Is the Fool the Smartest in the Room?

An analysis on Comedic Theatre and Social Critique in Starkid's "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals*"

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Goals and Impact

With this project, and my participation within it, I hope to truly emphasize my strength in the musical theatre sect of acting. While I have long term goals of pursuing other facets of acting performance, musical theatre is where I know my strengths lie. I hope to re-establish this confidence within myself and said strengths. Having been out of the performance sphere for about three years, I have lost some aspects of practice that have weighed on me mentally--with this show I am eager to conquer those anxieties surrounding my performance capabilities. In taking on roles in "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* I will be challenging myself to shake the rust off of my musical theatre The characters in this show are also double cast, meaning I will be portraying Charlotte as well as Nora-a bossy barista-and later a colonel. This will provide the challenge of having to separate those distinct people through the conduct of my body and overall performance. In performance, it's essential to give the character you are portraying a full story--shown through the pre-written and assigned dialogue but enhanced and implied through acting the role. In instances where one actor is to believably showcase several stories onstage it is necessary to differentiate between each character in the body. For the role of Charlotte, I intend to give her a fluttery-frenzied way of being. I will show this through nervous mannerisms, a little fearful hunch in stature, and leading from the head--however not in a "headstrong" intent fashion, Charlotte leads from the head from a standpoint of neuroticism and overthinking. For Nora, she is a persnickety nose in the air coffee shop manager. With her I have given her a particular snooty valley girl accent, an obnoxiously straight backed stance, and leading from the hips when she walks. Lastly for Colonel Schaffer, I plan to do the opposite and give her a

firm, strong, authoritarian voice with pointed diction. She will move rigidly, with every movement intentional and trained. This will be a particular challenge for me due to the nature of Starkid quick changes and getting on stage again so soon after leaving as one character. In "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* quick changes are rapid and *frequent.* Finally, the largest challenge I have identified will be launching myself back into a vocal role. Though I am still *able* to sing, the years of missed technique have had an impact on the overall health of my voice. Taking into account the healing difficulties of my past non-major surgery, I have noticed that singing feels *different* now, and I will have to work with myself on relearning proper techniques to keep my instrument healthy. Putting on this show now at Purchase will give me an opportunity to showcase musical performances as an adult, whereas all previous work was conducted in high school. Having this show on my resume will demonstrate a dedication to musical theatre work, and it will be an easy conversation point for possible future opportunities as it will be student run. Putting on this show now at Purchase allows for further enrichment of the arts community on campus, offering students another chance to engage with the arts. Putting on an entire student run musical on campus at Purchase will not only allow those itching for a musical theatre performance the chance to see and interact with one on campus, but also to introduce other students to the fact they can put on their own shows. This is a senior project, but with the show going up as a success other students have the opportunity to be inspired to create their own. This show is zany, silly, and a feat of its own in terms of musical composition before the addition of the dance component. However balanced within the lightheartedness and laughs are very real critiques that one may be hesitant to showcase on their college campus. On ours in particular there are subjects discussed that can be a potential sore spot--namely the discussion of police conduct in

improper and hypocritical ways. The show is a satirical comedy that will allow our audience to sit back and enjoy the jokes while also taking moments to discuss important matters that our students have been vocal about in the past: police injustice, monotony of daily life, and trust and truth in relationships. Having the show go up on Purchase campus, directed by students, choreographed by students, taught musically by students, designed and produced entirely by students will give those viewing the production a solidified and true piece of expression to enjoy and experience.

Is the fool the Smartest Person in the Room?

