

From: webteam@langara.ca
To: [Applied Research](#)
Subject: New submission from ARC Award Final Report
Date: Friday, April 26, 2024 3:19:00 PM

Name of Researcher

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Department/Faculty

THEA

Position in Department/Faculty

Solo Show instructor

Project Title

Emergency Mushroom Report/Learning Fear In Omphalotus

Term of Project

Summer 2023—Fall 2024

Please introduce yourself – include pertinent background information relating to the topic of your research project.

I'm a playwright, director, performer, producer and dramaturg. I teach Solo Show at Studio 58 (the students are required to perform a self-created one-person show as the final task before graduation). I have been working in theatre for more than 40 years, and in that time I have created or co-created original works in multiple forms: naturalistic drama, opera, cabaret, dance, interdisciplinary, musicals, and collective creations. I have also directed, performed, and choreographed violence for a similar range of projects, plus numerous productions of Shakespeare.

I have also been profoundly influenced by Science/Speculative Fiction and Fantasy. The great writers of SF often wrote about the future, but at the same time, they were reflecting on the present, which is exactly my goal with this project.

[NOTE: I'm not sure where else to put this, but rather than pictures which I do not have, I had hoped to upload a 5 minute video from Rumble's 'Symbiotic Cabaret'. Unfortunately, the system won't allow me to. I feel this video will help contextualize some of what you read about 'The Mountain' and the online piece 'Emergency Mushroom Report', so I'm including a link to a YouTube version of it. (This version is not meant for the general public, so please don't share it.) Please bear in mind that this is very much a rough prototype, not remotely a finished piece. I have also uploaded 2 scenes (which I had to convert from PDF to JPG to illustrate one of the points I refer to below. I realize you may not have time or energy for either of these, but they are available to you if you wish. The Mountain: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1O8sqWY0p4>]

Please discuss your educational background and your work experience that led you to taking on this research project. If possible, include a quote that helps define your interest in this project.

I went to a trade school (Studio 58) at the end of the 70s, and immediately began working in my profession (which I pretentiously sometimes think of as my calling). I had already produced several plays before beginning at Studio, and I produced a punk-rock musical for which I wrote the script in the one term I took off. (In those days, we had a summer term and you could complete all six terms without taking a break if you were somewhat unhinged.)

While I have taken dozens of courses and workshops over the decades, my education is primarily experiential. I'm a voracious and undisciplined reader and autodidact. I was hired at Studio 58 with the

understanding that my work experience was more than equivalent to a Masters. (Kathryn Shaw once said, "Well, you could go get an MFA in directing at UBC, but you already know more than anybody who would be teaching you.")

During Covid, I was involved in a collective-creation project intended to be experienced live-online. The project imploded for a number of reasons which are investigated in the documentary 'Where Is This Going?', which I created with Cameron Peal (another collective member and a Studio 58 alumni). A number of that project's elements continued to nag at me, and they are among the roots of this project. Especially, the online live element in the 'Emergency Mushroom Report' piece, and the intention of populating the internet with multiple elements of the project as online "Easter eggs".

Please summarize your project in plain language that others not in your field could understand.

I am laying foundation for the creation of two linked, site-specific plays about humanity surviving the climate crisis: one live-online and multi-media, the second outdoors, low-tech, in a tent. There are two areas of research: Covid-friendly, interactive performance, and the contrast of possible future societies based on human/mycological symbiosis with a society of tech-billionaires who have fled to underground disaster bunkers.

Identify the project goals and objectives. Explain how the results may be used to solve a problem or inform further research in the field.

In my project description I said that the underlying question of the large-scale project was "What is 'live' performance, and what elements of it can be preserved in 'Covid-safe' environments?" but that my key focus would be on two questions specific to the story of the pieces:

- "What would a society look like if it aligned humanity's survival with the needs the oldest species on earth, fungi and mycelia?"
- "What kind of society might emerge from the underground emergency bunkers currently being created by some super-rich survivalists?"

So, the main focus of this stage of work was sociological world-building: imaging the kind of society that could emerge from a giant tech-billionaire built escape bunker and contrasting that to a society in the above-ground world that survived by living symbiotically with fungi (and through fungi, other natural world elements).

Briefly explain the steps taken (methods used) to conduct the research, and describe the key findings.

