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Performance: An Investigation of the Representation and Perception of Gender on
Stage

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

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students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

When I first arrived at The College at Brockport as a freshman I knew what I wanted out of life. I wanted to study theatre and become an actor. At the time it was that simple, but during my time here, through education and discovery, I have learned that there is much more in this world that interests and intrigues me, and that I can no longer be content focusing solely on one of my passions. That is why, when deciding what I wanted to focus on for my thesis, I knew I had to incorporate both my major in Theatre and minor in Women and Gender Studies into my project.

During my time studying Women and Gender Studies one of the things I have found most important is not only how the genders are treated differently within society, but also how gender itself is constructed and perceived. I learned in my classes that gender is a performance, and that we act in whatever way we do because this is how we are taught a person of our gender should act. When I put on makeup and a bra and dress in the morning, it is because that is how I chose to perform my gender, just as someone who chooses to wear a football jersey and play soccer is performing their gender. This newfound understanding of the performative nature of gender prompted me to begin to question how gender was performed and perceived when presented on stage.

Description of Project

In order to examine not only how actors portray gender on stage, but also how playwrights convey and how audiences perceive gender, I chose to look at what would happen if gender roles were switched around. To do this I took scenes from

seven iconic plays, spanning in time from the 1600s to the 2000s, and inverted the genders of all the characters, both those seen on stage and those mentioned by the characters. I switched all the gender pronouns and chose costuming that would signify to the audience that I was not trying to have women play male characters, but rather that the characters themselves had been changed. Other than pronouns and a few other gendered words I left all the dialogue as it was. I chose specifically to maintain a relative gender binary within my pieces for the simple reason that none of the authors I chose to work with had included non-binary characters within their works. This allowed me to better focus on the specific portrayals of men and women at the time that the pieces were written.

Since one of my main goals within my project was to see how a change in gender norms on stage would affect the audience I decided that, in addition to presenting a production and hoping that the questions I wished to pose would be conveyed effectively, I wanted to hold a talkback after the show. The talkback would provide an opportunity to create a dialogue between the actors and the audience. To help facilitate this I enlisted the help of Dr. Barbara LeSavoy, one of my Women and Gender Studies professors. She had been the professor who had inspired me to join the Women and Gender Studies Department and she was happy to offer her expertise. In this way I was able to delve deeper into the topic and not only ask my audience and actors to think about the questions I was attempting to pose, but also engage them in a discussion as to the effects of my project on them, not only as audience members, but as people who live and navigate in this society that is so obsessed with gender.

Why I Chose this Project

This project sought to investigate an area of my field that, while not often talked about, is nonetheless very important. Our society, as much as we might wish to pretend otherwise, is not one of equality. Women are still paid less than men, racist slurs are still painted on buildings, and an appalling number of people still do not have access to basic necessities. In my work at The College at Brockport and in my life as well, I have chosen to focus more of my studies on the injustices suffered by women in our culture. As a woman I feel these impacts daily. I know when I walk out the door in the morning I am going to be judged for what I'm wearing. When I walk home from classes in the evening I see every person walking towards me as a potential threat. And I know that were I ever to be raped society would seek to find not the guilt of my rapist, but rather in what way I was 'asking for it'.

Through theatre we seek truth. We seek to imitate life, but more than that we seek to change it. I truly believe that theatre can be used as a force of change, if we use it in the right way. Conversely, however, theatre can also be used, while most often unintentionally, to reinforce harmful social beliefs and norms. This power that the theatre holds is why it is so important for us as artists to examine the content we wish to present to our audiences. In order to reveal the performative gender norms that are portrayed in many of our most loved plays I have posed a simple enough question. Why is something said or done by one gender suddenly wrong or strange when attributed to someone of a different gender? Through this

inversion my performance can add to a very important, if still too quiet, conversation about reinforcing gender norms on stage. It is imperative that this dialogue be had and my contribution seeks to further the idea that since the theatre holds great power we must examine how that power be used.

