

SHOULDA COULDA WOULD: PRODUCING THEATRE IN A PANDEMIC

By

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Honors Thesis Project

Appalachian State University

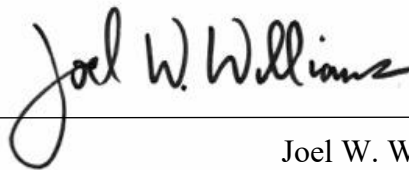
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Abstract

The transition from educational theatre to professional theatre is a daunting task for many theatre artists. Creating opportunities to bridge the gap between the two types of theatre can provide confidence and experience for those entering the professional world. This project allowed university theatre students to produce the show *Shoulda Coulda Woulda* so that they would have the skills to create theatre once they leave the university setting. This summary of the project will expose the many challenges that were overcome, the product that was created, and the skills that were gained by newly professional artists.

Independence and confidence have always been qualities that I have prided myself on in all aspects of my life. This includes being sure of myself when I know what I am doing and working to get to that point when I do not know. This is why the phrase often said in the arts “if you don’t have an opportunity in front of you, create one!” has always resonated with me. However, toward the end of my junior year I realized that my acting career posed interesting challenges in creating my own opportunities. Outside of self produced, directed, one man/woman shows there are very few options for actors to create their own individual art, and even that included two other roles in which I lack confidence. I decided to spend my senior year learning how to create my own opportunities and gain confidence in my ability to be a theatre artist and not just a theatre actor. I knew that the professors around me provided a wealth of knowledge that I would not be surrounded by once I had graduated. So, I put together an ambitious project that required me to produce and direct a play from the ground up, attempting to gain more independence and confidence in the world of theatre. In the following discussion I will state the expectations I had going into this process, the goals I set for myself, the process I went through, the skills I gained along the way, the lessons I will take with me into the professional world, what I would have done differently, and finally how well I satisfied my original goals. I will also mention how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted each step.

Beginning this process, I held flawed ideas of the roles and responsibilities of both producers and directors. I assumed that a producer’s job was to build the production team, find a venue, and fund the project along the way. In my initial understanding of a producer, their job ended when everything was set up for the success of the artistic team. My understanding of a director was that they were just another member of the production and rehearsal team. Their job was to implement the choices made in production meetings to the rehearsal process and to guide

the actors to discoveries on their characters. Neither of these impressions were inherently wrong, the roles were just far more complex than I had assumed.

With these flawed perceptions of what I would be doing for the next year, I set three goals for myself. I wanted to present this show to an audience of at least 50 people, I wanted to cultivate professional relationships with theatres in Western North Carolina, and I wanted to become a more well-rounded theatre artist. The goal for audience attendance came from my fear that I would not be proud enough of the show to present it to anyone. While these were valid goals to work toward, they do capture my flawed preconceptions and alone do not accurately measure the magnitude of the project.

Focusing on these goals, I began the process of producing a play around August of 2020. My intention was to treat the fall semester as time dedicated to producing, and the spring semester as a time dedicated to directing. My first step was deciding on the play that I would produce. I was given a play during my freshman year of college called *Shoulda Coulda Woulda* by Daniel Blanda. It resonated with me because it discussed a type of friendship that is not often seen in the media. I tried to find publishing information but I ended up just reaching out to the playwright through his website and explained this project to him. He told us that because we were in uncertain times we do not need to worry about a contract and that we had permission to produce his play. All he asked was that we make a donation to the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research.

After I had permission to produce this play, I began to gather as much information from the people and books I had around me. I asked questions about how to start this process, how to run auditions, and how to be a part of the design team. Ensemble Stage agreed to let us use their props storage and perform the show there in the beginning of April, Covid permitting. I began to

build my production team. Covid safety is incredibly important to me and when I brought people onto the team, I made sure to be conscious of that. My stage manager would be my roommate, Kat Sokol, because she would need to be the person I spent the most time around. I brought on Catherine DeCarolis as a scenic designer and she brought on Sarea Kelly for assistant scenic design and props. This was around the time that the goals of the project started to shift a bit. I wanted this project to serve those that had joined the same way that it was serving me. I expressed to them how this was their chance to gain new skills that they want to try but would not feel confident just stepping into. With this new focus, Catherine took on the lighting designer role, Sarea took on the sound designer role, and Kat took on costume design. We also brought on a technical director. We started to develop concepts during our production meetings and I felt my role as producer become less and less needed. I wrote in my notebook at the beginning of December, “it seemed like every time I came up with a task there was someone there that I had invited to the team that was responsible for that thing. I have these talented individuals and I get to trust them now. It is time for me to transition from producer to director.”

