for on a car ride home from the retreat. He suggested the Magellan Apprentice grant because it was only for Capstone students, and I would have a good chance at it. I found Cathy, applied, and in December found out I got the grant. I was SO excited. I was going to do this whole thing for free, and now instead I was going to have salary.

Once we found out we had the grant, Cathy suggested I do a read-through. I agreed, and started writing USC theatre friends. Ryan, Abi McNeely, William Quant, Haley Sprinkle, Kira

Neighbors, and Megh Ahire all said they'd be part. I love all of these people. My mom, gracious and generous as she is, paid for refreshments for everyone. Realizing I had remembered the binders with scripts and a pad for notes, I had forgotten a person to read stage directions. My sister Kate did so, cold! I was impressed with her. While I had planned on a super-small crowd, about 25 people beyond readers came, which was actually quite nice. I had forgotten to invite all the people that I should have, and that was my regret from that event. However, the read went wonderfully! I got some good constructive criticism from Cathy the day after that will make up most of my last children's edit of the show, but most of the people who stayed for a talk-back ended up talking a lot more about the merits. It was such a boost of confidence, and it was great to hear people laugh with it. I am really glad I took Cathy's advice on this.

So, here I go. Done with audition prep and the first entry of my research log, my next tasks will be to design the whole show, come up with props and set lists, and edit the show a final time. All with my sister's birthday this week, prepping for an abroad trip deadline, writing up the design of an independent study course for this fall, and trying to start and finish a term paper before my semester reaches a whole other level of crazy. Calling upon the powers of Wonder Woman, I face these challenges, this spring break. I just hope my busy nutjob self gets rug burns on this magic carpet ride I insisted on taking.

May 14, 2016

Well, it has been a while, and a lot has happened! I suppose I will start with auditions, and how those went; then, I will talk about callbacks, the final edit, the first read-through, the first rehearsal, and a bit about sound design.

Auditions were Saturday, April 2nd. They were well thought-out, and a little snaggy the day of, possibly due to my own nerves. I printed audition sheets, created two separate 'sides' packets for auditioners to use, and came up with a system to explain to the people who would be helping me (in this case, my mom, a family friend, and my awesome stage-manager, Sallie). Being a stage-manager three times in the past year, and having gone through the auditions process each time as an organizer, was hugely helpful to me during auditions.

Once auditions started, I brought people in in groups of four, and planned to do, in this order:

- A brief introduction of everyone
- A brief warm-up game
- Monologues for each actor
- Followed by two scenes, with two to three people in each scene

That was the plan. However, it differed each time, with mixed and (truthfully mild) consequences. I had my sister Hannah with me for moral support, which was good; with one group, I assumed after the monologues that we were done. Hannah pointed out to me that we were not done. The first of two scenes started and finished. I assumed we were done. Hannah pointed out we still weren't done. I promised I would be this forgetful all the time to the very gracious auditioners. I briefly considered daring all those who were not prepared for this crazy train to leave right then, but I abstained. The second of the scenes ended. I double-checked with my 14 year-old sister to make sure we were done. (We were done.) Good gravy. Breathe in, breathe out, yup, please bring in the next group. Also, I had the brilliant idea of stopping two people in the middle of a scene without forewarning that I might do this, to give them accents, then proceeded to accidentally interrupt about ten times while they tried to ask questions. Other than those two brief moments, things went well. I was very happy with who came out, but with only 15 auditioners, that night I asked a few people if they would be considered for parts, even if they couldn't audition.

Callbacks the following day were a better story. I was less nervous but just as prepared. I called back everyone, and most people for multiple parts. I printed four sides, and made sure that everyone got to read for each part they were called back for. People killed it! I was so impressed. People made really good choices, and I was really pleased.

Then, came the waiting game. For the auditioners, and for me. That night, after I texted him offering the part of Rick, Ryan was definitely in my cast, and that was a great feeling; he did a great job with it in the read-through, which I counted as his audition, and I knew he would be perfect for it. Then, there were two people who I wanted to cast, but they were waiting on a local and professional opportunity to perform, and the director of the show took about two weeks extra to cast the show than he had said. By about the 19th, though, I had found out both actors were cast in the other show, and I was able to cast my own. Finals were about to start for me and most of my cast, and it was a huge relief to have everyone cast and ready. One actor dropped out shortly after being cast because they realized how often rehearsals were. Because I had not worked with them before and their leaving the production would mean that I would be working with a full cast of already good friends, it was not a serious blow. Below is my final cast list. Can I just say, after having just a few rehearsals with them, how much I already love them?