The plan was to focus on these questions with consultants Dr. Michael Hathaway of SFU (author of 'What a Mushroom Lives For'), dramaturg Kelli Fox, performer Lissa Neptuno (and other performers to be decided as the writing progressed), and video/sound designer Jordan Lloyd Watkins. I had intended to also create prototypes of some "mockumentary" elements of the shows.

The consultation process was lively and incredibly useful. The time frame I'd originally imagined turned out to be impossible because I was working with a group of incredibly busy people, so instead of just meeting over my term off, our work continued into 2024, with me grabbing my consultants when they were available. We would discuss ideas fundamental to the project and they would respond to work I had written.

In the next question, I go into how the "mockumentary" elements evolved due to an opportunity to present excerpts of the work at Rumble Theatre's 'Symbiotic Cabaret'.

In addition, I did an enormous amount of reading, both of biology and popular biology books about fungi, and fictional representations of fungi (usually horror) including many pop culture sources such as comics and graphic novels, as well as some brilliant SF which imagined other futures where humans survive the climate crisis.

I feel a little pretentious describing the results as "findings". All these steps helped me to structure the two pieces, to create scenes and elements, and to imagine what my next steps are. One of the most exciting results of the workshops I held was that I found the solution to a key question: how had humans and

fungi found a way to live in symbiosis over a mere few hundred years, when fungal symbiosis usually happens over a much longer timeline? [The answer, by the way, is that the timeline has been much longer. Humans in this world were (as in still are today) simply ignorant of the many crossbreeds that have occurred over hundreds of centuries. I'm hoping I can upload scenes that relate to this with this report instead of photographs.]

Who was involved in this project (eg. faculty, students, community partners)? How did their involvement contribute to the project's success? Were there any challenges to overcome?

The idea of making mockumentary element prototypes was subsumed into a new opportunity: I was invited to present pieces of both 'Emergency Mushroom Report' and 'Learning Fear In Omphalotus' at Rumble Theatre's Symbiotic Cabaret in September 2023. The performance consisted a live element ('The Mountain'), which involved Linda Quibell performing the role of The Speaker sharing materials with the "Small Council" at The Mountain (the survival bunker/society featured in 'EMR'), including video excerpts performed by Munish Sharma and Tara Jean Stevens. Lissa Neptuno performed Armilara in an excerpt from 'LFO' live in the tent location where the cabaret was performed.

I would definitely count Rumble Theatre as a community partner. They provided a venue and audience for two nights, some rehearsal space, a small financial stipend which helped defray the cost of hiring actors in addition to Neptuno, and moral support. Another community partner was the company Boca Del Lupo who provided a micro-grant to support the work.

In addition to members of the general public, the performance was attended by many of peers in the theatre community as well as some of my current and former students. This led to very fruitful conversations and critiques from people I respected. The piece was very well received, which was encouraging. More importantly, I took what I had learned into new writing and held several other workshops which involved performers Rodney Decroo, Kona Katranya, Adele Norhana, Cameron Peal, along with Quibell and Neptuno. This work has profoundly deepened my understanding of how the society of 'The Mountain' came to be, as well as the various communities that birthed 'Omphalotus'.

Please share any personal stories that made this research experience memorable/valuable.

Two of my students attended the 'Symbiotic Cabaret'. At that time, they had just begun my Solo Show class, so I didn't know them yet. I think, in fact, they were more there to catch Lissa Neptuno's work than mine. After the show, they approached me with their eyes glowing. They appeared utterly entranced by the subject matter and the implications of the piece. Now, obviously, students rarely approach a new teacher with negative critiques of their work, so I didn't let it work my ego too much. What I most liked about that moment is that it was emblematic of the effect the study has had on most of the participants.

My consultants (with the exception of Dr. Hathaway) came on board because we already have a working relationship, but during our meetings the excitement was about far more than making a show. This was also true of the actors who came in for single workshops. Thinking about fungi and the future pulled them way deeper into the subject than anyone expected. Many of them are now reading some of the books I used as research. The possibilities and mysteries of the mycelial world seem to have infected them all. This is really the most exciting thing for me: I'm hoping the project will engage people on a dramatic level, but more than that, I hope they will be drawn into the larger questions of the piece. Seeing the effect the project had on my collaborators and consultants was very encouraging.

I also get a kick out of the fact that Lissa Neptuno refers to this project as my MCU (by which she means Mycelial Cinematic Universe, rather than Marvel's).

What are the next steps for this project and for you as a researcher?