My initial semester of producing taught me a couple hard lessons to learn. This began by learning how to ask for help. I do not think I realized how much a production costs to just start from the beginning. If I had not been met with kindness from people like Daniel Blanda and Ensemble Stage I would have been on an incredibly tight budget. The world of theatre is full of people that want others to also be able to create theatre. Stepping out of my comfort zone and believing people when they say they will help was something that I will take with me into the professional world. I also learned how to say “I am learning”. The confidence that I hoped to gain in this process is not something that comes immediately. There were many times in the meetings where I would ask the production team if they were missing anything from me as

director/producer and more often than not there were things. I would leave the meeting, educate myself, and get back to them.

During the winter break transition from producer to director, it was apparent this would be a play produced in the Covid-19 pandemic. With auditions approaching at the end of January we had to figure out the way to safely bring in actors. We agreed as a production team that we did not want this to be a Zoom play and that we would like to have a live audience. We came up with the idea to cast the actors from the same bubble. This would ensure that we did not increase the amount of spread that would happen. We would keep the audience at least six feet away from the stage so that the actors did not have to be masked. We were incredibly thankful that the show was only a two-hander, a play with only two actors, because this would increase the options we had for casting. The actors signed up for a Zoom audition as a pair, they both presented a monologue, and then they performed a short excerpt from the show. We ended up with three pairs of actors to choose from and after much deliberation we cast Clayton Paige as Marcus and Hannah Magee as Trisha.

The actors were cast on January 31st, and the rehearsal process lasted from February 7th to April 7th, bringing new lessons daily. It was vital for me to know clearly what story I wanted to tell, while also respecting the choices that the actors made. I had to learn how to ask questions to prompt them to come to a choice as opposed to me making the choice for them. It was so hard to walk away from a rehearsal and know that there was progress made even without it looking like a finished product. It was also a process that I doubted myself on daily. One particular example of this was in the intimacy choreography. I had read all of Chelsea Pace's *Staging Sex* in preparation for the choreography and had written out the instructions for the actors. I had done all the preparation and I still found myself wanting to ask the actors if they would feel more

comfortable if we pushed back the day of intimacy choreography. Even though I was as prepared as I was going to be, I wanted to postpone the choreography so that I felt more comfortable. I learned to never make these decisions when I was feeling anxious because I knew that it would just put us behind schedule. I felt this way with the off-book day and the clothes-off day. I realized though that at these vulnerable moments for the actors I needed to be sure of myself. It was important that I did as much planning as I could beforehand and then to carry myself with confidence during the rehearsal. This is also something I tried to do during the regular blocking rehearsals. There was one rehearsal where I came in and admitted that I was not sure of myself. It became incredibly frustrating as I watched the actors doubt me even as I figured out what I wanted the blocking to be. It ended up being changed because the actors never felt sure of the things they were doing after the attitude I came into the rehearsal with.

There were also moments that I felt incredibly united with my actors. One of the first things that we did in the rehearsal process was renaming the acts. Even after months of working on this show, it would still take a moment for me to figure out which act we were talking about by just their given titles. I did not want to pass this problem on to the actors. I expressed to the actors the ideas that I wanted to convey through each of the acts. *Shoulda* was this memory of a very good time in their lives; the last time things were easy between them. It should feel a bit fragmented and slightly too good to be true. *Coulda* should feel incredibly vulnerable. It is the story of two people invading the personal lives of the other. It should feel messy and awkward at intimate times, but should show the deep friendship they share. *Woulda* should feel honest and raw. It was the scene where the characters were speaking their minds, whether or not these conversations actually happened. It should feel like both a deconstruction and a rebuilding

process. Based on all these and also what made the actors laugh, we renamed *Shoulda* as *A Memory of Peace and Porn*, *Coulda* as *Playing House*, and *Woulda* as *The Inbetweens*.