Noell Staton	Pedacurist / Squire / Zanni
Kelly Helms	Nursula
Garrett Helms	Bastiano
Ryan Stevens	Rick Prince

Jon Whit McClinton	Dither-Dather
Beth DeHart	Frances / Mindy
Freddie Powers	Scattle / Accompaniment
Kate Chalfant	Arielle
William Quant	Chef / Zanni
Chauntel Bland	Neptune

My final edit of the script was completed about May 7th. I fixed a couple of jokes, and added a scene so that a couple of characters could be a little more fleshed out.

Now, let's jump ahead to May 9th, which was the first read-through. I came up with a list of potentially musical moments in the script to talk about with my accompanist, which we did before the read-through. We also had a harpist there, but due to personal reasons, she has since dropped out. Luckily, my accompanist Freddie can play the guitar, ukulele and a bunch of smaller instruments, too; so grateful to have him on board for a few musical moments in the show. The read-through was awesome! It was great to hear everything out loud, and people made me giggle. I giggle a lot at my own jokes, and am pretty shameless in my mission to provide bad puns for my fellow men. So, I had a good time.

The first rehearsal went amazingly well?? I put question marks because I had not known what to expect from myself. I knew what I wanted to see, and I know my script inside and out. However, plenty of doubts about my own ability to do something I'd never directly done before swam through my head. Then, I had my Scattle and Bastiano in rehearsal and it went efficiently and extremely well, I think. I had lots of ideas and they went with them, and gave me lots of energy and good choices to work with. Symbiosis, I say. The next section of rehearsal, and the next day in rehearsal also went well! Wow! Either I am experiencing beginner's luck or the calm before the storm, and I am choosing optimism today.

Before I go, let me mention a few things about how sound design has been going. I have Freddie, and he is awesome, but certain sound effects (like splashes and thunder) are hard to effectively do on a guitar. So, on Sallie's advice, I looked at FreeSound.org, which has all kinds of stuff for free. I've downloaded quite a bit, from cowbells to thunder to street music, and I look forward to playing with songs, too. I have a decent music collection, and I have pulled some things from that. The great thing about working with CCT is that I don't have to pay my own ASCAP fees to use pieces of copywritten music, and that is helpful. So, I guess I am dabbling in sound design now. I feel fancy.

Tomorrow is another rehearsal. I guess only time will tell how I do, but I have faith! Things are looking good right now. All I have besides *Fishmaid* right now is planning a month-long trip to France, and stage-managing *The Addams Family*, which is already in its second weekend of shows. I am getting lots of rest and actually reading for fun again. I can really focus on this show, and that is awesome. Excited. About. Life.

June 13, 2016

We are less than two weeks away from the show!! I keep telling everyone who asks about it, I have been really blessed with the generosity of who is involved in this show, and I am having so much fun. My stage manager Sallie has been going above and beyond the basics of being a stage manager, from sound engineering to figuring out lighting gobbos for me. William Woody, a friend of mine from CCT, agreed to do the program and promotional art for the show for free, and it looks fantastic! Alex Herstik, president of Toast Improv at USC (which I'm in) and a photographer, took some publicity shots for us for free! (See below for pics.) Beth agreed to paint the five signs for the montage in Scene Eight, Noell let us use her homemade puppets, and my improv-ing cast members are keeping things fresh and funny in rehearsals. Jim has been very helpful with everything from web stuff to tickets to ideas about props to reinforcing stage windows. Jerry has allowed us to alter costumes and use all kinds of props. My mom is paying for professionals to film the show for us. And, I keep finding things that would be good props, including cast-off remnants from a yard sale.