However, in my project concept I wanted to do more than just concentrate on the current situation of theatre and gender. I also wanted to look at how the representation of gender has changed on stage over time. Has it changed for better or for worse? Is it even possible to quantify so abstract a concept in such a way? A better question, perhaps, is, has our perception of these representations changed? When we, as a modern audience, look at older plays do we dismiss the potentially problematic aspects as products of the time, or do we still see some underlying, nagging truth? When we watch *Tartuffe* do we laugh at the situation, or do we understand that sexual assault is something that still happens to a terrifyingly large number of people? When we watch *A Doll House* do we shrug and say 'that wouldn't happen today', or do we understand that women in our society are still expected, much more so than men, to stay with and take care of their children, despite the harmful situations this expectation could potentially put them in?

How to reconcile problematic texts is a very important but also a very difficult question. We should not seek to get rid of them. The idea of getting rid of so much cultural and historical value is unthinkable. And yet we, as artists and as educated members of this society, must begin to ponder how to present problematic plays to a modern audience that still lives in a rape culture and a patriarchy. We must find ways to present these texts without subconsciously or even blatantly

reinforcing the ideals presented by the texts. To be clear, my project neither sought to nor succeeded in answering these very difficult questions, however, since it is my belief that the first step in answering a question is to pose it, I chose to use this project, and specifically my play selection choices, to help bring these and other questions to the front of people's minds.

The Play

In my production I chose to bring together seven scenes from iconic plays written between the mid 1600s and the early 2000s. All of the plays I selected were written by men. While this may seem like a conscious decision on my part it was actually something I only noted after the fact. I cannot say, however, that this surprised me too much. Rather than any specific statement I was trying to make, I think this speaks more directly to how little know, read, or acknowledged women playwrights are. While not all of the authors I ultimately selected were from the United States, they were all from western countries, as I had decided to focus exclusively on western culture for this project. In addition to the scene selections I also included two songs from musicals and accompanied them with monologues from two of Shakespeare's most well-known plays.

One of the things I was most lucky with during the entirety of my endeavor was the people I was able to work with. I had decided to keep my cast small and equal, in terms of gender, at least. The cast consisted of Matthew DeLuca, another graduating Theatre major, Adam Urbanic, a theatre and computer science major,

Shannon Toot, an alumni from the Brockport Theatre program, and myself. I quickly realized that I would also need a stage manager, and as such I enlisted the help of Grace Judge, a freshman who was, at the time, an anthropology major. While I did have some troubles finding a director, ultimately the show was co-directed by Cody Kaminska and myself. Directing was one of the newer and more challenging aspects of this project for me, but ultimately I found that the direct control I had over each scene really enabled me to shape both the individual scenes and the production as a whole.

Since costuming is something I have much more experience in than directing I was also the costume designer for this show. I had a separate lighting and sound designer, Nicky Sudyn, but I wanted to be in charge of the costumes myself. When I started making decisions about how to costume my actors I knew that, no matter how much I would have liked to, I would not be able to costume each scene according to time period. I decided instead to go with relatively plain, colored clothing for my actors. I also made the choice to put the women in dresses and heels to help reinforce the idea that I was not asking women to play 'masculine' characters or the men to play 'effeminate' characters. I didn't want the audience to be confused, thinking that the girls were supposed to be playing guys, or the guys girls. By making the women and men visually different I also highlighted the performative and visual nature of gender.

The Scenes

The show opened and closed with two songs, accompanied by a monologue. The opening musical number was from the 2010 musical rendition of *Matilda*. The song was 'When I Grow Up', and revolved around, as the title suggests, how children think they will perceive the world when they grow up. This song was accompanied by the opening monologue from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, beginning "O, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention". The closing song was taken from the musical *Side Show*, which premiered in 1997. The song, 'Say Goodbye to the Freak Show', centered around the idea of taking the next steps in the characters' journeys now that they have 'outgrown the sets of the side show'. The monologue I chose to accompany this piece was Puck's closing monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With these I hoped to create a framework for the show that would help structure my narrative thread.