Outside of the rehearsal process I was also learning about what is expected of a director as a part of the production team. I had always thought that the designers dictated what everything looked like and that it was the director's job to work with what they were given. Instead, I found myself scrambling to make decisions. I learned that the director should come to the first production meeting knowing the story they want to tell, the way they want to make the audience feel, and provide an idea of what they need to the designers. Then the designers take these notes and develop the production elements to communicate the story while also incorporating their artistic design and practical knowledge. During these meetings I wished that I had not been both producer and director, or at least I wish I had better understood the demands of both of these positions in the fall preparation period.

One thing we were prepared for was our Covid-19 precautions. The actors were always spaced 6 feet from Kat and me and we were masked the whole time. The production team stayed remote until tech week and even then we all kept distance and were masked. I am also incredibly proud of the whole team because they all chose to receive their vaccinations as soon as they were able. These precautions kept us all safe and healthy and we never had a positive case.

My time as a director also will forever change the way that I enter into an audition as an actor. I learned how things outside of talent carry so much more weight than I gave them credit. As long as an actor can carry authenticity with them, it becomes so much more about the schedule and the kind of story you want to tell. Even with only three pairs of actors auditioning Kat and I still spent hours going through the possible schedules with each of the actors as well as how effectively they could embody and project the characters to the audience.

The reasoning behind choosing this play also changed during one rehearsal. There is a moment where the character Trisha asks Marcus about the future and “what’s next” and Marcus says “This”, Trisha “Just this?”, Marcus “No more just. *This*”. I realized that we had spent the last year trying to put together a show during a pandemic and it was hard. There were things that we had to compromise on to make the show safe to produce and attend. It was something that could easily become very disappointing if we thought about it for too long. It was in a rehearsal of that scene during March that those words truly resonated with me. I had spent so much time trying to force the theatre that was produced in 2019 and instead I just needed to take a moment and realize that the theatre that we are creating with the restrictions that we have is not any less just because it is different. After this realization, the central idea we focused on was anticipation and living in the moment.

I also learned the importance of specific blocking for scenes that seem daunting. *Woulda*, or as we renamed it *The Inbetweens*, is an abstract act that gives little help for how it should be blocked. Originally, I wanted the actors to provide the substance of the act. I wanted them to have such great emotional and physical shifts that it was able to denote the time passing all on its own. It was very difficult to communicate that to them and have them apply it. They are both naturalistic actors who had trouble finding spontaneous levels between different events. After two rehearsals of trying distance exercises, level exercises, and improvisations for context I eventually realized that it is also my responsibility to break out of naturalistic directing. The next time we worked that act I had blocking that gave them specific movement, places to look, and reasons why I am asking them to do those things. After that the actors found a greater motivation to have the emotional and physical changes. The context from the improvisations also came alive

when the actors were confident with their physicality. I was so pleased to watch the actors always know exactly what they were doing. It ended up being our strongest act.

For this play, I also had to decide the order for the show. The three acts and their descriptions were, “Shoulda - Then, Coulda - Now, Would - Irrelevant”. The playwright recommends the acts are performed in a different order every night to provide a different experience. I did not feel like that was a very practical choice for us, especially for my first time directing. However, I did want to make sure that I picked the right order for our show. The order of the acts is written the way it is titled. The first thing I tried to identify was the climax of each of the acts. *Shoulda* has the most comedic elements. *Coulda* seems like it has the majority of the themes and purpose of the play. *Woulda* is the kind of act that makes an audience feel like the theatre artists think they are smarter than the audience. Because of these things, I knew that I wanted *Woulda* to be in the middle so that the audience could fully understand the beginning and end, with the ambiguous act in the middle. It also felt important to start the audience off with the most comedic part of the show. I knew because of the pandemic the audience members would be stepping out of their comfort zone, entering a group for one of the first times, and trusting us to be taking the proper precautions. It felt wrong to do anything other than make them laugh first. Because of these things, we performed them in the order of *Shoulda*, *Coulda*, *Woulda*, or as we called them *A Memory of Peace and Porn*, *The Inbetweens*, *Playing House*. We established that *A Memory of Peace and Porn* happened in 2012, *The Inbetweens* are the conversations that happened between them over a 7 year gap, and *Playing House* took place in 2019.