However, getting a little concerned about tech week starting tomorrow, especially because at this point, quite a few props just aren't ready yet, or have never been used yet; being a props master along with everything else has been maybe the most complicated thing. I have a couple more signs to paint, scuba gear to make, leg warmers to figure out, and a couple of complicated prop tricks to put together. I also haven't figured out completely who will be doing what scene changes. And, I am nervous that CCT will need the stage again this week to work with the about 160 kids that are cast in *Shrek, Jr.* So, the good news is, a lot of all of those things are within my control. I just need to focus on getting things done these next few days, and taking deep breaths during tech.

Our tech week will consist of four days this week, an optional rehearsal at my house on Friday to throw around some ideas for a for-adults version of *Fishmaid*, two days off, then three more days of tech before we open Thursday June 23rd. (I forgot to say we will have five performances, with two on Saturday, and the 7pm Saturday performance being just \$5, and with all ticket profits going to Curing Kids Cancer.) It is a weird show schedule, but should hopefully prove effective.

In terms of how the acting has gone so far, people have done a lot of improv and new choices, and I have given them / they have found places to help create lines, which has worked well. Now we will start solidifying, but we are in a better place than we were before, now that we have new lines that to me, really show how the actors are beginning to own the show, which is wonderful. They have given me a really amazing amount of energy each rehearsal, which is so important for getting things done. And they are so multi-talented. I now have drum, guitar, puppetry, and a couple of small stunts in the show. I did a little choreography, too, so the first 40 seconds of the show should be pretty exciting. It was also fun to choreograph the chase scene.

I've done the sound design for the show, and Sallie will be putting it into a cue program along with the light cues. CCT has new light and sound boards, which is exciting. The sound I've chosen is a mix of Classical, 50s Pop, and a little Latin. I also found a bunch of sound cues on freesound.org, as mentioned. I've also nearly finished making the 3' ocean drop for the stage, and I am going to make the gloves for Bastiano, and hopefully feet for Scattle. Publicity is something that Jim and I have mainly worked on; luckily, he does this for shows all the time, so he knows who to send things to. I've given him some promotional material, listed below. Creating the Facebook event was fun.

That's my report for now! Things are going well. Here I come, tech week.

July 18, August 1 and 16, 2016

WHAAT? Where did the month go? We're done! The show wrapped on Sunday, June 26th, and I am so, so proud of my people.

I will start with tech week props! It was a little down to the wire to try and finish them during our extended tech. Beth DeHart is my knight in shining armor for helping me paint and / or fix six signs for the show!! I painted signs for the Sea-VS, Wait-a-Minute Clinic, and Fishmaid vs. Human Scoreboard, and I almost finished the Big Bubbles and We're Proud Royal Karaoke Party before Beth gave it a much-needed makeover. She is quite possibly the most talented crafter I know. I made ear fins for Dither-Dather by sewing them to a propellor beanie. Ms. Donna made me beautiful hand fins for Dither, Frances, and the Zannis. I made bird feet for Scattle by cutting up some craft foam that we re-taped to his shoes each night. Thanks to the Harrington family donating cloth, the 23-foot ocean I made was free. The PVC poles with velcro that Jim made for me stuck to the ocean because of the type of cloth, which was awesome and saved a step!

Also, I bought a dolphin, then realized I hadn't paid much attention for about the two seconds it took to click 'order this thing' so it was too small. I bought another one that was pretty tatted up with warning labels about how not to put your life into its fins. I thought that was hilarious, so I didn't try to cover it. We did a bit where Arielle summons a dolphin, so it was pretty funny to me to see it, handles and warning labels and all, bobbing on a fake sea and being propelled by human hands. We taped a box with a seashell in it to its nose every night.

Making the Scuba Gear during tech week was an interesting and involved process. When you're too cheap to buy scuba costumes from Amazon, you get creative. I bought two pool noodles from Walmart, balloons from Dollar General, and I borrowed a used newspaper. My mom gave me tips on paper mache (my tip: don't use corn starch and hot water. Useless. Mom was right with the use of flour). With the aid of a Wiki-How article, I paper-mached a balloon, let it dry, cut off the bottom and facial area, cut pieces off of the pool noodles and glued some of them around the outside like knobs and one on the inside so it would fit better, cut the remaining pieces of the pool noodles in half and glued / rubber-banded them together to make a tank, made a cord to attach the helmet and tank out of braided bulky yarn then scrapped it, spray-painted the whole thing gold, enjoyed a day of looking like Midas with my now-golden fingers, realized the spray paint was truly magical and I was actually the reincarnated Midas, accidentally touched the city's water supply and knocked off a couple of thirsty squirrels in the process, fixed it by bathing in the river Pactolus, sent praline bouquets to the families of the fallen, and asked Freddie to bring a belt so he could strap on the tank. Later, trying to get the helmet to stay on Freddie's head was another issue, but the dude is graceful, so after a little bit of fiddling with a headband and the pool noodle chunk in the helmet, we were pretty gucci. Total price? About \$3. As opposed to \$25 at least for a just the helmet on Amazon.

