

*A One-Woman Disney Cabaret*

**An Honors Thesis (THEA 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Cabaret is an art form that most people do not know about. Through my experience in the class THEA 499, my senior cabaret class, I learned about the art of cabaret, and continued to improve in my skills of singing, storytelling, and creating patter. I wanted to create this project to tell my story through many different songs, but also to illustrate, through the theme of Disney, that cabaret is something that can be done in many ways and can be easily translated to a digital form. My half-hour digital one-woman Disney cabaret tells many different stories about my life, hardships, family, and love for my friends.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Beth Truitt, first and foremost, for volunteering her time to help me on this project, but also volunteering all of her time and energy these past four years on helping me to grow, being there for me at my lowest moments, and for being my biggest cheerleader at Ball State.

I would also like to thank my classmates in the Musical Theatre Option class of 2021 for helping me through the class, cheering me on, and for always being willing to send me funny videos of themselves at any time of the day or night.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for supporting my musical theatre career since I was six, playing a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*. I would never be where I am today without them believing in me every step of the way.

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## Process Analysis Statement

### A One-Woman Disney Cabaret

When I was first considering what topic I would write my thesis on, I was overwhelmed. I had so many ideas that were just blurs in my brain, and no idea that I could put concretely on paper. As a Musical Theatre major here at Ball State University, I was at a loss to figure out what to write my thesis on in terms of what I was passionate about. I knew I was passionate about performing, but how did I translate that passion into a project that could transform into some form of academia? I do not write, so I would not be great at writing my own one person show. I can dance, but I did not want to do that as my entire thesis. I love to act and sing, but how was I supposed to incorporate that into something that I could call a “thesis”?

So I reached out to some people I knew had done this before me. I fortunately had the number of a few Theatre and Dance alumni who had graduated from the Honors College before me, and I had heard somewhere through the grapevine that you might be able to combine your HONR 499 class with your THEA 499 class, so I decided to ask them about it, and thankfully, they were able to point me in the right direction.

After meeting with my option coordinator, I finally had some idea how to combine these classes, and more importantly, I realized that I would *love* to combine my THEA 499 class with my Honors Thesis. My coordinator informed me that since the class was performance-based where we as a class create a group cabaret, most people who combine these two classes tend to perform something like a thirty minute solo cabaret. He told me that that would be my most likely option to be able to turn my experience from that class into my thesis. He encouraged me to try and find a theme for my cabaret, but reassured me that I would not have to tie the cabaret

into anything else besides my work: meaning that I did not need to make it specifically about climate change or social justice (as that had been my current idea).

Now that I had my idea, it was time to choose an advisor, and this part of my process was one of the easiest choices I had to make. I have been taking class and individual voice lessons with my professor, Elizabeth Truitt (whom we all call Beth) for my fourth year now, and we often joke that she is my mom away from mom: she has been there for me as both a teacher and as an emotional support for almost four years now, and I could only hope she would agree to go with me on this last personal journey together. And although this is uncharted territory for us both, she graciously agreed. As an active performer herself, Beth knows so much about putting on performances and the art of musical theatre, and she is an invaluable resource when it comes to putting together this project.

After talking to Beth, I was pointed in the direction of Dr. Livingstone from the honors college, and she also reassured me that this project would be relatively straightforward and that as long as I was passionate about this project, that there was no need to stress. She answered my every question, and just like that, I was on my way to creating my own creative project thesis.

A little more context about THEA 499, or senior cabaret class: the class took place every Tuesday and Thursday for about two hours, and each week, all of my fellow senior MTOs and I had to come up with a new piece to perform. We would get our assignment for the next week after class each Thursday, and then we would have the following week to work on it and then present it that following Thursday. Some examples of assignments included mashups, duets, or singing a group song about social change. Every year in this class there is a different theme, and this year's theme was Disney, so for every piece we created and performed, we had to include at least one Disney song into our performance.

Although we performed our songs the first week in person, after that there was a surge of COVID-19 cases at Ball State, and we decided to continue the class virtually. Each Tuesday, we would meet with our accompanist for that week (either the fabulous Michael Rafter or the incredible Johnna Tavianini) and have them work on our ideas with us, tweak anything if need be, and let us record our piano accompaniment so that we could sing to it when we recorded ourselves for our performance.

After we recorded our songs, we would upload them to a YouTube channel just for our class, and then on that Thursday during class time we would all do a Zoom call, watch everyone's performances, and get feedback from our professors. If any of the professors were not able to be on the Zoom call that week for any reason, they could go back into our YouTube channel and watch all of our performances. Although this is not the way the class has been taught in the past, I believe it worked very well for both students and professors, and I believe that I got all of the performance and educational experiences this semester through virtual learning that I would have gotten had we been in person.