At the end of February we hit a large obstacle. We knew that we had access to Ensemble Stage, Covid permitting and at the time Covid was not permitting. We found ourselves just over a month out from our first performance and we no longer had a venue. For the next month I

would have to balance both director and producer. I was a director in rehearsal and a producer in countless meetings for the next couple of weeks. I mistakenly thought that finding a large space to perform in would be easy considering the number of spaces in the student union and all across campus. However, it seemed like every space that could accommodate an audience and performance space was already booked for our performance dates. I did reserve a space in the student union that could hold more than the 50 people I had set a goal for. However, with Covid precautions the furniture could not be moved around at all, meaning the audience would be in classroom style seating, there would be a podium in the middle of the largest open space, and we would not have the lighting and sound equipment we had anticipated. It would cause compromise on every level of this production.

On March 17th, I learned that the IG Greer Studio Theatre would be open on our week of tech and performances. It was truly the biggest relief of this whole process. There were still compromises that had to be made. Since it was a university affiliated space the actors would have to keep their masks on even with the social distancing. This would change the intimacy blocking completely. Because of the different stage type, I would also have to rework most of the regular blocking to make sure that the whole audience would get to see what is happening. The proscenium stage at Ensemble stage has the stage in front of the audience members. At IG Greer Studio Theatre, there is a three quarters thrust stage, meaning the audience is around 3 sides of the stage. We were also unable to have anyone that was not Appalachian State University affiliated in our audience. This also changed the demands of the production team. All of the set designs, lighting designs, and some of the props would have to change and this would have to be accomplished in a little over two weeks.

As we moved into tech week, I felt my job as both producer and director become less important. There were still moments when I was asked for my opinion on design elements and there were a few notes that I would give the actors. However, I knew that this week was not about me. This was the time for the designers to get all their elements added. I helped around as I was needed by painting the walls and running to the store to get the things we did not think of before. I also realized that we were missing a house manager. I did not want to bring more people in than we needed so I took on that role for the week. I made sure that the audience was sanitized before every performance, I checked health passports at the door to make sure no one was Covid symptomatic, I designed a poster and program, laid out a seating arrangement that made sure everyone was socially distanced, and I responded to emails and calls to reserve seats and make sure we stayed below the mandated audience capacity of 15. (see figures 1 and 2)

The show ran with little issue and good audience response. The show itself was a success simply for being able to run safely during a pandemic. Even though I now see various missteps I might have avoided or decisions I could have made better, I know that it is all part of the process. The nature of theatre is that you are working toward a show date and once the run begins there is nothing more that can be done. The show that we put on is something I am incredibly proud of. (see figure 3)

Because this is a show produced during 2020-2021 there is a great deal that must be said about the impact of Covid-19. While I have alluded to impacts along the way it had a greater influence than I would have imagined in August. This show would have looked very different if the initial plan I had developed with Ensemble Stage had been what we presented. There were many times in the university space that we had to ask the audience to suspend disbelief. The play asks the actors to smoke a cigar, eat, drink, sleep, kiss, and smile, all of which are difficult to

perform in masks. We also felt the change in the amount of audience members we were able to have. The highest attendance we had was 10 in one night, the lowest was 8. Despite this falling short of my initial goal, we celebrated these numbers as we knew that we were asking people to trust us with their safety. The audience never felt empty. In fact, I think if there had been too many more people, it would have been overwhelming to be in a large group after having not been for so long. When we were in rehearsals there was a time where one of the actors received a call from their employer saying that they would have to quarantine. This happened as we were getting set up for an in-person rehearsal. Our stage manager immediately sent us all home and we had to miss an entire rehearsal. We would continue our rehearsal schedule on Zoom until everyone that attended rehearsals could produce a negative Covid test. Finally, everyone had to take on more responsibility than I could have imagined because of Covid. There were very few people in our production team that did not take on multiple roles through the process. We would discuss new roles that were required in production meetings and we would ultimately decide that we could not bring on a new person to fill that role because we could not guarantee everyone's safety if we did. Thankfully, there always seemed to be someone on the production team that had wanted to try the role out. In the rare instances this was not the case, it would fall to me and I would happily do it. This left our stage manager running a couple quick changes, our lighting designer also being the board operator, and me running the front of house.

