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Lucy (in) the Slut with Diamonds

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LUCY (IN) THE SLUT WITH DIAMONDS

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Theatre and Dance
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Vanessa Genoveffa Borg

May 2016

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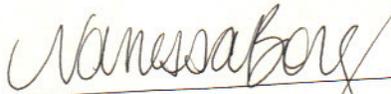
Vanessa Borg
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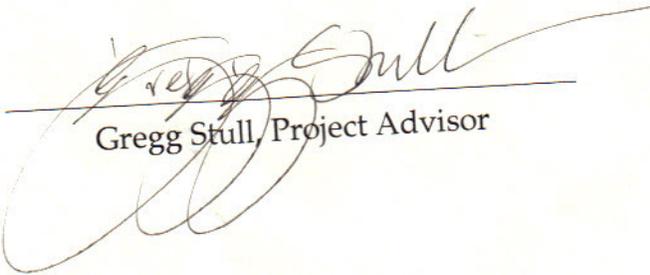
*Performing Lucy in
Avenue Q*

submitted to the Department of Theatre & Dance
in fulfillment of THEA 482: Senior Project

<http://lucytheslut.umwblogs.org/>

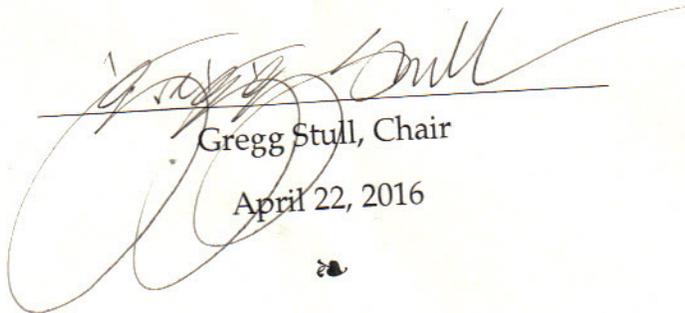


Vanessa Borg



Gregg Stull, Project Advisor

AWARDED HONORS IN THEATRE, 2016



Gregg Stull, Chair

April 22, 2016



UNIVERSITY OF
MARY WASHINGTON

Department of
Theatre and Dance

Lucy (in) the Slut with Diamonds

Sure it's a stretch...but that's what Lucy's good at.

Lucy and Miss. Piggy

Posted on October 19, 2015

Miss. Piggy, easily being the 'sexiest' puppet that has ever been marketed towards an audience of all ages, seemed like the best place to start with research for Lucy.

One similarity between the two puppets is their diva personality, and the fact that they are both actresses and singers. Miss. Piggy and Lucy both know how to play towards their audience, as we can see from this 1982 clip of Miss. Piggy performing "I Will Survive":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7HYYKEbfLk&feature=youtu.be>

A difference between them is that Miss. Piggy seems to have a generally sweeter temperament, Lucy appears to be bitchier and leans somewhat towards the more pessimistic side of realism. However, this could also be because we see mostly see her in performance mode and interacting with Princeton and Kate, who seem to be a bit younger and more naive than she is. One way they are both similar, however, is their quick wit and penchant for clever insults. Lucy demonstrates that in her interactions with Kate, and one example of that coming from Miss. Piggy would be her appearance with Kermit on Jimmy Kimmel Live:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdOj7Hlahik&feature=youtu.be>

A difference between them is that Miss. Piggy has more of a brassy, 'puppet voice' than Lucy does. I think that it's important that Lucy has a bit more of a realistic, human voice because she exists more in our real world than the rest of the puppets in Avenue Q, so there needs to be a distinction between them. Lucy "The Slut" is also, obviously, a performer of the adult entertainment industry specifically- unlike Miss. Piggy, who is more of a family-friendly performer and, quite honestly, is a bit classier.

It can be argued that Miss. Piggy and Lucy the Slut are the two most successful characters that we get to meet from each of their worlds. Lucy has beauty, prestige within her career, money, independence, and seems to be one of the most well-adjusted of all the puppets in *Avenue Q*. Miss. Piggy, likewise, has beauty, a fantastic career, confidence, and prestige that carries over from the world of the Muppets into our own- in the '70s and '80s she was more popular than any of the other muppets (including Kermit) and she published a book that became a New York Times bestseller. She has met and

collaborated with many famous artists and designers; including Elton John, Ozzy Osbourne, Dolly Parton, Vivienne Westwood, Celine Dion, Ryan Seacrest, Marc Jacobs, Lady Gaga, and countless others; launched a beauty line in partnership with MAC cosmetics, and started a lifestyle collection with QVC -- which can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZctjXwndgo&feature=youtu.be>

All in all, these women are two very different puppets but I can see Lucy (and myself) drawing a lot of inspiration from Miss. Piggy's no-nonsense attitude, confidence, show-stopping dramatics, and quick wit.



