

It's The Thought That Counts: Using
Matilda to Explore the Facts and Fiction of
the Effects and Impact of Early Childhood
Abuse and Recovery

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1) Artistic Aims

This play, *Crumbled House*, is the second project that I've worked on at Purchase, with the exception of being an usher for *The Terrifying* last year. The first project I worked on was Wilson Castro's intended senior project musical, *The Kingdom*, but unfortunately that project didn't develop to its full potential due to COVID-19 restrictions. *Crumbled House* will be a unique challenge for all of us, as the cast members will be interacting with each other entirely through Zoom for the entire length of the production.

In this production, I'll be taking on the role of Sam, an eleven year old boy who has a twin sister, Lisa. As I am a twenty-one year old nonbinary person assigned female at birth, this character is not easy for me to understand or relate to, but this is a challenge I hope to conquer through character work and research. Having taken Movement for Actors, I can use what I learned from that class--as well as additional research--to inhabit the physicality of a preteen boy. Vocally, I want to present a boy who has a higher pitched voice than myself, and an overall brighter, youthful affect. In preparation for the role, I plan to alter my appearance to better get myself into character, such as wearing a chest binder or tying my hair back and wearing a baseball cap. In terms of acting, I will research and study younger boys at play and note their vocal and physical tendencies and mannerisms.

Playing the role of not only a younger brother, but a younger twin, will also be a challenge. My own relationship with my younger sister and the relationship between Sam and Lisa are very different. For one, my sister and I have many shared clothes, experiences, and stories that stem from us both experiencing life as women. In contrast, Sam and Lisa would have been raised separately in some ways, due to differences in clothing and physical features, not to mention the difference in their parents' expectations of them. Another difference between us is

that I don't like horror movies, while Sam seems to like them, although he may only watch them to try to imitate other kids his age. These of course are obvious differences, but we do have several things in common.

Through the course of the play, Sam is experiencing a growth spurt, which has resulted in frequent fatigue. I can relate to this feeling; my sleep has been unfulfilling and fitful since birth. Feeling sleepy despite getting enough rest is frustrating, and difficult to explain to people who can't relate, so that is a point that I can connect with. Sam and I are both reaching a turning point in our lives; he is entering puberty and starting middle school, while I'm about to graduate from college and start my adult life. Sam and I also share a love of animals. Though not explicitly stated, this can be gathered from his expressed aversion to eating meat, and his concern for a skunk in the treehouse being threatened with a broom. In exploring these differences and similarities, I can grow to understand and better inhabit Sam's character.

The online method of rehearsals will be a new and unique challenge for me, so making our meetings successful and productive is one of my goals as a performer. Before the pandemic, I was never in a situation where the team of actors was unable to safely meet in person in order to rehearse. Another of my goals is to connect with the actors outside of rehearsals in whatever way I can, because it will strengthen the bonds of the team. I plan to reach out and ask if the other actors--Marianna, Jackson, and Sarah--have GroupMe or Discord, my preferred messaging apps. While we can't do many traditional acting or improvisational exercises, playing games together online may help us understand each other better. Furthermore, as I won't be able to interact physically with them in scenes or take advantage of the acting space, I will have to emphasize my physical movements so that they can recognize them and react accordingly. If we do this

successfully, we can coordinate our movements over Zoom so that they will be convincing and realistic to the audience.

After I graduate from Purchase, I hope I can be a language teacher overseas, though I won't close the doors on acting. Considering that there are more actors than jobs in the very competitive industry of acting, I feel reluctant to pursue it as a career because I'm conflict-averse by nature. I also worry that it would take a toll on my mental health and self-esteem, and would lead me to retire early. Therefore, I don't see acting as a job I'd be able to do long-term. However, I still love acting and haven't had an opportunity to act in what feels like ages, so while it's an entirely new experience, it does feel familiar, and I know I wouldn't have wanted to graduate without it.

Even if I don't pursue acting as a career, I can definitely use strategies I learn from this production process. In collaborating with others and discussing how to rephrase lines to make their intentions clear, I can better understand how other people work, as well as how they process information and express emotion. For the foreseeable future, classes will happen online or on Zoom, which will help me get used to spending time in a presentational setting. This skill will transfer when I am able to teach students overseas, because both teaching and performing involve keeping the audience engaged. Another useful skill that I can develop is establishing and solidifying relationships with other people entirely through online interaction. This is something I've already had some practice with, because my classes for the past two semesters have been conducted almost entirely on Zoom.