Cathy was really helpful; she came to a run during tech week even though she was sick! Her advice was important to helping me make the tough decision to cut three pieces of different scenes, and changing the layout completely of Scene 7 to make it faster. My cast and crew had such a good attitude about doing scene changes over and over, and changing them after cuts and with new challenges from new scenic pieces. We got the show from 1:33 to 1:18 within one run, and luckily managed to avoid the intermission we would have had to take with any time over 1:20. Thank goodness! I really dislike intermissions. I find them to be as awkward as all get-out, especially when the bathroom is far away.

So, yes. Tech week went very well. All of the new props that were being finished, set pieces were coming in to rehearsals, sound cues were coming in at show levels, and lights were being added. Sallie is my saving grace for simultaneously handling sound cues and light cues with willingness, grace and style. Also, the actors were really settling into their characters. Costumes always help with character solidification, in my opinion. Jerry did a great job pulling together

pieces. Thank goodness everything fit nearly everyone, first try! (Except Kelly. Kelly is so teeny tiny, and the costume was not. Jerry fixed it quickly.) It was so convenient that CCT has done this show before. I was concerned about the actors' rhythm during tech week at first, because we would be rehearsing Monday to Thursday, taking a break, coming back Monday to Wednesday the next week, then opening on a Thursday. However, everything went very smoothly. Every person was really professional, especially when we needed to reblock or add props late in the process. I had so much fun watching it be pulled together. Tech week was like a really good costume that was in pieces one day, and wear-ready the next, exactly as tech should be.

Opening night, on the other hand, was stressful. I felt like I was fighting back a panic attack. Hannah, my sister and also one of my two crew members, had gotten sick a couple of times on the afternoon of opening. I was already so concerned about how the audience was going to react, and was looking forward to the show being out of my hands. However, I was by far the most qualified person to fill in without preparation, so I got ready to crew. I am not usually nervous needing to improvise and do things on the spot, but with a relatively intricate set of tasks to do, I was unreasonably sure that I would ruin my own show, for myself and for everyone else who had worked so hard the past month to get this show ready. You know those nightmares that you have where you are supposed to perform but don't know what you're doing, except in this one, it is the opening night of your playwriting and directorial debut, so you're essentially Abraham being handed the knife that could kill your Isaccian brainchild? Though it was nerves telling me this, this problem felt like a nightmare. Plus, if it went badly, two of my four biggest supporters (Hannah, and my dad to take care of her), wouldn't be there to give me a hug and a white lie after.

Sallie and Sydney were my knights in shining armor, though. Sallie assured me that this was just about always the way that directors and writers felt on opening, which made me feel less like a crazy person. Sydney was incredibly calm and knowledgeable about everything that needed to be done. Though she could see I was worried, she efficiently and simply went through the whole show with me verbally beforehand, and answered all of my questions. As the show went on, she was able to remind me exactly what I was to do next. I've known her since she was very young, and was so impressed at how grown-up and compassionate she has become. Also, there were still a few technical elements that needed tweaking, so Jim and Sallie handled a lot of that for me. I have had such good people working with me.

The house for opening was small and quiet, but appreciative. I didn't know very many of the audience members, because most of my people were going to come the next day. However, I was so, so proud of my cast for keeping the energy up, having a fun time, and giving an excellent performance. Everything went just swimmingly (have I made this ocean pun yet?).

The rest of the shows went well, too! I could not believe how smoothly everything went. I knew so many people in the audience on Friday, including my grandma! There were more people that day. It felt a lot more like an opening show, especially since I was able to watch the show (Hannah is a trooper and the bomb-diggity, even though she was tired!). Saturday morning's crowd was excellent; very enthusiastic, and actually pretty full. The \$5 Saturday night show solely for Curing Kids Cancer was just about full! Tons of people came. In the end, we raised over \$500 for Curing Kids Cancer, which feels amazing.