Secret sisters?

Puppet Boot Camp

Posted on November 17, 2015

I know that I've been very behind on typing up my blog posts. I've been physically writing down notes for quite some time now but have put off actually typing them up here, so I'm trying to catch up on that now, starting with the beginning of this whole process: puppet boot camp.

The first realization I had during this process came during our very first day of learning puppet technique, which was: wow this is actually a lot harder than it looks. What I realized eventually is that in order to be a successful puppeteer and really bring life to the character the actual puppeteering technique you use has to look effortless. When people walk and move in everyday life it often isn't slow or laborious or disjointed, it looks easy and natural. It's very important to be able to master this

natural sense of movement within the puppet itself, in order for the audience to be able to connect with the character and not be pulled out of the world by sloppy, non-intentional movement or lack of focus. All of this is a lot easier said than done, the only way to really master the movement is through practice- which, thankfully, we got a lot of.

As it stood though, the general excitement that the entire cast felt at the beginning of puppet bootcamp began to dissipate pretty quickly as, by the third day, we realized that the soreness in our muscles was only going to get worse. Quite a lot worse actually. The stretches that we learned for our fingers and arms became very important to help relieve cramps and muscle aches, though I must also admit that I didn't take many notes in my classes during that week or the one after as it became kind of hard to hold a pen for extended periods of time. Another challenge that I think is worth mentioning is that our puppeteer coach was sometimes a bit lascivious towards the girls in the cast, I think sometimes particularly towards me since Lucy (the Slut) provided somewhat of an opportunity for him. I did my best to not let any of that affect me while working on Lucy's voice or her movement and I don't think it did, though it was definitely something that I had to work through. I certainly felt more comfortable to experiment with Lucy after that element of our rehearsals was no longer present.

The techniques that we learned were interesting and indispensable, particularly when it came to learning the dynamics of basic puppet movement. As I said before, when puppet movement is done correctly it seems flawless and the audience automatically understands what is going on. I grew up watching The Muppets and had always just understood what it meant when Kermit looked down and stroked his stomach (being uncomfortable or hesitant) or when he smushed his mouth together (grimacing) but had never taken the time to think about what the puppeteer was actually doing to make those expressions happen. Or, for that matter, how the audience automatically understands what those movements mean even though *humans* would never perform those actions to convey those emotions. It's something I thought about often in those lessons, how there is clearly a secret language to puppet body movement that has become so ingrained in those of us who grew up watching The Muppets and Sesame Street that we understand it even though, were it translated into human movement, it would make absolutely no sense. I realized at that point that, while I could try to incorporate some elements of human movement into Lucy, attempting to model her movement directly after a human woman's would be useless. I had to find her character from a puppet perspective first, then add the human element into that later, if possible and necessary.



The many expressions of Kermit THE Frog.

Vocal Life

Posted on November 17, 2015

When it came to finding a voice for Lucy there were a lot of different available routes to go, but the first thing that Gregg suggested to me was to find a dialect for her to have in her everyday speaking voice. At our first rehearsal with Gregg, when we were all experimenting with puppet voices together for the first time he asked me to try multiple different dialects: French, Southern, German, Russian, being some of them. As I was playing with the dialect after that I tried to figure out which would make the most sense for Lucy to have.

All of the above can be found in New York City so any of them *could* make sense, and Russian or eastern European is one that I played around with a lot. Part of this was because I know that our audiences are pretty used to hearing southern accents on our stage (*Miss. Firecracker*, I had one in *Lysistrada*) and because we are in the south southern accents are just more prevalent in the area in general. I wanted to try an accent that would sound a bit more foreign to our audience; I picked Russian to play with partially because it was one that I was more familiar with because I use it sometimes as part of an inside joke with friends, and also because I know that Eastern European women are pretty prevalent within the adult entertainment industry—often because of human trafficking, sadly. I eventually decided that these weren't good enough reasons to keep using the Russian accent because, while Lucy does work in the adult entertainment industry she is not a trafficked person or basic sex worker, she's very much a performer. I believe that Lucy is actually pretty saavy, "Lucy the Slut" is actually her legal name but it's also a brand that she has built. She is a touring artist so clearly her performing ability is there, but with the name and body that she has it certainly makes sense for her to be able to make a LOT of money by marketing herself the way she has and appealing to an adult audience.