Throughout the process of working on this project, I have learned to adjust my expectations, while still making constructive, critical, and creative contributions. I am learning to be patient with others' progress, and how to rephrase thoughts in ways that are easier to

understand or translate. Going into the project, I wasn't sure what to do or how I should expect to proceed. After reading the script, I felt like there was a lot to be edited, expanded, or cut. In the process of elaborating upon these changes, I grew comfortable with coming up with both scenarios and dialogue that sounded natural. This skill set will help me in the future with teaching and explaining phrases in other languages. In the course of this project, I've realized that while I'm only part of the team, I can still make a valuable contribution.

As we read through the script, I identified and pointed out certain scenes or interactions that I had reservations about. As an actor, I can provide a different perspective to the writer and the director, in terms of making the dialogue more natural or fitting for the character. I'll be researching conversations between pre-teen boys like my character, and I already suggested revisions during our first read-through. I have also been asking about the intention behind specific lines, and noting continuity errors, typos, and story plot-holes left over from previous drafts, bringing them up to clarify the purpose or necessity of various lines. For example, initially the playwright had written Sam as Lisa's younger brother, who was joining their friend group for the first time. At times Allie recounts anecdotes from their past adventures to explain to him, since he wasn't there. However, in the most recent drafts, he is now Lisa's twin, so it makes less sense for him to have only joined the group recently, instead of having been there from the beginning. Some characters had to be cut due to the shortage of available actors, specifically Allie's mom and Bobby's older sister. Certain facts or backstory are revealed out of the blue, like Bobby's difficult home life and his unexplained anger. In future meetings, I plan to bring these up with the group, and suggest that we consider making changes to clarify these plot points and ensure a comprehensive storyline. Because it will be a staged reading, some props will be difficult to implement, and certain stage directions won't be feasible in the final run. However,

the actors can still use their body language and facial expressions to initiate contact with each other across the Zoom frames and to convey intention.

This play features a friend group dealing with one of the members moving away. This is particularly bittersweet given the current quarantine, where we are unable to meet up in person without the risk of endangering ourselves, our loved ones, the people we come in contact with, and the people that are close to or important to *those* people. Considering this, I think that audience members will relate to *Crumbled House*: they will be inspired to reach out to friends that they've lost touch with and look forward to meeting up in person when it becomes possible. It's a fresh story about children's coping mechanisms of imagination: making the best of a difficult situation through creating new worlds where anything is possible. We can learn from this, remembering that we shouldn't let our situation limit or restrict our growth and creativity.

The play ranges from a light-hearted comedy of pre-teens' pastimes to the personal struggle of an inhospitable childhood home. It's a heartfelt and genuine journey, and I have no doubt that it is even more meaningful to the writer, so I will do my best to perform the story he wishes to tell.

2) Research Essay

The story of Matilda Wormwood, a girl genius with telekinesis, is only 33 years old, so it's no wonder that her hopeful message of independent capability is still relevant and popular in the present day. It's a best-case scenario of childhood abuse which leads to her reclaiming her life, freeing her classmates, and getting adopted by her beloved schoolteacher. However, while acknowledging the fact that it is fictional and thus the story and characters do not necessarily have to be realistic, the abusive situations portrayed are real and affect thousands of people and children every day. While each case is unique, children in situations like Matilda's may likely end up internalizing their trauma, which I believe could be prevented or helped if education on childhood abuse was part of the middle school and high school curriculum as much as sexual health is. Additionally, part of the proceeds for any type of literature or media that concerns child abuse could quite easily be donated towards the children in abusive situations, or organizations dedicated to helping said children. On Broadway, the gross revenue of the musical was nearly \$200 million (broadwayworld.com).