The songs and monologues were clearly set apart from the rest of the show. The songs were not gender swapped, and while the monologues technically were, since they were written for male actors and I performed both of them, because they were not scenes and there was arguably little character interaction the switching of the gender roles was not the main focus. Instead, using the monologues, I wanted to reinforce the idea that what the audience was about to see was a performance and that gender, in and of itself, is also inherently a performance. The opening monologue reinforced this idea and also helped to illustrate that, in some way, two people were about to serve to represent an entire gender. One of the lines I chose to capitalize most on during this monologue in order to further this idea was "O pardon, since a crooked figure may attest in little place a million". Through blocking

I also chose to have the “two mighty monarchies”, which in the original text would have been France and England, speak rather to the two genders I would be examining through the rest of the play. This was strengthened by the idea that there was a “perilous”, yet “narrow” ocean keeping the two apart. The closing monologue reinforced the idea of a performance, but also illustrated that what the audience had just seen on stage was not necessarily a good example of the way things should be, but rather that we were trying to make the audience think and question, more so than they perhaps had before.

The songs were incorporated in order to help focus on how we as people in this society, and specifically how I as a student at Brockport, come to understand both gender and how our society dictates, teaches, and controls gender. While gender is something we learn as children it is not until we grow up that we come to realize the potential problems with the way gender is performed and policed in our society. And yet, much as we may still feel like children, it is important for the younger generations to step up and not ignore the problems we face. This idea was highlighted by the first song, which ended with a character, who was much more of an adult than anyone else on stage, singing “when I grow up I will be strong enough to fight the creatures that you have to fight beneath the bed each night to be a grown up”. This sense of responsibility and awareness that is acquired as people grow up, often times during their college years, was a narrative arc I wanted to focus on. While the closing song in some ways served as the final goodbye for me as a member of the SUNY Brockport theatre community, it also revealed the potential problems that can occur in our society for those that do gender “wrong”, just as

every character in the scenes in my production inevitably would, at one time or another. In not performing gender correctly these people faced the possibility of being labeled 'freaks' by our society. This idea, as well as the responsibility to step out into the world and change it for the better once a person has gained the education with which they can see the flaws, were the narratives and the arcs that I was hoping to create with the inclusion of the two songs and monologues.

The first gender swapped scene in my production was from Moliere's *Tartuffe*, which was published in 1664. It is important to note that from here on I will be using the genders and the names used during the show for each of the characters I will discuss. Hopefully this will help to alleviate some of the confusion we suffered daily when discussing characters and actors in rehearsals. For my *Tartuffe* selection I chose the scene in which Elmer hides his wife under the table, then attempts to seduce Tartuffe in order to get his wife to see Tartuffe's true nature. This scene was interesting because the audience was hit with the power dynamics switch that inevitably accompanied the switching of genders right off the bat. The idea that it is a woman who has so much forceful control over a sexual situation and it is the man who is not only helpless but also unwilling was a blatant inversion of power. *Tartuffe* is undeniably a comedy, and while this scene may still have been funny at times, I think it was a much more uncomfortable sort of funny. By putting a man in a situation of experiencing sexual assault, a topic which is not remotely funny, this scene asked the question why is it acceptable to laugh if it is the woman being sexually assaulted? Even if the play is a comedy there should be

something inherently wrong with laughing at a situation like that, no matter what the gender of the victim.

In rehearsals one of the things I, as the actor playing Tartuffe, and Matt DeLuca, the actor playing Elmer, found particularly difficult was finding the switch in power. Throughout rehearsals Matt had trouble giving up his power, especially in a situation as sexual as the one the scene called for. I also, arguably, had trouble taking that power, which led us to discover a much broader problem we had not fully considered. In order to not automatically let the man take power in a scene we, as actors and directors, had to fight both our subconscious and the audiences'. We had to do everything in our power to make it blatantly clear that, in a scene like *Tartuffe*, it was now the woman who had control. Once we framed the scene as a sexual assault scene I was better able to understand that power dynamic and ultimately both Matt and I were able to find the power dynamic inversion the scene so desperately called for.

She Stoops to Conquer, by Oliver Goldsmith, was the next selection. Written in 1773, the scene I ultimately decided on focused on the character of Chris Hardcastle, who pretends to be a barman in order to better get to know Ms. Marlow, the woman his mother wants him to marry. This scene served in many ways to help us look at the conventions of gender and class in the 1700s. Through it we also examined the idea of promiscuity and question of who is allowed to do what with whom? In the scene Ms. Marlow is known for being 'a favorite among the gentlemen', and yet she can only converse easily with lower class men. While Chris likes the fact that Ms. Marlow can speak easily with men and is unsure of his

marrying her until he sees how passionate she can be, when Chris's mother finds Ms. Marlow taking Chris's hand she reprimands him sternly for his promiscuity. In this way the unequal standards between men and women that were held by society at this time were revealed.