(How many puppets have marketing like that?)

In the end I decided to go with a southern accent, I thought it made the most sense considering Lucy's revelation at the end of the show that she has become a born-again Christian. To me this seemed more likely to indicate that she came from a conservative, Christian background in the southern U.S. than Eastern Europe where the largest religious population is most likely Eastern Orthodox.

Chris told me very early on that I should think of a deeper, more resonant and sultry vocal timbre when it came to the quality of her vocal speech. Gregg also suggested to me to listen to some Bette Midler, which I did, but while I appreciated the strength that she conveys in her voice and wanted to use some of that as inspiration, I still felt like there was a big gap between how she sounded and how I wanted Lucy's voice to sound. I played around with this for a little while but couldn't really find anything that I was happy with until I had my vocal coaching session with Helen. She helped me find my true tonal range through y-buzzing, and that really helped me connect to a deeper sound that felt genuine. One thing that I thought was very interesting and helpful through this whole experience is the way working on Lucy's ordinary vocal life and working on the vocals in "Special" really complimented each other. I had taken voice and body movement before and learned my y-buzz then but kind of lost that skill, I think just because it didn't fully connect. I have belted in songs before but it's never been as strong as my belt has become through working on "Special". I think that the quality of my voice has really improved since working with Kathy Ahearn, I also practiced a lot in my free time over the summer, and now after working on my belting voice and y-buzz together each feels more solid because they complement each other. I can feel that my voice has changed pretty dramatically even over the course of the semester, my voice *feels* healthy and at least somewhat warmed-up all the time, it's exciting progress.

Bad At Team-Building Exercises, Good At Being A Team

Posted on November 27, 2015

When we got together for our first rehearsal it became clear that, I think more than with any other musical I've been in thus far, the people in this cast were all coming from a variety of backgrounds and different experience levels. I think at times this made things slightly nerve-wracking for everyone, but in the end I think that it was an amazing experience. I feel that every person in the cast was able to draw inspiration from other people in our cast, and we pushed each other to do better and work harder. I was very impressed with how much every performer grew over the course of working on the show, especially the freshmen in the cast, they knocked my socks off. I think that they really put in hard work over the course of the production and learned a lot very quickly, the UMW Theatre Department is lucky to have them as a part of the department.

In my opinion one of our most fun rehearsals was our first, team-building exercises rehearsal with Gregg. We did non-verbal exercises requiring teamwork and cooperation, and others that necessitated quick-thinking, memory, fast learning, and clear communication. One of the exercises that stood out to me the most this time around was when we had to pair up with a partner, talk to each other, and write down six things that we had in common. Olivia was my partner and through talking to each other in this exercise and then a bit more throughout the show I learned enough about her that she really started to remind me of myself my freshman year. Sure we have differences as well but the one that seemed to be the largest to me was that she seems so much more confident in herself than I was in myself freshman year. She already understands the importance of taking risks and trusts herself to do that. It made me wonder how much more I could have maybe grown as a performer if I had learned these things earlier on, and it makes me excited to see where Olivia will go because she's already made such strides so far. In fact, all of the freshmen in our cast took risks during rehearsals and some of them paid off in big ways. Projecting confidence is something that I've been consciously making an effort to work on for the past few years, and getting to know these young performers and seeing their progress has reminded me of the importance of that skill.

One thing that we weren't very good at, however, was making domino chains.

Music Rehearsals

Posted on December 1, 2015

One of the things that I loved the most about this role is that, while I sang background vocals in a lot of songs, Lucy herself only has one big number. Actually, I guess that was a blessing and a curse because in the back of my mind was always the hope that I'd knock that one big number out of the park- but there was also the fear that if I messed up I wouldn't have another opportunity to redeem myself in the show. But I loved doing "Special", every night I got to sing it was so much fun, I'm really thankful that I got cast in such a great role for my senior project.

While working on "Special" I had one-on-one coaching sessions with Kathy Ahearn, Wes Hockaday, and Chris Wingert. Most of the feedback they gave me centered around finding dynamics within the song, and finding how I should work the jokes in the song and the interaction with the audience that it requires. Honestly, one thing that really worried me at first was that I felt like I wasn't getting much feedback in terms of what I should work on vocally with the song. In the past I've usually had more to work on technically with songs, but I think that I had fewer difficulties with this song because my voice has improved recently and because the song sits in such a comfortable place in my voice already.