The court jester is no unfamiliar role to the common ear. A prominent figure in the historical development of comedy, the jester, the fool, existed within the king's court for entertainment--for revelry and joviality. The jester was no means or representation of intelligence or prestige, despite their role in a royal sphere. The jester was there for giggles, for teehees and royal snickering amongst general hobknobbing. A jester's place was to dance about and provide the well-to-do's a chance to "Laugh! Point and laugh at the funny little man!". Comedy was merely a realm of entertainment, a distraction from critical thought and disparities of day to day or governing life. However, within the giggles and the "ha-ha's" exists an underlying form of skilled and targeted mockery. When comedy is put to the page and performed for an audience, through the use of exaggeration and silly characters, there is often a portrayal of truth reflecting a society--or a person, a people, a *time.* Writers like the famous Shakespeare, Geoffery Chaucer, John Swift, are associated with using comedy and character tropes in their work to critique the political and societal issues of their respective times. This utilization of comedy and scattered sillies continues on through historical works of theater and still to today. In many a modern day musical it is nowhere near unheard of to see a dramatized character trope put under a musical spotlight to point a critical finger at an aspect of the present. Woven throughout the history of theatre is the fool, the comic, and the silly: and the usage of these as a critical tool for social critique. Through writing forms such as satire, and inclusions ranging from Shakespearean jesters to modern day musical theatre exaggerations, moments of "foolishness" often have within them harsh truths brought to light under the guise of a laugh. The use of theatre in these forms challenge their audiences to consider and ponder problems of class, power, and pre-determined

norms. In Starkid Productions "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* through the use of tropes and musicality they shed a comedic yet critical light on police brutality and the hypocrisy of those in power, fascism in modern day, the interpersonal and sexual relationships of women, and workplace power imbalances.

Starkid productions is a group of actors who came to fame and public knowledge through the success of their parody musical "*A Very Potter Musical"*. The group uploaded their performance on April 9th 2009 to YouTube and found rapid success in musical and book fan spheres alike. The musical was a spinoff creation written by creators Matt and Nick Lang, and Brian Holden. From this first production the group continued onward to release many other original and original spinoff musicals. Starkid even managed to create their own musical universe centering around a town called "Hatchetfield". The three productions in the "Hatchetfield Series" would include in order of release "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals" (*2018), "*Black Friday"* (2019), two additional staged readings of *Nightmare Time"* and *"Nightmare Time 2",* concluded the full performance trilogy with *"Nerdy Prudes Must Die"* going up on stage and uploaded online most recently in 2023. The universe is categorized as a series of "horror-comedy" musicals. The shows contain interwoven themes that string together through their differing plotlines to create a fantastical set of worlds with apocalyptic scenarios. The shows include the same or similar set of characters placed into different scenarios and relations as they navigate the conflict plaguing their story. Starkid has solidified their presence in the musical and theatrical world with their strong arsenal of original work, with their uploads on Youtube amassing millions of views and sold out live theater performances.

"The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals" takes place in the fictional town of Hatchetfield intended to be located in Michigan, USA. Hatchetfield is set as your "average" town with

nothing truly remarkable about it to set it aside from any other town. The citizens are average persons, average workers, and average townsfolk. It is intended to be a very *typical* sort of town. This all changes however when the residents of Hatchetfield begin singing and dancing in fully choreographed musical numbers following the crash landing of a meteor into their town. The meteor brings with it a conquering alien race that overtakes the bodies of a planet's inhabitants with deadly spores, and utilizes the bodies to spread the infection through song and dance. The story of the musical follows the titular "Guy" who didn't like musicals himself, Paul. The character descriptions for the musical are consistently short and sweet, but for Paul specifically he is only described as "a regular guy who doesn't like musicals" (Lang, 1). Paul, with the assistance of his workplace friends Bill, Ted, Charlotte, a zany scientist, and a romantic interest he found in a local "take-no-shit" barista, challenges the hive of aliens to quell their worldwide conquest.

Characters in *"The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* rely on and fall into a series of typical and well loved comedic and horror tropes. The show is branded as a "horror comedy" and heavily leans into the comedic aspect, the apocalypse itself takes the form of singing and dancing aliens. Entangled within the sillies and comedic relief the entire show provides, there is real and well delivered critique of society and current political schemes. To break down Paul, the titular character, the protagonist: he breaks a stereotypical horror rule of having a "final girl". It's more than common for a work of horror or thrill to follow primarily a female character, often resulting in a final stand or fight to the death between her and the main villain or threat of the piece. Yet, in "The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals" we follow Paul. Paul is a perfect exemplifier of a story's "straight man". Other than being blatantly that, a straight man, he is a branded plain character who is *straight*forward. He's a man in his early 30's, who works a boring and mundane