The ARC funding allowed me to focus on sociological questions. That work will continue throughout, as it is essential to the piece, but over the last several months I have moved from that focus to more detail about story, characters, and the history of these two societies. I think the best way to say it is that the presentation in September was the apex of the ARC funded work, but that it has also helped me to segue seamlessly into the next stage, which is more of the nitty-gritty of writing elements the two linked shows.

Over the coming summer, I will move on to the next step: writing full first drafts of both pieces, which will help me clarify the next research stage. That next research stage will necessitate much technical exploration and knowledge, and will be a return to the underlying research question of the piece: "What is 'live' performance, and what elements of it can be preserved in 'Covid-safe' environments?"

There are many reasons I want to create live work than can exist online. One is that I suspect Covid will not be the last pandemic in my lifetime. The profession of theatre was deeply damaged during lockdown. Many of us who work in the profession explored various approaches to bringing work to the public, but now that the pandemic is supposedly over, most in the profession have simply gone back to business as usual. It's as if we've developed collective amnesia about the Covid years. I can't do that, not only because I suspect the world will deal with more pandemics, but because I've become very excited by the idea of finding other ways to make work immediate. There is a hybrid form developing, which is not traditional theatre, not TV or movies, not gaming. It is its own beast, and that is work I need to pursue.

Another reason I need to continue this investigation is that the increase in online activity allowed many people to see work who simply can't go to the theatre. Some of these people have disabilities, are immunocompromised, or have other reasons that they can't share space with large groups of people. For me, when it works, there's nothing more satisfying than playing for an audience that's in the same space, reacting in the moment, feeding the work of performers and creating a lively feedback loop. There's nothing quite like it. Is there a way to bring that joy and excitement into the online experience? In what ways can an audience that is live but not present affect the mood, tone, and perhaps even action of the play? These are questions which have been haunting me for several years now.

Finding answers and putting them into practice will mean diving deeply into questions of interactivity for both the online and live pieces. These are essentially "site-specific" pieces. We are asking the audience for 'LFO' to imagine that they are in a tent participating in a ritual, and the online audience for 'EMR' to imagine that they are residents/workers in The Mountain bunker. They will not simply be passive observers. There will be interactive elements. For this stage, I will need to work with game designers and some of the artists who focussed on interactivity throughout the theatre shutdowns during Covid. One young artist I consulted about "liveness" during my Covid collective project was an avid gamer. He said to me, when gaming, there's another kind of "live" that existed between him and the console. Elements of gaming will certainly influence work going forward. There are whole generations of potential audience who have grown up expecting to interact with stories.

Another element I need to investigate is the element of online "discoverability". During 'EMR', The Speaker shares many clips. These will be excerpts from longer scenes. So, she may show 30 seconds of a conversation between The Root (the leader of a mushroom cult) and Dr. Anjay E Kamat (a mycologist). The entire scene between them will be "discoverable" online. The plan for 'Emergency Mushroom Report' is that elements of the story will populate the online world, available on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and even hidden away in unexpected places like LinkedIn and mock business or government pages created specifically for the piece. So, there are several ways an audience can engage with the piece. Those watching the show live will be provided with links if they wish to explore the world further. On the other hand, someone randomly searching, for example, YouTube may encounter one of these "scenes" online and then be led to other elements through YouTube's algorithms (and links provided on the page or within the video), which can lead them to the live performance or to explore that may elements of the world that exist online.

In effect, the show is the tip of an iceberg, but much of the iceberg is available to be explored in multiple locations and platforms. I want to exploit the tendency of modern internet users to fall into rabbit-holes. (God knows, I have sometimes realized, bleary-eyed, that I my initial search for a recipe for kale has led me to the history of agricultural uprisings in Bolivia in the 19th Century. Sadly or fortuitously, I am not unusual in that regard.) As you can imagine, there are numerous puzzles to solve, many of them technical, but also structural: how do you tell a story which can be started in the middle and discovered piecemeal? This is a new way of looking at storytelling. (I should add that I still love traditional theatrical story-telling forms. This project is not me turning my back on existing forms. I believe a healthy theatre ecology contains multitudes.)

[For any who are interested, here is a link to a case study of a Swedish “transmedia” show from 2007 which existed both on television and across social media: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://truthaboutmarika.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/the-truth-about-marika-a-transmedia-case-study.pdf]

Please upload any images that will help to showcase your project.

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