

The Dracula Project

Background

Studio Z is Chicago's only theatre organization dedicated to integrating live theatre and digital technology. The organization has spent a number of years working on programs that successfully integrate emerging technology(ies) for the benefit of the theatre. These past projects have used digital technology primarily as a means of communication furthering international arts exchange.

Since its inception, Studio Z has been actively investigating various approaches for **digital theatre production**. This work has resulted in the discovery of an innovative approach to the development of theatre based on work at the University of Kansas' Institute for the Exploration of Virtual Realities (www.unkans.edu/~mreaney/). The process involves the use of computer-generated scenery and other imagery projected onto screens (and/or the actors' costumes). The audience wears simple plastic glasses that render the scenery three-dimensional. **This effect results in a viscerally engaging hybridized form of contemporary performance, one which incorporates a variety of artistic mediums (including theatre, film, graphic design and digital art).**

We now propose to produce digital theatre productions as part of a study to investigate the establishment of a base for digital theatre production and research in Chicago. Studio Z, in association with university, corporate, and cultural collaborators, will produce a full-length play, "**Dracula**", a dramatic retelling of the epic vampire tale from a feminine perspective.

The production process begins with a summer workshop (slated for June 2002) which invites students in Chicago-based universities to participate in the development of the performance text. The workshop, focusing on enhancing and experimenting with improvisation and text adaptation techniques, will allow students the opportunity to experience this unique art form first-hand. In addition, the creative process will be thoroughly documented and an integrated study will take place investigating artistic and audience needs, cost analysis, and return on invested time and resources. “**Dracula**” will be presented in the spring of 2003. We believe the project will produce not only a very dynamic and new type of theatre but research and information that will be useful to theatre artists and others interested in exploring the intersection of digital technology and the arts.

Project Description

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published in London in 1897 and attained best-seller status almost immediately. For every generation since it has remained one of the most thrilling, horrible and suspenseful tales ever conceived. But while much is known of the ominous Count Dracula, far less attention has been paid to uncovering the details of Stoker's life.

Scholars have long asserted that Bram Stoker was unquestioningly as fascinating as the bloodthirsty vampire of his imagination. an anglo-irishman (born, raised and educated in Dublin), he became obsessed with the dark side of Victorian culture beginning in childhood. Working as an assistant to famous stage actor Sir Henry Irving later in life, Stoker gravitated towards theatrical imaginings of ghosts, goblins, witchcraft and the occult. The 1905 death of Irving left him unemployed and nearly penniless. By that time he had written over seventeen novels (mostly tales of terror), earned a law degree, and re-directed his macabre fascinations into a structured campaign for "moral" reform in twentieth-century life.

Like other writers and artists who left Ireland for the promise of greater opportunity elsewhere (most notably George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce) Stoker was forced to contend with issues of displacement and rejection by British society. He remained, until the end, a rudderless Irishman looking for love and acceptance in a world he never fully understood. In his last years, isolated and alone, he appeared not so very dissimilar from the loveless count of his imagination.

Project concept **GOTHIC, EROTIC, Storytelling..**

In Studio Z's version of the text of *Dracula* would be set in the gothic mansions and stonewalled huts of late Victorian Dublin. Setting the tale within the backdrop of Irish history, *Dracula* becomes the nexus of intense cultural and political turmoil (revealing a struggle between old and new worlds, oral vs. written traditions, social and economic disparity, gender and sexual differences, political and religious conflicts and Anglo-Irish vs. Catholic Irish cultural clashes).

Further, this re-telling of the epic would highlight the erotic and titillating aspects of *Dracula*. (rather than reenacting each bloody, gory detail). Working with a palate of yellow, blue and gray hues, the production would endeavor to imagine how the Count, an Eastern European nobleman, is himself trapped in a world of his own making (one marked by isolation and despair)—as desolate and alone as Stoker himself felt in England (as an Irishman).

Creative Innovations: Digital Aspects of Production

The production would incorporate 3-D technology (computer-generated imagery and graphics) as well as various computer software programs and state-of the-art projection. These elements together allow for an innovative approach to a familiar text like *Dracula* (the unveiling, in vivid detail of the visual richness and linguistic density of the story). The materials and technical innovations utilized in

the production would be developed by a committed cross- section of theatre and visual artists, computer specialists, Web technicians and digital pioneers.

Cast Size

“**Dracula**” calls for eight cast members (4 females, 4 males).