office job, a fixation on coffee, a dead end crush, and a distaste for a widely loved media form: musicals. Paul's introduction is a perfectly curated boring office scene where he discusses printer complications and enforces office rules. He is simply a very unlikely protagonist. As the story unfolds and the infection takes hold, Paul's role takes on an interesting shift. As the protagonist of the story he is almost forced into the position of the unlikely hero: as he displays no heroic traits, and even directly opposes a spotlight in literal and metaphorical terms. He is thrust into the universe he despises, forced to interact with a musical in every interaction since the meteors crash, and is made to be one of the few able to resist it. In Paul's story, he reflects the average person in the quest to maintain individualism amongst a hive mindset. This notion can be applied to the mass overtake of trends and ideations that an average consumer can fall victim to through peer pressure. The minds and opinions of today's people, youths and adults alike, are now heavily molded by the internet and perceptions of those around us. Paul is a perfect example of resisting a "norm" until you can no longer fight against the mass of opinions against you, as even he succumbs to the infection in the end and joins the hive in song and dance. The Hive in Starkid's production utilizes a sinister form of manipulation to lure in their victims before infection. The infected individual is still, in some ways, alive--and the now host alien has access to that individual's memories and emotions. Once a person is infected and corrupted, the alien will use their memories and feelings to influence those around them to "join them". The infected body will tug on heartstrings and portray a state of euphoria, nudging the un-infected to believe that once they "join the hive" they finally have everything they want. In a study conducted by Brian M Parsons on Social Identity and Peer Networks he states that "The extent to which an individual perceives a strong identification with a group is associated with greater conformity to the norms of the group, as a person strives to adopt the typical behavior of group members."

(Parsons, 2015). In summary, when one identifies with one aspect of a group--it is therefore easier to assimilate and join a collective of thought in full through that shared view. Addressed later in the show and more blatantly is the indoctrination and blind faith following radicalized political views, which implement similar tactics. Identify one point of contention shared amongst a grand sum of individuals, promise to address in a way that seemingly caters to the shared need, and garner a mass following of support. For Paul, he is finally convinced in his final number *"Let It Out"* wherein all of his infected comrades sing and dance about him and lead him to believe that this is what he's truly wanted, needed, and searched for.

Further addressed in Starkid's critique of peer pressure, conformity, and blind faith, is their direct reflection on political allegiance and right wing affiliation: exemplified in their satirical song titled "America's Great Again". This number is performed by a militant troupe of the hive, a sect of the military sent into Hatherfield to do away with the infection and its perpetrators, introducing themselves as a branch of the military titled P.E.I.P the Special Unit Paranormal Extraterrestrial Interdimensional Phenomena. They begin with an earlier introduction of their leader, a General McNamara who kidnaps Paul and interrogates him-intrigued by his survival and skeptical of his presence. McNamara tells Paul that "I love my country, I do... But the experiences I've accrued throughout my tenure with this organization have given me a deeper understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. I follow a higher law than any institution could decree, and that is the universal truth of love and the strength of the human heart" (Lang, 37). McNamara is displayed as a true and devoted soldier, loyal to his cause and the decree he follows. It's unclear where his orders are taking place directly, but one can assume it would be this universes' president. McNamara instructs Paul, as a known survivor, that he has a limited amount of time to get his last living friend and make it

