

Lights, camera, curtain: Undergraduate explores cross-pollination of film, theatre

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

Brenden Gallagher is only at the beginning of his career, but already, he has something in common with Ingmar Bergman, Sam Mendes, Kenneth Branagh, and Mike Nichols: All have directed both plays and films.

The main difference is that Gallagher is a college undergraduate.

A fifth-year senior from York County, Pennsylvania, Gallagher is triple majoring in film, fiction writing, and theatre in pursuit of the prestigious Bachelor of Philosophy (B.Phil. degree) through Pitt's Honors College.

To earn this demanding degree, students are required to work closely with a faculty member to design and implement a research project as well as write and defend a thesis based on their research.

"Nowhere else lets you triple major with the ease [that] Pitt does while still maintaining rigor," says Gallagher. "I have to say, I've been thrilled with my Pitt education."

Kathleen George, professor of Theatre Arts and Gallagher's adviser on his B.Phil. degree readily admits that he is a talented scholar and student. "If I didn't know Brenden and just how interesting he can be as an analyst, I would be telling him, 'No, you can't do this,'" "I would say he actually has the equivalent of three B.Phil. projects."

Gallagher began his research by investigating what it means to compare the experience of directing in each of the two mediums — film and theatre — and to see what directors who have done both can borrow from each discipline.

Finding that his first research thesis was a bit broad, Gallagher refined his project to focus on how theatrical directors approach film.

"Rather than approaching each individual art as its own enterprise, [I wanted to] encourage others to realize that a film can have any number of things in it to be the artwork it should be," he says. "All too often, we restrict ourselves formally. That's something I'd like to dispel with my project."

Gallagher has learned from his own research on directing and is incorporating this knowledge in his own direction of the Jane Martin play *Middle-Aged White Guys*, and while also directing a self-writ-

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ten zombie film, *If You and I Were the Last Two People on Earth*.

"I've always been fascinated with zombie films because I wondered what the allure was," says Gallagher. His idea was to write a script completely devoid of the undead and focus on other characters living in their midst.

His research experience is proving to be invaluable as he creates his own film. Using a \$1,500 budget cobbled together from Brackenridge Fellowship funds, money from Arts and Science's Office of Experiential Learning, and Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Gallagher has been experiencing firsthand the setbacks of the independent filmmaker: Fake blood that stains, people who purposely disrupt his on-location shots, and angry neighbors who call the police.

And as if that weren't enough to test him, as a part of his on-going research, he is also viewing and analyzing a long list of films made by theatrical directors.

When undergraduate Gallagher took Dr. George's graduate-level course in script analysis, "he was very, very good," she says.

"He was able to understand the ways that plays are put together and the ways that they create an argument with polar opposites of various sorts. I have a lot of faith in him." If Gallagher chooses to pursue academia, he is definitely PhD material, she notes.

For his part, Gallagher remains undecided about his future after graduation, although he does hope to pursue a full-time career as an artist.

Unquestionably, his undergraduate research experience will be invaluable to his future, whether he pursues a career in academics or becomes an independent filmmaker.



Theatre Arts Professor Kathleen George stands with undergraduate researcher and budding director, Brenden Gallagher.

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