In fact, doing the class this way was certainly to my advantage when it came to this project. Because we had to record ourselves performing our pieces each week, I had lots of performances already on tape and ready to be edited into my final project. Of course, some of my performances I re-recorded and improved upon for my final performance video, but it was certainly helpful for both me and my advisor to be able to watch each one after the fact and discuss the performance in terms of this final project.

I decided that to aid myself through writing this reflection, I would keep a journal throughout the semester about my time in class and how I felt about the assignment for each

week. This proved to be invaluable when it came time to start writing my paper, and a lot of the following descriptions come from this journal.

Then, after about six months of quarantine, it was finally time for class to begin. Our first assignment came to us in the form of an email a few weeks before the semester began. The assignment was to tell a story about our summer and how we dealt with quarantine through one Disney song, and we were not allowed to change any lyrics from the song (this would come later). I decided on the song “Try Everything” from the Disney movie *Zootopia*, because I felt that it would be a really fun way to show that I had tried just about every hobby one could think of over quarantine (some being successful while others were complete failures).

When it came time to perform, I was extremely nervous because I was going up to actually physically sing behind that plastic curtain in Strother Theater (little did I know that would be the first and last time I would physically sing in front of my class), and I made mistakes, both lyrically and vocally, but it worked wonderfully with the theme of my piece, and I actually used those mistakes in the moment to prove my point that failure was okay, and actually good. At the end of the day, I had a lot of fun with this first song!

The next week, my assignment was to create a mashup between a Disney and a musical theatre song, with the added challenge of accompanying yourself on any instrument of one’s choosing. I decided my patter (my spoken word/explanation of my story within the song) would be about my identity and about my home in Florida, so I decided to play the ukulele to “Hawaiin Rollercoaster Ride” from the movie *Lilo and Stitch*, to tell my audience about my love of the beach as well as my home in beautiful sunny Florida. I decided to keep this theme for my musical theatre song, and learned “Under the Sea” from the musical *The Little Mermaid* on the ukulele as well, and I decided to use that song to highlight more of the story of me in high school

telling my friends from Florida how nice it is there, and how I do not understand how they want to leave that lovely place (ironic, because I did just that).

That assignment took more research and time than the first assignment for sure, because I've never played the ukulele, and additionally, I had to learn how to mash up two songs to make them sound good together, which is something I had never done before. It was so much fun, despite of all of this work, because learning a new skill is so rewarding and I absolutely love both of these songs, but it was also fun because *Lilo and Stitch* as a movie has been such a passion for me ever since I was little, and to be able to sing a song from it while accompanying myself was just a dream come true.

I believe that a big part of the art of cabaret is learning and getting better at instruments, but generally just trying new and scary things. It definitely took a lot of digging deep and deciding what to focus on for my patter that related back to my identity of family and the beach. From this second assignment, I learned that I might have needed to hone that a lot more as far as specific patter that pertains to my specific story. However, the main thing I learned was that the story for my two songs needed to have more of a through line and I needed to connect them in a more specific way, which I honestly think meant more of a commitment to the development of my patter, especially when it comes to mashups, since the ease of transition between the two songs is vitally important.

Bill Jenkins, one of my professors for my cabaret class, also commented that he kept seeing elements of my humor from those first two pieces, and that he was waiting to see me pull that out full tilt in a future assignment. I had given that a lot of thought, and I think that came through at least a little bit in my duet with Tatum Langley, a colleague in my class, which I will speak about further on in my reflection.



The next assignment, as far as my class goes, went really well. It was the mashup that I had prepared to do two weeks beforehand, before there was a massive COVID outbreak within my class, so I needed to revisit it and fine-tune it before actually performing it in front of the camera. I was not sure how much I liked it initially, but I think I worked it into a place where I was okay with it.

The idea for this assignment was based on an aspect of my personality that I can find very funny at times. Basically I have two sides of myself: I can be extremely sweet and romantic and head-over heels for boys but on the flipside, I am a very intense person that does NOT care about men whatsoever. I like these choices, but in retrospect, I think I could have spent more time on them. I wanted to continue on and reach more into popular musical theatre songs, because I definitely thought it would be way more fun for the layperson's, non-theatre audience member to enjoy.

After I had completed that assignment, I felt that it had gone well, but not spectacular. I had prepared that entire performance the second week into school, so it had been two weeks since I had worked on it. I think it was kind of awkward because I had my accompaniment recorded and split up into parts, so I had to keep pressing play on my laptop after doing my patter in between my pieces. I also did not feel like I could sing in my full voice while singing because I recorded it in a quiet house with my roommates, and I definitely got in my head about them potentially listening (or me disturbing them).

