

## **Melding Cognitive Science and Theatre Arts** **By Alex Knapp (theatre arts and psychology)**

In my studies at the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, I have sought to discover an intersection between my passions in the theatre arts and psychology.

I became interested in psychology, specifically the concept of emotions, in my early teens and developed a passion for the field quickly. My fascinations with psychology incorporate the study of emotions and how emotional states affect our communication, behaviors, how we socialize, and our tendencies to deceive. My courses in the Dietrich School often satisfied these intrigues... but to further pursue this subject, I conducted individual directed research in the Relationship, Communication, and Interpersonal Behavior Lab and with the Affect Analysis Group through Pitt's Department of Psychology. These labs allowed me to analyze emotion and other facets from a critical perspective that I would not necessarily reach in my required courses.

What that research also did, however, was further drive my curiosities' as to how affect influences theatre/performance, psychology, sociality, and trauma. I have been involved in theatre since an early age and my involvement in the arts has subsequently become a substantial part of my life. Until I started in the Dietrich School, my passion for theatre ran parallel to my passion for psychology and only intersected in minor ways.

Then, in my junior year, Assistant Professor Lisa Jackson-Schebetta introduced me to the field of performance studies. Since then my passions have maintained an ever-growing intersectionality. With Dr. Jackson-Schebata's help, I decided to pursue a BPhil in the Theatre Arts department and began doing independent research in theatre arts as part of that pursuit. Both Dr. Jackson-Schebata and my BPhil advisor Visiting Assistant Professor Sara B.T. Thiel helped me carve my research path through thorough discussions and the sharing of their detailed knowledge.

My research seeks to meld cognitive science with theatre studies to facilitate our knowledge of the embodiment of cognitive processes on the stage and in communities affected by the theatre. I explore trauma, memory, and affect as forms of performance that are ingrained in historical contexts and may be used as an analytical lens through which to view cultural (e.g., theatre, dance, music), social (e.g., the performance of everyday life, maintenance of social constructs, etc.), and political performance (e.g., political rallies and protests, maintenance of ideologies, etc.).

To conduct this research, I read a large number of texts, watch performances, critique scripts, analyze empirical psychology research, and more. Humanities research requires a large amount of writing and time outside of the lab setting to gather sources and construct your argument. Despite this time commitment, the research process has been incredibly rewarding and even avenues I chose not to pursue have served to enhance my own knowledge.

While my core fascinations lie at the intersection of psychology and theatre and performance studies, the methodology I learn is incredibly beneficial across many areas of study. I frequently draw from sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, and biology. This not only supports my own thinking and research, but allows me to feel unrestrained in my academic pursuits and consistently opens new possibilities of looking at concepts across fields.

Studying across disciplines influences me so deeply because of the prospect of a more interdisciplinary academia. I strongly believe that, no matter your field of study, we are all pursuing the same goals of acquiring knowledge and understanding. By bolstering interdisciplinary perspectives and communities so follows more nuanced and exciting perspectives on various subjects of interest.