Of course, the whole point of live theatre is the happy risk of 'goof' moments, and the fact that each showing is new in some way. My favorite goof was definitely Jon getting his propellor beanie stuck in the bead curtain! Especially in comedic shows, those kinds of things make you giggle the most, and are often the most memorable things about a show (if only I'd remembered this on opening when I was so worried about myself goofing, right?). He was stuck for a minute, but was able to pinch off the strand that caught him and carry on as usual. I loved it.

So, now the big scary question. The cost! (Insert scary music crescendo of choice.) I managed to get away with the following basic costs:

BASIC COSTS:

\$18 Program

\$17 Shipping for Accidentally Tiny Dolphin, then a Better Dolphin

\$20 wax bottles for the fake retainer (scrapped... we later got a mouth guard), balloons, disposable shot glasses, nail clippers, hand sanitizer, cheese grater for use as foot file, confetti

\$25 Comforter for Arielle's Bed from Dollar General

\$35 Craft Supplies: signage (chalkboard paint, posterboard, foam, felt) and a couple of costume pieces (noodles, shirt) from Walmart and Hobby Lobby

\$60 Scripts and Folders

Total: About \$175

Yay!! Love it. I wear my cheapskate badge proudly. Jim and Jerry's full aid with costumes, set pieces, and individuals' labor on the set pieces was really what made this happen with the budget, and for that I am so grateful! With not a whole lot at risk, this project was a lot more comfortable for me to take on. By the end of the show, my 30% cut of the ticket sales covered my costs, so I was able to keep my Magellan money (and use some of it on gifts :)). People were so super generous with me, from their time, to their resources, to emotional support, and I am incredibly grateful for that, and for USC's support to boot. This project has shown me that the arts connect people in a beautiful myriad of ways. I love theatre more than ever! And I'm so happy to have had *Little Fishmaid* in be part of my world (last pun, promise).

PUBLICITY MISC.

Carrie Chalfant is a rising senior at the University of South Carolina, studying English and Theatre. She is also the director, playwright, and lead designer for the new parody, "Little Fishmaid," a project that was funded by one of USC's Capstone Scholars Program's Magellan Apprentice Grants for research and creative projects, and further supported by the generosity of Columbia Children's Theatre's charitable and educational initiatives. Carrie says, "It's been a dream putting this together, and a satisfying way to combine a lot what I've learned from formally studying theatre. Watching these actors do what they do best, I don't think I've ever had so much fun in my life. If you want to see a show that will shamelessly strive to make you giggle, whether you're eight or eighty, this show is for you."

"I'm especially excited to be able to support an organization like Curing Kids Cancer. CKC does so much to help pediatric cancer research, and to improve the quality of life for kids who have gone through so much. I feel like theatre is a way for everyone to have a little catharsis for their troubles, and when I was thinking through a core concept and goals for "Little Fishmaid," and then about a charity to support, CKC was a natural choice."

Come see "Little Fishmaid," a brand-new, original family show and a parody of pretentious puns, rambunctious rigamarole, and anthropological aspirations! Join USC Magellan Apprentice Grant recipient, Columbia Children's Theatre's Carrie Chalfant, in taking a new show from pen to performance.

In this spoof on a famous tale, Arielle goes on a journey above the waves to study humans and become an anthropologist. Pretending she has a human boyfriend, Rick Prince, to get around babysitter Bastiano, she visits the local Sea-VS Nurse Practitioner Nusula to get her legs. Catering especially to kids aged 8 to 88, this show features everything from puppetry to live guitar to scuba-diving birds.

Tickets are \$10, with 20% of all ticket sales will be going towards Curing Kids Cancer. The 7pm Saturday show will have \$5 tickets, with all ticket profits going toward Curing Kids Cancer. See www.columbiachildrenstheatre.com to purchase.

Show Times:

Thursday June 23rd, 7pm

Friday June 24th, 7pm

Saturday June 25th, 2pm and 7pm

Sunday June 26th, 3pm