back to their EVAC chopper before they eradicate the rest of the town and “make a clean sweep”. Later we see McNamara again, when he and his now infected soldiers kill a side switching Ted at his final line “I bleed red, white, and blue”. They break into a strictly choreographed number titled “America’s Great Again”. This musical number is making a direct commentary on the Trump administration and their known slogan, which pushed Trump to higher levels of mass support amongst right wing circles. This moment in the show is a perfect example of the Hive Mind, in both infection and mass political following. It puts the Trump administration and its supporters under a direct criticising light, a bit of a contrast from the inferred and less obvious critiques earlier in the show. Lines from the number include verses such as “There’s a war to be fought in this country, Against those that are far too bold, Two party system: left and right, There’s only room for right and wrong, It’s me or you or you or me, The loudest become the strong, Yeah, we’re great again” (Lang, 37). These lines in particular draw attention to the strategies used by the party in their campaigning, simply aiming to be louder than other opinions in an effort to drown them out and leave no space for equal ground of conversation. Much of this can be seen in Trump’s debate with past president Biden during his first run, where he would shoot down any and all critical commentary or critical thinking questions. He and his now present team in his presidency have continued to do so in court proceedings where they will simply refuse to answer questions and acknowledge allegations. The song says there is only room for right and wrong, a policy which Trump enforces without hesitation. His consistent critique of any and all perceived left-wing notions are done in exactly this manner, refusing to acknowledge any legitimacy or worth to the ideations. Anything he can deem as “woke” “liberal” “diverse” or any other buzz word he’s latched onto and demonized will immediately send off a reaction in his supporters to denounce it, therefore instantaneously silencing any and

all consideration for the information, question, or policies in conversation posed by any perceived opposing party. Many of his supporters are proud to be Americans, to the point they brand themselves as the only true ones out there. The loudest become the strong, and supporters and perpetrators of the MAGA identity truly do their best to be the loudest and proudest of being Americans, delving so strongly into their massified mindset that other identities and experiences are drowned out and deemed inadequate. This number holds special significance now that Trump has won his second run for President, and now holds power in the United States. His recent policies and changes have fallen under great scrutiny, and have caused damage to countless American citizens, households, and jobs, yet his support remains steadfast due to the solidified camaraderie of his party followers. In a similar vein, "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* puts into the spotlight the conversation and issue of police brutality and misuse of police force--highlighting the damages and hypocrisy of the "back the blue" mindset.

The character Sam in Starkid's "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* is the husband of Paul's workplace friend Charlotte. He is introduced as a rather unsavory character to begin with, separate from his identity as a police officer. He repeatedly cheats on his wife and sidelines their relationship, thus pushing Charlotte further into her trope of the spacey wide eyed idealist as she continues to turn to him for aid and attempt to repair their marriage. Charlotte introduces his main officer number, "Show Me Your Hands" in which he and two of his officers-infected-chase down the main group and further showcase how all hope is lost as the "protectors" of Hatchetfield were among the first to fall victim to the infection. In the number "Show Me Your Hands" Starkid showcases the hypocrisy that can be shown by cops in their enforcing of the law. The infected officers directly contradict themselves while pointing firearms at the group of survivors, still expecting them to follow whatever orders they give and threatening when they

become confused. The officers state “You better empty out all of your pockets, But DON'T empty out all of your pockets!, Yeah, we're cops, Yeah, we"re cops

And we make sense” (Lang, 20). The cops even add to their own direct and clear mockery with the line of “we make sense” where they clearly do not. They go further into the song and instruct the group to get into a vehicle, then step away, get in, and step away and to “Do the things I say I’m a cop.”. This is a direct critical take on a corrupt officer's tendency to excuse any undeserved force implemented in an interaction with the justification that the suspect “resisted arrest”. In cases like the murder of George Floyd, where an unsuspecting and cooperating black man was suffocated to death by officers using unjust force on him and his body--the blind faith and unwavering unspoken law of “Back the Blue” and the “Blue Code of Silence” always supporting cops is put under the spotlight. The notion of the Blue Code of Silence is that a cop will defend another officer without hesitation, even in instances where they have overstepped legal boundaries--simply for the fact that they too carry a badge and “snitching” on your fellow officers will put a traitorous mark on one's back. In an article done on the Blue Code of Silence done by the Montana branch of the Innocence Project stated that in officer Shannon Spaulding’s case “the blue wall of silence was so strong that her life was threatened by officers when she reported Watts” an officer who utilized unjust force in the field “to the FBI.”. For many following an ideology that a police officer always has the interest of the public in mind, it is easy to blindly follow and support a “Back the Blue” mindset. In tow with a common right wing ideation of refusing other arguments’ consideration, in cases where statistics of violence against minorities show high volume of perpetration, it is very easy for these followers to default to their trust in police--especially if their political views align with the suppression of a racial minority or “Anti-American” identity. In an article written in 2020 by Kyle McLean, an associate professor

