

# THE HIERARCHY OF FISH

Commitment to Collaboration & Continuing the Conversation  
Despite Distance



A still from *The Hierarchy of Fish*

BY LAUREL HINTON

The Farm Theater is a New York non-profit that has a stronghold on creating links and networks for young actors to use while decreasing the gap between college and the working world of artists. One of their highlighted programs is the College Collaboration Project. The initiative provides students a chance to see a play come to full fruition, from the initial workshopping and creation of the script, to a final product that is presented in New York the following year. As a part of the 2019-2020 season, Shenandoah University announced that it would be partnering with The Farm Theater's College Collaboration Project. What the College Collaboration gives students fits into an arena of new work, which is already valued by the school, but is a specific experience that is hard to come by unless you find yourself a working professional. Through this process, students have the empowering access to see how their voices directly affect the play while

building relationships with industry professionals.

## *The Process*

The College Collaboration Project is thorough and takes place over a year-long period. The Farm chooses a female playwright to provide a piece on a predestined topic written specifically for college aged actors. In April 2019, this process began for Judith Leora. She called a group of Shenandoah students along with Padraic Lillis, founder of The Farm Theatre, to start the conversation about the 2019-2020 chosen topic: free speech versus hate speech. For an hour, students shared what the phrase meant to them —specifically on their campus— while making their cases and asking questions. From there, the process was quiet

until August, when some of those same students went to New York with Director Scott Hudson (Labrynth Theatre Company, SU Head of Acting), eager for the opportunity to attend a professional reading and be a part of the adjustments that followed. Over three days, rewrites occurred continuously as tough, taboo conversations on content circulated the room. In the months since, the play has been workshopped at another university as edits continued to occur. A full year later, Shenandoah has the privilege of putting up Judith Leora's, *The Hierarchy of Fish*.

Besides adjusting to a new way of life as a whole, there are performance-specific difficulties that we have had to overcome

amidst a pandemic sweeping the globe, sending our cast and crew back to their childhood rooms across the country. Our team is streaming rehearsals from eight states and two time zones, and we are having to navigate how to efficiently run a rehearsal for a staged piece on a screen. Even though the process has presented itself with hard comings, we are lucky enough to have a chance to work directly with Sidney Williams and Judith Leora. Williams is a New York based professional actor who is playing one of the adults in the show—the same character that he read in the show's first workshop in 2019—who we would not be able to have with us if it were not for the technology-based approach we are having to take. Leora has been in almost every rehearsal, listening to our concerns and editing the script as we go along, ultimately creating one of the most ideal environments that a young performer, writer, or director could be a part of.

The internal conversation has also been prospering throughout our process. Our dramaturg, senior Carmen Burbridge, expressed that, "rehearsing over zoom allows me to listen to the text more fully and to focus solely on the language and how we can serve the text.... It feels like good practice for our post-collegiate futures to get the chance to work with a playwright on their work in development." Freshman Gracie Keener was supposed to make her mainstage debut in Shenandoah's Glaize Studio Theater but is now making it over Zoom. Within the disappointment, she still took time to stress her appreciation. "I quickly grew to realize how valuable this process was for myself and for others. In times of hardship, people everywhere turn to art for an escape, for hope, for a glimpse of beauty," she remarked, while also expressing the unique, resourceful opportunity to work on tablework for five weeks in a row.



Senior Rylie Butzbaugh-Patrick's new set up  
for *The Hierarchy of Fish*

# *The Piece*

## *The Hierarchy of Fish*

"When a prominent professor at a liberal arts college refuses to use a student's preferred pronoun, it unleashes an intense battle over political correctness. A slur is painted on a door, a slushie is hurled into a professor's face and the students struggle to find the line between freedom of speech and the freedom to be their authentic selves."

By the time the play got to our hands, free speech still held emphasis, but a much larger issue was presented: the hierarchy of power. Where we once had a room of professionals reading through a new script observing who was right or wrong, we now have a story where no one gets off clean— a much more universal occurrence. *The Hierarchy of Fish* went from being a relatively clear division of politics to a question of humanity. There is an incredible innovation that comes from this process as a whole, but more importantly, an immediacy of the conversation that the play generates.

A hot topic of the play deals with gender and sexuality—what do those words mean and who has a right to comment on it? A strong, reoccurring point within the show is that you are the only person who can decide who you are. It raises the question of individual identity, leading us through rough circumstances and questions about determination and expression of pronouns, yet also encapsulates the beautifully tragic challenge of everyone wanting to have an unapologetic, voiced opinion on how other's beliefs affect them. There is a strange sort of stereotypical encouragement within the fact that a group of college students is telling this story. College is where you are told you will

change the most and are continually on the lookout of discovering what you believe while discerning how to express that respectfully. To be able to relay something that we are all learning through a tangible piece of work is truly incredible and opens the floor to a continual stream of questions.

*"We can't allow ourselves to stop listening to the call to create, because that's exactly what we need to be doing in times such as these." -Gracie Keener*

## *The Challenge*

From the eyes of a student assistant director, I leave you this: If something comes up that you do not agree with, do not turn off the screen. Sit in your opinion, acknowledge it, and be proud of yourself for believing something so strongly—that is a hard thing to come by. But then open your ears. *The Hierarchy of Fish* is inviting and lighthearted yet is an educational lesson on humanity at its core. Debatably more important than the information that is shared throughout this piece is the way the relationships change and grow as these individuals make the active choice to step out of their own comfort zone and listen, even if they do not necessarily agree. Know full well that your views will not be presented as the "good guy" continuously through this show because we are all



humans and we all slip up. The more we listen, the richer we can grow to the things occurring around us. Ask yourself, "if I put what I firmly believe aside, what deeper human experience and connection can I find within me?" And if you leave with more information, more tolerance, or more appreciation for the medium of artistic communication, we have done our job.

Shenandoah Conservatory is a place where support runs deep, and creativity is pushed far beyond it's supposed limitations. With the recent transition online, the school has risen to the challenge of continually cultivating an environment where art can be created and displayed, despite the medium in which it is expressed. Mainstage and student-group productions alike are sustaining weekly performances on various online platforms. Classes are still taking place, and scenes are still being performed. Now, more than ever, the Shenandoah Conservatory community have each other's back, providing an artistic support system to be reckoned with. Shenandoah's spring production, *The Hierarchy of Fish* will be live streamed on The Farm's Facebook page on Saturday, April 19, at 7 p.m. This show presents a process, piece, and artistic challenge like never before. But there has never been a better time for innovative industry collaboration on the levels we are pushing them to now.

For more information be sure to visit the links below- and don't forget to tune into The Farm's Facebook page Sunday, April 19 at 7p.m.

### The Farm:

<http://www.thefarmtheater.org>

<https://www.facebook.com/thefarmtheater6/>

### Shenandoah Conservatory:

<https://www.su.edu/conservatory/>

<https://www.facebook.com/shenandoahconservatory/>



Pictures of Shenandoah students observing the read through and workshopping of the first draft of *The Hierarchy of Fish*