While rehearsing this scene the idea of this switch was actually something the actors struggled to comprehend. It took us a while to come to the understanding that Chris is not trying to 'save' Ms. Marlow from having been with so many lower class men, a thing which, switching back to the original genders for a moment, would have been looked on as acceptable for men in the 1700s. The scene actually shows that Chris looks for that passion in Ms. Marlow, and is not content until he sees it. For Chris, Ms. Marlow does not have to be saved because, while it is unacceptable for him to even take a woman's hand, society at the time dictates that someone like Ms. (or rather Mr.) Marlow and that freedom. Once the cast of this scene was able to come to a better understanding both of the conventions of gender and of class during this time period the scene took better shape and the gender inversion became much more striking.

A Doll House was written by Henrik Ibsen in 1879. This was by far the longest scene, and what I considered to be the turning point of the show. I chose to start this scene right after Helen has received and read Krogstad's letter about Norman's forged signature and go all the way to the end of the play, when Norman ultimately leaves his wife. Since *A Doll House* is known as the first feminist piece of theater, flipping it on its head was really interesting. I found that it was able to reveal a lot of really fascinating things about femininity, inversions of power

structures, dominance, and double standards. In our society now it is still considered more 'normal' for the man to be the one to leave the family. Certainly within the context of inequality of education and the way Helen treats Norman it seems almost unthinkable that Norman would not leave. And yet when the genders are put back into place Nora's leaving was so unthinkable that her exit was termed "the door slam heard round the world" and the idea was so forcefully fought against that a different ending had to be written for the play. While it is not quite so unthinkable in our modern society, it is hard for us to be able to say that a woman should not stay with her children. This must prompt the question why do we have this double standard? Why is it expected that a woman will stay with her children even if a relationship is as clearly dysfunctional as Nora and Helmer's is?

This scene was by far the hardest for both Adam Urbanic, who played Norman, and myself. Not even taking into account the gender inversion the play is a very difficult one, and once we added the extra layer we found that it was not until my project adviser, Michael Kirckmire, came in to help us that the scene really began to click. It was during one of these rehearsals that we began to work on different tactics Helen uses to get Norman to stay. We looked at many different ones, including intimidation, belittlement, mothering, smothering, scolding, and others, but ultimately I found that infantilizing Norman worked very well in this scene. By treating Norman like a child I was able to reinforce sentiments behind lines like "He's become her husband and her child as well. From now on that's what you'll be to me – you little, bewildered, helpless thing", as well as heighten the gender dynamic switch. This scene really helped to bring to light the way in which

femininity is held at a much lower status than masculinity and the problems that therefore arise. In that vein this scene also helped to reinforce the idea that an inverted unequal power dynamic is no better than the unequal power dynamic that already exists. Norman was being treated just as terribly as Nora would have been, and yet for some reason it seems to be easier for us to see when it is a man being treated badly than when it is a woman.

The next scene combined two scenes were from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. The first was the scene between Cecil and Gavin where they meet and discover that they are supposedly engaged to the same person – Earnestine – and the fight that then ensues. The second scene takes place a few moments later when Jackie and Ally discover that this has happened and argue because they have each separately claimed to be Earnestine and proposed to Cecil and Gavin. While both of the scenes revolve around characters having tea, I wanted to look at the differences in how the genders disagreed with each other and expressed that disagreement. This was the only section in which I had the women and the men totally separate from each other, and despite the fact that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is known for being a comedy about manners, it was interesting that the women, in this case, got to openly disagree and even be slightly physical with each other. Meanwhile the men had to sit there and make biting remarks with a smile plastered on their faces. This juxtaposition, while subtle, was really interesting and fun to examine.

In rehearsals this scene was a lot of fun to play around with. Personally, as the actor playing Jackie, I found the scene pretty easy to figure out. Even the

language wasn't difficult, as this is a play I know quite well. While the women had a relatively easy time with this scene, it was clearly harder for the men to come to terms with. They struggled to smile and still make sure that their jabs had landed. To combat this in rehearsals we worked a lot on tactic and following through. I kept telling them to imagine they were wearing a corset. Ultimately we arrived at a much better place for their portion of the scene than we had started in, but there were still some nuances in the language and mannerisms that I wish we had been able to capture more clearly.