Not every impact of Covid-19 was bad, though. As strange as it may sound there are a couple things that Covid-19 made easier. There was such a sense of enthusiasm that the team carried with them through the whole process. We were all so desperate for the chance to put theatre in front of an audience. Zoom plays are a new thing, and therefore have a great many issues that still need to be smoothed out. There is nothing quite like building a world on stage

and watching the audience get pulled completely into it. It was so clear that the production team and actors were motivated by this and focused on this as we worked through many obstacles that we encountered. (see figure 4)

In addition to the lessons I learned about the roles I took on, there are some universal lessons that I will take into the professional world. I learned the importance of clear communication. There were moments that I would overshare information before it was decided on, there were times where I felt like I was playing catch up with someone that I could have just cc'ed on an email chain. There were also times where I trusted someone to communicate clearly with me and there were things not fully articulated. I learned that it is better to be a bit annoying and over communicate than to operate under assumptions.

I learned the importance of collaboration. Theatre is an amazing form of art because it brings together to minds of so many different kinds of artists. Every person on the team has ideas that are wonderful and should be heard. As the person that was in charge of making many of the final decisions it was so important that I took a moment to think about everything being said. It was vital that I let myself change my perspective with new bits of information because we are far more likely to come up with something greater together. Also, because theatre relies so much on the help of others, it was important to be considerate of the needs of those individuals. Specifically, I remember when we were trying to figure out how to run auditions safely. I was speaking with my production team about my ideas to have people write down who they are in contact with in their daily lives or to just have the actors spaced 6 feet apart. It was my stage manager that suggested that we cast from the same bubble. Without opening up the discussion to others, I would have never come up with such a successful idea on my own.

I learned the reason why there are so many roles in theatre. It is not because they had to hire everyone that showed up to the interview, it is because there are one million things to be done to have a successful production. There were so many times that I just wished I only had one role in this process. I felt spread too thin and that I was not accomplishing what I wished to at the level I had hoped. During the beginning of the process, I only intended on having a couple people on the production team. At different stages I considered costuming, sound design, playing one of the roles, and running crew. I am so thankful for the people along the way that told me to not do that. Each one of the people in that filled those roles did far better than I would have. This also showed me how much more effort smaller theatres have to put into their productions to be successful. While well known theatres may have the budget to hire many professionals, smaller theatres have to put on productions with the resources they have.

The simplest lesson that I learned was something I should have learned a long time ago. If you do not know something you want to, read a book. The books *The Director's Craft* by Katie Mitchell, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors* by Paulette Marty, and *Staging Sex* by Chelsea Pace were invaluable to the success of this show. I found myself getting stuck so often and not knowing what to do. Without fail, when I picked up one of those books, I found a new task to be working on and a couple I should have done the week before. My only wish is that I would have thought to have read them before starting this project.

When I find myself with an opportunity to take on a project like this again, there are a few things I will be doing differently. Firstly, I will do as much preparation as I possibly can before even starting the project. I wished through the entirety of spring that I had assistant directed the semester or year before, instead of just going off of what I observed. I wish I had just asked someone for a book or to be honest with me about the hard lessons they had learned

through directing. If I had done this, I think I could have navigated the process with a bit more grace.

Secondly, I will also be delegating better in the future. I was so scared to overwhelm the people on my production team that I ended up overwhelming myself. Now I have a clearer understanding of what the roles entail for each person on the production team and who would be responsible for new tasks. The people in theatre, for the most part, want to do their jobs and in the future that is what I will be asking of them.

Lastly, I will never underestimate the impact an uncontrollable event can have on your production. While the pandemic was something I entered the process knowing about, I could only do my best to respond and adapt to the influence it would have in various ways along the road. In the future I will have confidence in my ability to adjust to unexpected challenges and meet them with flexibility.

In the beginning of this process, I set out the goals to present to an audience of 50 people, to cultivate relationships with the theatre professionals of Western North Carolina, and to become a better theatre artist. Looking back at these goals is laughable. There is such a clear disconnect between what I thought I would be doing and what I did. In a quantifiable sense I did not accomplish my goal to present to an audience of 50 people. We ended up having a total of 35 audience members. I would still consider this amount of audience members a success. The idea behind the goal that I set a year ago was still achieved and in light of the note on Covid-19, I am not sure 50 total audience members would have been a good idea. So, while not entirely fulfilled I would call this goal satisfied.