Matilda, written by acclaimed author Roald Dahl, was published in 1988. In 1993, actor Danny DeVito's daughter brought the book home, and when DeVito reached out to Dahl's widow, she consented for him to direct and produce a movie adaptation of the book, which was released in 1996 (Lawson). The Royal Shakespeare Company subsequently created and staged *Matilda the Musical* in 2010, and the four girls who alternated the titular role performed a number at the 2012 Olivier Awards in England (considered equivalent to the American Tony Awards). The musical was nominated in all categories available and won 7 awards, which was record-breaking at the time. The same year, *Matilda* (the book) was ranked the 30th best novel among children's novels of all time in a 2012 survey published by School Library Journal (Bird). Following a

spike in 2016, the book reached over 17 million copies purchased in 2018 (Staino). The book, movie, and musical alike have received outstanding reviews, and the movie was praised for its faithfulness to the book's themes and Dahl's spirit (Leydon, Thomas). The narrative centers around five-year old Matilda, who succeeds in revolting against her abusive parents and violent headmistress when she discovers her telekinetic ability. Because of its adaptations and popularity, *Matilda* has become one of the most well-known literary examples of child abuse. *Matilda* is also unique in that it is one of the few stories to focus on the childhood of the victim, rather than revealing the abuse as a traumatic backstory of an aged-up character.

Many fictional stories of childhood abuse or trauma seem to serve as an insight into the characterization of villains or anti-heroes. Sometimes the abuse, neglect, or bullying that the young child experiences is partially due to them being born with some sort of abnormality, whether it be magical powers, physical deformities, or mental illnesses, among other things that are entirely out of the character's control. In contrast, the character of Matilda seems to have been neglected since birth--for no real reason apart from her parents' apparent lack of interest--and becomes capable and independent entirely out of necessity. Matilda's powers of telekinesis were created by Roald Dahl in order to give her a weapon to fight back against her abusers, and they serve as a perfect counter, considering that once she sufficiently exacts her revenge on her neglectful and abusive parents and headmistress, she loses her powers, at least in the book. This is interestingly reminiscent of the phenomenon of hysterical strength, where people temporarily gain superhuman strength or abilities in life-or-death situations. Matilda has that power ultimately taken away from her, preventing her from being a superhero--or a supervillain--in the future. Some studies have suggested that anywhere between 33% and 75% of child sexual abuse victims will later become offenders, and this has become a very common misconception, which

could have prevailed due to offenders claiming they were abused in court to garner sympathy (Ogloff, Carey). But even more studies have shown that victims are more likely to fall back into the role of the victim, instead of the abuser, and if they *do* become an abuser, it's most often due to the environment or the care they were given or shown following the initial abuse (Goleman). Matilda's story seems to be a best-case scenario in that she works hard and is able to develop an advantage which she uses to escape from her abusive situation.

As mentioned earlier, very often villainous characters, antagonists, and antiheroes are given traumatic backstories to push them towards doing evil things. One such character is Carrietta White, the main character of the Stephen King novel *Carrie*. Carrie's story was adapted from a book to two movies and a remake, and a Broadway musical as well. A few notable differences stand between *Carrie* and *Matilda*, although they do have much in common: Carrie is 16 while Matilda is 5, and *Carrie* is unmistakably a horror story. Carrie is subjected to religious abuse at home from her fanatical mother, Margaret, and is friendless and bullied at school. Like Matilda, Carrie also discovers that she has telekinesis, but uses it on a much larger scale. Following a cruel prank at the prom where her date is accidentally killed, Carrie uses her power to seal her classmates inside the school, then causes a fire and eventual explosion, destroying the building. She then destroys fire hydrants, gas stations, and power lines to thwart any attempts to put out the fire, and heads home, where she's stabbed by her mother, who tells Carrie that she may have been the product of marital rape. Carrie kills Margaret by stopping her heart, and Carrie herself dies some time later, crying out for her. This cycle of abuse is one that could have been avoided, had some sort of child welfare organization been present or made aware of Carrie's traumatic home life, where her mother avoids talking about anything related to intimacy, and locks Carrie in a closet to pray, accusing her of sin.