of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice at Clemson University he states in his introduction that “some people legitimate the police more so based on tradition than normative concerns regarding fairness.” (McLean, 2020). He conducted a survey based study where individuals were given different versions of information about a hypothetical police shooting, and the need for internal investigation. He had participants from varying demographics “.. read a series of mock tweets and a brief news article” about the posed shooting. Results of the study showed that “it was apparent that the structure followed the theorized patterns with factors consistent with the concepts listed above – trust in the police, normative alignment, obligation to obey, and traditional legitimacy”. As shown in McLean’s study, many will default to the tradition and shared mindset of trusting police as just and protectors even when given opposing information. Though the song in “*The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals”* is posed in a highly comedic manner, having cops doing a musical number in which they contradict themselves, it blatantly highlights the at large issue of police and enforcer injustice prevalent in modern day society.

Starkid and their productions are known to lean heavily into comedic and parody shaped spheres, garnering effortless laughter and engagement from their audiences with well crafted humor. Yet clearly laced within the humorous content is an understanding of the complexities of modern political and social spheres. In their shows, namely *“The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals”* they pose these conversations and considerations to their audience in a lighthearted and easier manner of digestion, by making it funny. Yet the comedy doesn’t entirely overshadow the severity of topics covered and addressed, even though it is introduced through hilarity and clownish song and dance. Starkid utilizes their theatrical and jester-heavy space to spark thought in their audiences and incite critical thought about the world around us. With the conversational

introduction being in a comedy sanctioned space, audiences are at ease and able to ponder the circumstances of the present world without feeling as though they are being fed a solely political piece. Starkid productions utilizes their comedic stories and characters in a skillful manner to highlight prevalent topics in the modern day.

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Reflection

Undertaking Starkid Productions "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* was a feat I, in truth, had worries about in the early days of its process. Being an actor in my entirety and having it be the only hat I've worn in a performative sphere, I had reservations about the complications that would arise in suddenly taking on the role of producer. I have only ever been the face on stage, and I have been comfortable in that facet of myself. Learning a new administrative role in real time while being in the musical I am producing felt like an arduous task. Yet, I found myself pleasantly surprised and shocked by how enjoyable the project as a whole was, and how useful it was to me to add these experiences Behind the scenes to my own actors toolbox.

Beginning the process in September of 2024 with auditions was the first moment of experiencing "the other side". Sitting at the table with my other producers and having to evaluate those who came in was entirely new to me. I felt I was quite empathetic in my notes on auditions due to how well I know what it feels like to be on the opposite side of the table. We had a large number of auditionees come in for each role. In evaluating each performance I took into account the work I noticed they'd done on the character and how it diverts from the original production on youtube, their comparability with the script and direction/feedback, and their musical capabilities. In determining callback eligibility, it was difficult for me to have to write negative reviews—noting when someone was not meshing well with the work or, as occurred more often, too attached to pre-planned bits, but I would write it down and share with my other producers during the debrief. In my own casting notes

it was important to find people that could balance their comedy with the more serious notes and moments of the script. This led the team and I to find our eventual cast and begin production. We launched into rehearsals immediately, beginning with musical number teaching and choreography. We figured we start with the "big feat" of learning complicated Musicality (courtesy of the writer Jeff Blim, known for orchestrating momentous vocal and harmonious feats) so that way when we introduced blocking and script work we were strong in the musical portions. In the process of teaching the musical numbers we rarely ran into any noticeably hiccups, aside from actors being late and needing to miss rehearsals. It was a relatively smooth process headed by our musical director Danny Campbell, who took to teaching a room of nine actors exceptionally well. Danny led each performer through their harmonies with piano lead note teaching and took time to work and record individual parts in songs for them to learn in individual practice. While learning vocals in some rehearsals, in others our choreographer Katie Heinz would meet with actors to learn their dances for the musical numbers. Katie brought an amazing and refreshing take on so many well loved and well recognized Starkid choreographed moves that it allowed a lot of beginning stress to be alleviated. Katie took the songs and made her own wonderful work of the dance moves and perfectly separated us from the original choreographed songs. It was imperative that we didn't just put on a carbon copy of the already existing show, and Katie allowed us not to worry about that in our dances. On that same note, when blocking and script work did really begin, it was asked of the actors not to watch the original production in their free time so as to assure an original and individual take, given that many of our cast members were familiar with and great fans of Starkid and "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* previously.