My intention to cultivate relationships with the theatre professionals of Western North Carolina did not go entirely as planned. My goal was to build a better relationship with Ensemble

Stage and Invisible Theatre. It was also to reach out to other theatres to see how they were adapting to the pandemic. I would say without a doubt I built better relationships with Ensemble and Invisible Theatre through my relationships with both Gary Smith and Derek Davidson. I do wish that I had reached out to the other theatres in all this. If I had given myself a little less to do then I would have accomplished this outreach. However, with each challenge that arose, I just never felt like it was the most pressing thing for me to accomplish. Although, I did find another way to satisfy this goal. I was also able to reach out to a Boone, NC band to use their music in our show, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between our production and the band Home Astronomy. If I rephrase the goal as to cultivate relationships with the artists of Western North Carolina I would call that a success.

My final goal was to become a better theatre artist. The idea with this goal was to be a better director and producer. I would say that I absolutely achieved this goal. To begin with, I learned what it means to be a director and a producer. I am far better at these roles than I was a year ago and I know what I can do to improve even more. I know that in a pinch I can serve as a producer or director to a show, although I am not sure a producer is the right role for me. The ways that I grew most as a theatre artist were the ways I did not anticipate. I gained appreciation for each role in theatre, especially the ones that I thought I could do. I watched other people take them on and I knew they were far better for the job. I know how much work is done from every single person outside of production meetings and rehearsals. The accomplishment of me becoming a better theatre artist only partially came from me improving my own skills. Instead, the appreciation of skills and talents that I do not have will keep me learning and working toward creating theatre.

My goal that was added along the way was to gain experience from this that I could not get from my regular education. I absolutely achieved this goal and I have a full understanding of why this is left out of the curriculum for anyone who would like to do anything else with their time.

Confidence and independence were the traits I was striving for. I hoped to enter the professional theatre world knowing that I could do it on my own and I could do it well. I will always remember what I learned this year. I will never be successful doing theatre on my own. Theatre created by one person is not theatre because theatre requires collaboration. It would be a waste to call something a show that I did entirely on my own. Confidence is a little more complicated. I am more confident in what I bring to the table now, but I have so much more humility in what it is I am bringing. There is so much I have to gain by experience and learning to get to a point where I can sit with utter confidence. For now, I will bring what I have and I will learn new things in the professional world. The traits I actually gained and hope to take with me from this year were humility and collaboration.