At least 1 in 7 children in the U.S. (had) experienced child abuse and/or neglect in 2015-2016, according to a report from The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences). However, some media outlets, movies, tv shows, and literature still sensationalize both fictional and actual child abuse. "Stories about abuse from [the] news... perpetuate the ideas that 1) abuse is absurd, sudden and caused by a few 'bad' individuals, and 2) if that is the case, eventually the 'good' people will... catch the few people that abuse so the problem doesn't affect me." (Kanakapura). But even when child abuse or neglect has been reported, the child may not necessarily be removed from the home in which the abuse is taking place (ACS). In *Matilda*, Miss Honey feels helpless when she pays the Wormwoods a house call, frustrated that Matilda's parents don't seem at all interested in their daughter. For the purposes of the story, Child Protective Services doesn't seem to exist, but in my own experience, I've observed that reporting to child services doesn't always guarantee that action will be taken. Generally this is a precaution, for without significant evidence, it can be difficult to determine whether abuse has actually taken place. When an investigation into suspected abuse is launched, CPS may pursue the evidence overtly, sending police to the home of the victim, and if no (clear) evidence is found, the case may be closed (ACS). However, if the parents or guardians are made aware of the investigation, they may punish the child, assuming that the child is somehow responsible for the investigation. If this happens, it could completely deter the child from talking about their abuse in the future, but it will also likely lead the child to internalize their trauma, potentially developing a trauma or dissociative disorder.

In 2019, Child Protective Services received almost 4.4 million referrals, which in total concerned almost 7.9 million children. About 3.4 million of those were then actually investigated, and of *those*, over 2.8 million were deemed "nonvictims." (Child Maltreatment

2019) From this statistic alone, it seems apparent that either the legal definition of abuse or maltreatment is far too narrow, or else most of the reports come from people who are uneducated or uncertain of what situations are worth reporting. In a Pennsylvania Child Protective Services annual report, 2019 had 87% of reports resolve "unfounded." (CPS Pennsylvania)

Despite the publicity and attention that the story of *Matilda* has received, data shows that the vast majority of child abuse reports end up unfounded, while possibly many others fly under the radar. I think CPS productivity and accuracy would increase greatly if more funds, especially from any future projects concerning stories of child abuse or trauma, were dedicated towards educating children and teenagers about the realities of such situations. Hopefully, any victims among those children will begin to improve their own lives by seeking help and/or therapy, so they don't prolong the cycle of abuse (Curtis). In addition, films or plays like *Matilda*, which demonstrate a positive ending after abusive situations, may inspire children to find their own path of escape from such situations, no matter how unrealistic or fantastical the play or film might be.

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3) Technical Essay

My student advisor, Rachel, reached out to me about *The Crumbled House*, who were looking for cast members. Once we had the first meeting, I was able to give my feedback after reading the play once through, and I thought it was an interesting concept. I struggled a bit to understand Sam, my character, and I asked the writer about him; the director encouraged me to create motivation and backstory for him (Sam) myself. There are a few children around his age, 11, in my neighborhood, but I had mixed feelings about asking if I could "watch them play." I thought it might have helped if I knew what inspired the playwright, but I didn't get a definitive answer to that, either. Sometimes the dialogue felt slightly awkward, and when I noted this, I'd point it out during our zoom read-through meetings. Many of the interactions, statements and actions of the kids I found questionable or silly, and most of the time when I brought it up, my concern was written off, with the excuse that "they're just kids, they don't know any better." Even in the final script, there were some lines of dialogue where I understood neither the purpose nor the meaning, but since they weren't my lines, I didn't want to overstep by asking for clarity more than once. Namely, in the second-to-last scene, there's an interaction between Iris, Allie's mother, and Bobby, in which she apologizes for not considering his feelings when deciding to move with Allie into the city, which felt very unrealistic to me, and sends a message, in my opinion, that kids somehow are justified in being angry at other children's parents for not thinking of them. As we prepared for the show, we had one or two rehearsals prior to shooting the scenes, and we did some acting exercises, which were interesting. Another drawback, however, was that due to lack of efficient and reliable communication with the rest of the group, we ended up bringing more props than necessary, which wasn't the end of the world, but made me feel a bit disjointed for

having brought so much and used much less. In all, this project gave me a lot more freedom than I'd been expecting, which was both a good and bad thing for me personally.

Link to the uploaded performance video:

<https://vimeo.com/539129269/fc14ccd691>