Production Location

Ideally, venues such as the Palace or Uptown Theatres would capture the look and feel of being inside Dracula’s castle. A studio space such as ones situated at Steppenwolf or The Goodman (approximately 150 seat audience capacity) would also work, conveying more of the intimacy that such a text elicits. The technical equipment is mobile and able to be transported

“Dracula’s” Artistic Team

Kathryn Farley (Director)- Kathryn is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University and has spent that past four years conducting extensive research on contemporary Irish cultural life, focusing on how issues of national identity are being both expressed and contested within the context of theatrical performance. At Northwestern she teaches courses which investigate the performance of contemporary Irish drama and the adaptation of fiction. An accomplished stage director and producer, Kathryn began experimenting with emerging technologies in her recent production, *Away with the Fairies*-- an exploration of the dramatic possibilities of utilizing a historic event (and historical narrative) as the basis of a performance text. For a detailed account of the production and Kathryn’s artistic background, please refer to www.awaywiththefairies.org.





Tim Portlock (*Lead Designer*)- Tim obtained a Masters of Fine Arts degree in Painting from the University of Chicago in 1994 and is currently completing a MFA in digital art at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory at University of Illinois-Chicago. Tim is also an award-winning painter and virtual-reality artist who has taught courses in digital media design and 3-D modeling at various colleges and universities in the Chicago area, including: Columbia College, Northern Illinois University and The Chicago Academy for the Arts. A current CV and catalog of his work can be found at www.evl.uic.edu.

Dan Zellner (*Producer/Creative Consultant*)- After obtaining a Masters of Fine Arts degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, Dan relocated to Chicago where he initiated Studio Z in 1991. The organization initially set out locally to develop new plays for the theatre. The Studio conducted monthly play readings of scripts by Chicago playwrights and presented "**The Z Festival**", Chicago's first play festival on video. The theatre company continued to make use of video and soon was experimenting with the Internet. In 1994, Studio Z produced "**Voices from Down Under**", a U.S. - Australian Internet based play development workshop. The Studio has received support and commissions from the following organizations: **Ameritech, The Chicago Historical Society, City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, Creative Inc., Illinois Arts Council, The Mining Company and WPWR-TV Channel 50 Foundation.** To find out more about Studio Z, please refer to: www.studioz.org.

Joseph Kowalenko (*Technology Coordinator*)

Meticulous Ltd., a Chicago based company wh



that support the integration of technology and the arts. These services range from technology coordination to brand development. Drawing on a diversified skill set, Mr. Kowalenko works across a variety of industries that include technology, manufacturing, media, and the arts. He strives to blend experiences learned in the corporate environment with the creative processes involved with the arts. Based on a solid belief that few people use their tools to the fullest extent, he attempts to find ways to repurpose technology until maximum usage is achieved.

Other Studio Z Projects

In the summer of 2002, Studio Z will present “**DuSable**”, which tells the story of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable: Chicago's first non-native settler. “**DuSable**” follows the life of this black pioneer from his departure from Haiti to the sale of his Chicago homestead. The play deals with all the legends, historical conjecture, and reported facts in a humorous, forthright, and revealing manner. An ensemble of actors play multiple roles and suggested scenery is used for DuSable’s many travels. The play is suited for all ages and asks the audience to see history for what it is: a human account, with errors and imperfections, of actions that affect our lives and shape our perceptions of the world.

“**DuSable**” was first developed in collaboration with **Studio Z, Red Path Theater** (Illinois’ only Native American theatre company), and the **Chicago Historical Society**. Staged readings of the play were presented at the Chicago Historical Society and Red Path Theater in celebration of Chicago’s 160th birthday.

The readings starred a talented cast of local actors featuring **Aaron Freeman** in the title role. The development team included **Chuck Smith** and **Phillip Van Lear**. Music was composed by local jazz musician **Bethany Pickens** and artwork by **Ruben DeSantiago** was commissioned through collaboration with the **Marwen Foundation**. This artwork was displayed at the readings as well as on an educational website developed to accompany the play.

The DuSable website (www.studioz.org/dusable/) provides information about DuSable, early Chicago history, and the play. “**DuSable**” was funded in part by the **Illinois Arts Council**. Following the Chicago presentation, “**DuSable**” was presented as part of the African-American Theatre program’s first annual **Juneteenth Festival** at the University of Louisville.