Figure 1 - Show Poster

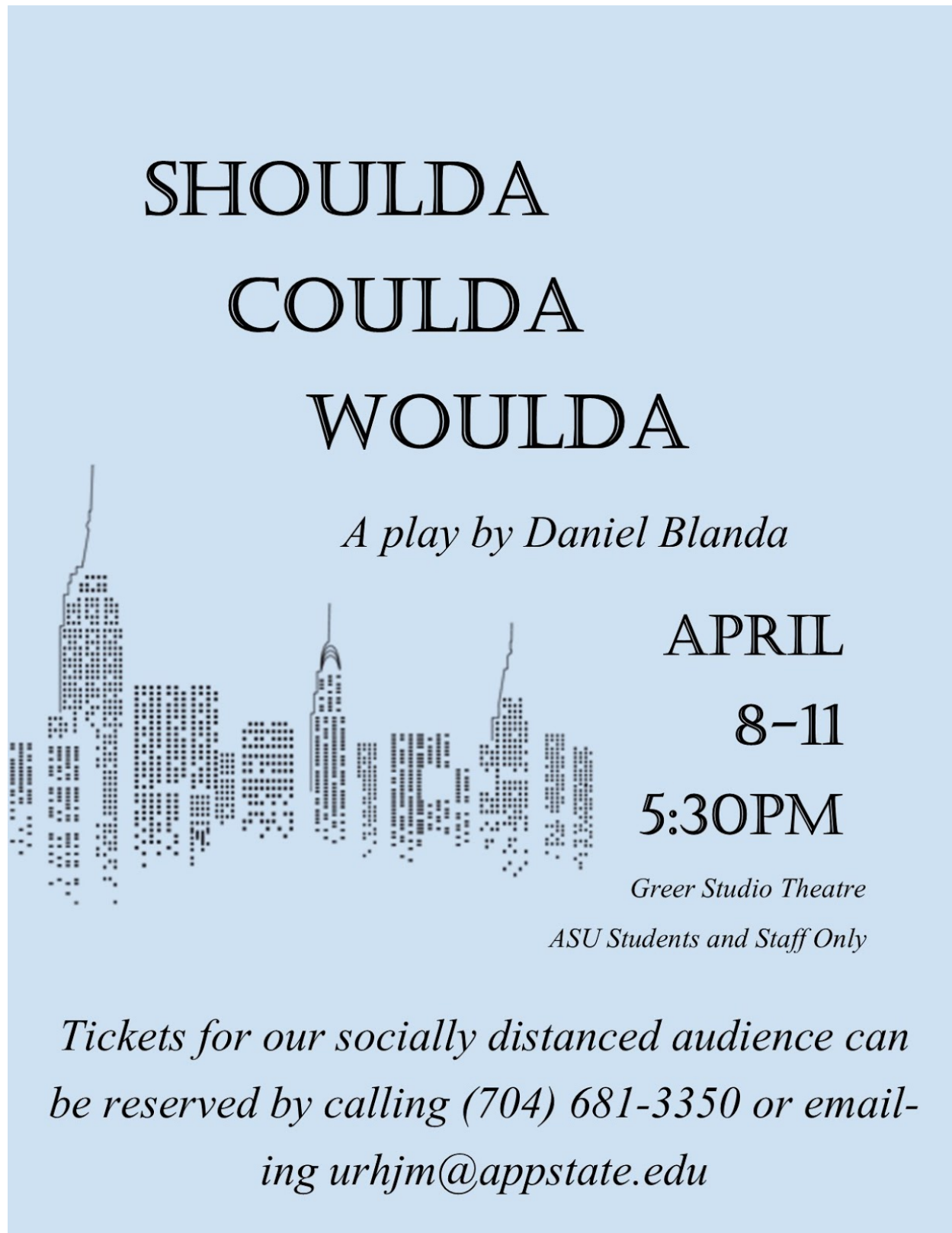



Figure 2 - Program (pages 1-4)

**SHOULDA
COULDA
WOULDA**
A play by Daniel Blanda



1

SHOULDA COULDA WOULDA
 Written by Daniel Blanda
 Directed by Julia Urh
 Scenic and Lighting Design by Catherine DeCarolis
 Costume and Makeup Design by Kat Sokol
 Sound and Assistant Scenic Design by Sarea Kelly

Cast

Trisha.....Hannah Magee
 Marcus.....Clayton Paige
 TV Woman.....Cali Lilly
 TV Man.....Justin Nolen
 TV Husband.....Samuel Emmert


Crew

Stage Manager.....Kat Sokol
 Technical Director.....Cecilia Chan
 Assistant Stage Manager.....Ahmed Al-Kadhi
 Properties Master.....Sarea Kelly
 Lighting Board Operators.....Nicole Pehan
and Catherine DeCarolis
 Paint Charge.....Catherine DeCarolis
 Producer.....Julia Urh

2

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

We cannot ignore that this past year theatre has had to find new roads to continue to create. We have lost a lot of the things that many of us find joy in. However, I hope you can find comfort in the wonderfully creative people that make up the world of theatre artists. We persisted and adapted and produced even now. *Shoulda Coulda Woulda* explores the theme of anticipation, and the focus on what's coming next. While the ideas of the seats next to you being filled and seeing the whole face of the actor are very exciting, I do hope that leaving tonight you are encouraged that theatre is not going anywhere. And that *this not just this, this is still art we can find joy in.*



3

THANK YOU

Ensemble Stage

For use of furniture and properties

Home Astronomy

"The Bruxist" [https://
homeastronomy.bandcamp.com/](https://homeastronomy.bandcamp.com/)

John Urh
Joel Williams
Paulette Marty
Derek Davidson
Angela Mead
ASU Theatre and Dance
Elaine Hartley
Matt Tyson

Music Credits <https://www.bensound.com/>

4

Figure 3 - show pictures



Figure 4 - Scenic design renderings and stage photo, designed by Catherine DeCarolis