Once script work began and was launched in full swing into rehearsals we focused on the relationships between each character and their counters on stage. It was important to establish how everyone on stage felt about each other, character wise, to inform blocking and bit centered decisions. To establish these connections our director prompted us with past based questions and intention establishment with pre-written portions of the script. For example, we were asked how long our characters who are coworkers had known each other. We were given the chance to do more with characters, develop them together, and create our own understanding of their relationships and ways of functioning on stage. This allowed everyone on stage to fully grasp newfound motivations for their characters, their survival in the scheme of the musical, and their choices they make in regards to those around them. Once blocking had wrapped up and we began to do full runs, everything seemed to just click into place. We were working with a minimalist set, relying on just a few flats to create the realm of Starkid's "Hatchetfield", and through the universe and relationships created our show came together, in my opinion, beautifully. Another aspect of the process I had not anticipated was the bond I was going to create with my cast. It is all too common a story to hear that a cast has problems, or strife between any two castmates, or casts dividing into factions and despising one another by the end of the project. However, our cast had nothing of the sort. We grew closer and closer together as the process went on. It was somewhat essential to the process to care for each other, due to the intimate nature of a lot of the content involved in the show--namely hypersexual themes in musical numbers and jokes with sexual undertones. Through these close bonds we were able to try new things on stage and work around each other with ease. I personally grew incredibly close with everyone involved with

the project, and I know that through this production I have formed lifelong personal and professional connections with my cast.

When I look back on the entire production of "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* and I consider the work that I myself had done for myself, as a performer and a producer, I come away with a few things I wish I had pursued somewhat differently. When I approached the character of Charlotte, my first understanding of her was "The Woman Comedic Relief" and took most of her lines, directions, and dialogue to heart *that* way--and so in my initial reads and character work I played heavily onto her comedic characteristics. I leaned into jokes, created bit after bit when I could find them, and eventually lost sight of who Charlotte was as a character separate from her comedic aspects. I was eager to play a comedic character again, as that is my particular favorite form of performance. In leaning s heavily into this version of Charlotte, she became a caricature rather than a character on stage. This left me in the middle of the production process realizing this, and then having to work back and edit the character work I had already done. So this left my finished product of Charlotte, while still being something I was and am presently proud of, a bit half finished. In performance, my Charlotte was funny--but I do still feel that I leaned a bit too heavily in moments into her "funny" parts. I would have liked to focus more on humanising Charlotte, and giving her more focused and poignant responses rather than taking many moments that I could to grab at a comedic bit. Through direction I was assured that they were not poorly placed moments, but I was left feeling somewhat unsatisfied. Were I to be given the opportunity to start over and go from scratch, I would take more time to establish and understand more of the marital strife with Charlotte and Sam--then subsequently her

reasoning for having her own affair with Ted. While somewhat obvious, her marriage is stale and her husband is cheating on her, the entire song of "*Tied Up My Heart"* solidifies that Charlotte still feels love for Sam and the love they once had is still present. Present enough to keep her trapped with him long enough to give him the opportunity to kill her and turn her over to the side of the infected.

Being a producer on the Suny Purchase production of "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* was a beautiful process for me to be a part of, and I am so beyond glad that I undertook this project as my senior project to close out this year. Being allowed the chance to see what the process of a show looks like from the point of view of the administrative side was more than eye opening. I was given the chance to put together a cast, undergo scheduling table reads, procuring props myself with my team, debriefing with crew members for aspects of the production I never previously would have been privy to, and to work side by side with my director while simultaneously being directed *by* them. I have grown a greater appreciation for the work done not on stage than I had before, which was already a grand amount. I understand to a stronger extent the work that goes on when the lights go out and the curtains are drawn, and I am incredibly thankful for this experience and for having Starkid's "*The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals"* be my final production at Suny Purchase College. Thank you to Hatchetfield.

Production Photos