In 1939 Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse wrote *Life With Father*. It is still the longest running straight play in Broadway history. For this selection I chose the scene in which Claire Day, the mother of the Day household, attempts to go over the household accounts with her husband, Vinnie. This scene was fun because it depicts how a family at that time might have operated, and yet it was also a comedy. The play, in many ways, used the conventions of gender during its time as something to laugh at, and by laughing at it audiences may have been able to see just how silly the systems they lived within were. And yet by switching the genders the scene became more laughable still. Things that may have been quaint if outdated when done by a woman were suddenly outlandish when performed by or to a man. This once again served my purpose by asking why the same actions, simply performed by someone of a different gender, were suddenly so much more laughable.

The performative nature of gender really came to light in rehearsals for this scene. One of the problems we had that I had not foreseen going into this project was body language. I didn't want to make men act like women, but there were a few

times, in this scene especially, that I had to ask my actor to sit differently because visually he had too much power in the scene. With his legs spread wide, leaning back in his chair, with an arm on the table, Adam took up so much space that I felt like no matter what Shannon Toot did she would not be able to affect him. Once I brought this to his attention, however, Adam found ways to become much smaller and more submissive both in this scene and in others. We also ran into a problem when the script called for Vinnie to cry. As director I made the choice not to ask my actor to cry, for fear of seemingly parodying femininity, but I still wanted to use a similar tactic. It was very difficult for the actor to arrive at a place where I could ask him to make Claire pity him. How foreign this idea was to him really helped bring to light how different the performance of gender can be, both on stage and in everyday life. While he did do what I asked and I think the scene benefited greatly from it, I believe this was the most uncomfortable thing for any of my actors of the course of this project.

The second to last scene I chose was from *Arsenic and Old Lace* by Joseph Kesselring. From it I selected the scene where Marian discovers the dead body her uncles have hidden in the window seat of their home. I chose this because I wanted to look at how gender in relation to age is performed and perceived. While the play was about two doddering ladies who had decided that lonely gentlemen would be better off dead than living a lonely life, the play seemed slightly less sinister than when it was about two old men killing lonely women. However, I'm not sure how well this came across. From an acting and directing stand point this was one of our stronger scenes, however, perhaps because, unlike *Life With Father*, *Arsenic and Old*

Lace is not a comedy about gender roles, I'm not sure how well the gender switch influenced or enlightened the audience.

When rehearsing this scene gender certainly did come into play. We ended up having trouble with some of the lines spoken by the character I played, Marian, because they sounded – and for good reason – like they should have been spoken in a lower register. For example, the line “That’s all you know about her? Well, what’s she doing here? What happened to her?” often gave us trouble. This was something we played around with, trying to find a medium between where my voice naturally wanted to go and being too high pitched. We found a happy medium for most of the scene, but it was interesting as this was not a problem I had ever expected to encounter. We also worked on making the uncles act older, something I as a director struggled with, as I had never had to instruct anyone on how to do this before, but I do not know that this was as much a gender issue as it was an acting and directing one.

The final, and perhaps my favorite, scene was from David Lindsay-Abaire’s 2006 *Rabbit Hole*. The play focuses on Hannah and Benny, whose young daughter was run over and killed a few months before. I chose the final scene from this play, during which the couple, although they are learning to cope in different ways, finally comes together to face their grief. This was arguably the least gendered scene I chose, and while there were many reasons why this could have been, I think two reasons stand out to me. This was the most modern of the scripts I picked, and while we have not achieved equality, we are taking steps in the right direction. The play also centered on grief, which in many ways in our society is genderless.

However just because the characters did not seem to be acting abnormally based on their perceived gender did not mean that the scene did not have great value in my show. Because the characters didn't seem to be acting strangely the scene illustrated how little gender, in many situations, ultimately matters. We did not judge the characters differently based on if they were wearing a dress or pants. Both dealt with their grief in their own ways, regardless of their gender. They were both able to be strong and weak, supportive and in need of support, and their gender didn't matter.