The scariest part of the whole rehearsal process was when I first started doing choreography and blocking while singing, because I had gotten used to just parking and barking with the song and it felt very solid. But then when we added the choreography (and then a bit again when we added the show

puppet) I hadn't anticipated how much I would have to modify my breath to make it work. There were a few rehearsals where I got very breathy and parts of the song were just off, it was scary to suddenly be so thrown off when I hadn't anticipated it making that much of a difference. I think that part of the problem though was just that the choreography was still so new, sometimes I would forget to breathe while trying to remember the next move. I practiced the choreography more and once that was solid it didn't take long for me to be able to sing the song again as I had practiced it.

The most fun part of the process was once we got to performances, by that time I felt very comfortable with what I was doing during "Special", both vocally and physically with the puppet. I was able to just relax into the role and loosen up, it was an interesting paradox of sorts, to still be trying hard to give the best performance possible but also to just feel very at ease with it. Another *huge* "A-ha!" moment was singing through the song for the first time with the orchestra. Chris had tried to describe the accompaniment for me to understand the vibe of the song a bit more and I didn't really get it until hearing it for the first time. But as soon as the band started playing during the zitsprobe I understood exactly what he had meant, everything really felt like it clicked in that moment. Really feeling and relishing the vibe of the music helped me loosen up onstage as well.

"So come on baby let down your guard!"

-Lucy' motto before all of her performances (probably)

Summation

Posted on December 2, 2015

All in all, I couldn't have picked a more fun show and role to end my college career with. I learned things about what I need to work on as a performer through this role (more confidence earlier on in the process, difficulty putting together vocal work with choreography) and I also gained new skills and learned what I do well (puppetry, belting). I was able to take away some things to think about; for example, a few other students came up to me after they saw the show and said that they hadn't even known that I could sing. This is not something I've ever tried to hide but it doesn't seem very good for someone who wants to be a professional musical theatre performer to have that said to them, maybe I need to work on finding more opportunities to sing publicly? It seems like a good idea to seek those opportunities out, after all, why would someone tell you about an audition or tell a casting director about you if they don't know what you're capable of? So I guess one thing I'm thinking about now is finding ways to better represent and display the skills that I have, in auditions as well as just in regular life.

Another thing that stood out to me was how, even though I thought I was pretty much finished developing Lucy's character by opening night, she continued to grow the more comfortable I became with letting her do that. Once I relaxed into performing as Lucy I was able to let her be more loose and respond more to other characters and the audience. One thing that had been in my mind but that I was actually able to put into practice more once this happened was casual body language. Actors standing onstage display casual body language and I wanted to be able to convey this with the puppet as well, it became much easier when I was already confident enough with my basic blocking to start experimenting with some other ways to move her that weren't absolutely necessary, but would help convey attitude. In my first blog post I talked about Miss. Piggy and how she was a great reference to be knowledgeable of for Lucy, although (I thought) she probably wouldn't have much to offer in terms of actual character development as Lucy and Miss. Piggy are very different. I still stand by that, however, it became interesting to see Lucy's movements become a bit more similar to Miss. Piggy in her more "casual" moments. When Lucy performs "Special" she adopts a bit more of a casual attitude to receive applause at the end, I wanted to have her acknowledge the audience and the most natural response seemed to be to have her chuckle with them and blow kisses in response to the applause, these actions ended up being quite Miss. Piggy-like in nature. I also added much more of a bounce to her curtain-call walk, as this seemed to fit more than the other sultry persona she usually puts on. All in all, I was just surprised by how easy it was to develop the character even further just by loosening up, I will try to apply this to other roles in the future. I was also amused by how Miss. Piggy's physicality did end up influencing Lucy's physicality in the end, even though I hadn't anticipated this originally.

Overall, this role has been very reaffirming. I'm sure that at some point in their careers every person has wondered if they made the correct choice, that every student has had doubts as to whether they'll be able to even turn their degree and experience into a career. This is one fear that I think a lot of student performers have in particular: am I good enough to do this professionally? Will I be able to get cast consistently? This probably isn't the last I've seen of those doubts but this show was so reaffirming in that I felt like I gave the best and most professional performance I could have given. Based on the feedback I've gotten and the way I felt about my performance in this role overall I think I'll be graduating this year not just *hoping* that I'll be able to make a career in this industry but *believing* it.