Matt DeLuca and I, the two actors who worked on this scene, found this to be our easiest scene by far. Because gender had little notable bearing on the characters there were not any great obstacles we had to tackle based exclusively on the concept of the piece. Michael Kirckmire came in a few times and helped us work on some of the more difficult acting aspects, which was very helpful and, I feel, improved the scene greatly. Ultimately this scene was a hopeful note to end on, both for the show as a whole and for the wider discussion on gender I was hoping to promote.

Talkback

After the show I held an optional talkback between the actors, the audience, and Dr. LeSavoy, one of my professors in the Women and Gender Studies Department. Because I was hoping to create a dialogue with my project I thought it would be a good idea to give the audience a chance to react and talk about what they

had seen. To open the talkback, which was actually very well attended, I spoke for a moment about the project itself, why I had chosen it, and the basic idea behind the talkback. Then Dr. LeSavoy made some very kind and insightful opening remarks and we opened the floor to questions from the audience. At first the audience focused on what this experience was like for the actors and when, if ever, we had had problems portraying our characters. A few of the actors talked about times in rehearsals we had had to work extra hard to wrap our minds around playing roles written for a different gender. The actors offered some great insights into the process and I was able to speak from the viewpoint of not only the person who had conceived of the idea in the first place, but also as an actor and director. As the questions continued the audience members began to offer insights into what they had seen and perceived. A few people mentioned how well *A Doll House* worked for the purpose of the show specifically which was something I, as an actor, could tell while I had been on stage because of the amount of nervous laughter we had received. Dr. LeSavoy addressed some of the questions and gave insight from a different perspective from my fellow actors and myself, which I think complemented the discussion very well. I kept the talkback relatively short, but I think it was a great way to begin engaging in the dialogue that I had been hoping to create.

Review of the Project

Ultimately the structure and idea of the play worked, I believe, very well. I was able to use my concept to pose the questions I wanted to and hopefully get the audience thinking about the social constructs and performative nature of gender. A lot of the plays I selected worked very well to help further the examination of the perceptions of gender. If I had to choose what plays worked the best I would say that *Tartuffe*, *A Doll House*, *Life With Father*, and *Rabbit Hole* were the most conducive to that end. I also think that the talkback was both well conceived and well received and I am very glad I was able to help further the conversation I was hoping to start with the help of Dr. LeSavoy, my cast, and my audience.

If I had to choose one thing that didn't go according to plan I would have to say that I do not believe I quite realized just how much work this project was going to be. My first director quit the project very early on, so I partially took on the role of director as well. While Cody's help was invaluable he was often busy running his own senior project rehearsals. I found it very difficult to be both director and actor at the same time, and there were many days I felt like I had run a pointless rehearsal because I was unable to both see and act in the scene. However Cody and I worked very well together and we were able to overcome any different ideas or directing approaches we may have encountered. As daunting, time consuming, and exhausting this project was, however, I do believe this project was worth every minute of time I put into it.

I learned many things during the process of this senior thesis. I learned a lot about theatre and how a show is put up, but I also learned a lot about gender and how we perform it. This project made me examine new ideas that I hadn't even

thought of when I was conceiving and planning it. It reinforced the knowledge I had that inverted power structures never work. It helped bring to light that femininity is often equated with infantilization and the inevitable devaluing of femininity that will therefore occur. It also taught me that dominance is physical, verbal, and, at times, subconscious, and it showed me just how hard I had to work to fight against my inclinations to give the male actors dominance, even when they were playing parts originally written for women. While these are all lessons I will carry with me as I say goodbye to my freak show and take my next steps I know that there was one more lesson I learned. Most importantly I learned that if you are going to do something crazy like this, you need a great group of people to back you up. Luckily I had that.

While two days before the production went up I would have said that I would have done everything differently, I am able to look back on it now and know that not only did the show go up, but it was also well executed and well received. I would say that this project was absolutely a success. Since my goal was to ask questions I cannot say with any certainty that the audience left with any concrete knowledge of anything new, but I do believe they left with new thoughts and new questions. I wanted to look at how gender was perceived and portrayed in iconic works of theatre across a period of time, and I believe that for the most part that is what I did. I am very proud of the work I did and I think it encompasses and illustrates well what I have learned during my time at Brockport.

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