To choose that particular musical theatre song, I just looked through my existing repertoire from the last three years of singing musical theatre to see what would fit the kind of storyline the best. I found "The Simple Joys of Maidenhood" from *Camelot*, and chose that one. I think in hindsight it might have been better to research other musical theatre songs to find that

perfect fit for my story. However, I liked my choice of Disney song, I just think I should have done more lyric changes, as my professors suggested.

For the next assignment, Wren Rivera (a classmate) and I did a duet virtually. We decided to make our story about how everyone in our class though I was gay when I first got to Ball State University, and everyone thought Wren was straight, based on our respective looks. We decided to set my (first) part to “I’ll Know” from Guys and Dolls, with lyrics about the fact that I’ll know when the right man comes along. Then Wren would come in with some patter and start singing “Circle of Life” from The Lion King with many lyric changes that we both thought were hilarious.

When we came in to meet with Michael Rafter, our accompanist, he told us that he liked what we had planned musically, but he suggested that we needed something to tie it all together with respect to the music. We agreed, but we told him that we were not sure how to do that. He then took a minute to think and then suggested we lay one song right over the other. He then gave us some ideas about how we could do this musically (saying he was just “riffing”), and they were *beautiful*. The lyric changes he proposed and the way he put the one piece of music right over the other made Wren and I emotional in that moment. This is what he suggested we sing at the end of the piece:

Emma: When he

Wren: When they

Both: come along

Both: the Circle of Life

We were both really moved by this idea. He recorded all of that accompaniment for us, with a couple of options of which we could choose our favorite. He told us to meet with him

again later, but we believed that we could use what he played for us that day. We were very excited to record and edit it with Wren's wig and my hair pulled up, to show what we looked like when we first came to Ball State.

In hindsight, I think we should have met again and fleshed it out a little more, because, on that Thursday, we did not get good feedback from our professors. They just did not like the number overall. They said that the songs did not work well, and we should have found a song that worked better about the theme of not judging a book by its cover. I really had trouble bouncing back and finding motivation after that, I just really felt like nothing I could do was good.

After having some time to reflect and watch the number again, I decided not to include this duet in my final thesis, because I felt as though I understood a little better what my professors were trying to convey to me after I had time shed off some of that previous emotion. This is something I have learned overall in these past three and a half years at Ball State: you have to be able to put yourself out there and perform, and sometimes you fall flat on your face when you felt as though you were going to shine, and that is all just part of the process of making art.

After all of that reflection and emotion, I was very happy that the next week's assignment was a group number. This gave me time to not feel as though I was being scrutinized individually, but being a part of something bigger than myself. That week was certainly busy and it was a challenge figuring out rehearsal time with all eight of our schedules, but I am honestly really proud of our final product. The following is the process we went through to get to our final performance:

We started a group chat between the eight of us, and then one of my classmates (who ended up very efficiently leading our group: Thomas Whitcomb) suggested two songs we all liked to mash up, and then we decided to make our performance's theme about social change issues. After that, we discussed in the chat about when we would meet, and then we met in person and had a long discussion about our theme, messages we wanted to send, and how we would get those messages across.

After that, Thomas (being the best at music theory out of our group) arranged some acapella parts for our performance, and then Thomas and another talented classmate of mine (Jake Letts) transformed "Seize the Day" from *Newsies* into a gospel arrangement, which sounded so cool and inspiring and chilling. After that, we were allowed to practice a couple of times with our accompanist for that week, Johnna Tavianini, and solidified blocking, which was extremely fun.

Overall, it was simply *so much fun* to sing with my friends again after we had not been able to for an extremely long time. It was absolutely magical and I would not have traded that experience for the world.

The next assignment was to re-create, or improve on, a past assignment, which I loved because it was something I was planning on doing for my process for this thesis at the time. I decided to re-do my version of "Simple Joys/I'll Make a Man Out of You." I chose that because, as I previously stated, I had to keep bending over and playing the music in my original performance, which was really distracting for my audience. I also decided to change some of the lyrics of "I'll Make a Man Out of You" to make it about a group project at school (so that the subject matter was more geared to me and my life), and to top it all off, I thought it would send the point home if I put on my signature baseball cap that says "Spicy" across the front.

This was also a time when I was really reflecting on how to make my videos look more professional and put together, since that was the format I was going to be using for my final performance. After experimenting a bit with my lighting and background, I asked my roommate Erin Kiahara if I could borrow her tripod so that my phone camera could be at the perfect angle, and then I ironed a navy blue sheet I had and duct taped it to my wall as a background. Although this setup seems rudimentary, in my opinion, it ended up looking really good on camera. Additionally, I felt like I spent a lot more time on the singing of this performance and I believe it came out much better than the last time and that this performance was something I could be truly proud of (and was thesis-project worthy).

After that assignment, I couldn't wait to do something more vulnerable--a big comedy moment too-- but I really wanted to get real and raw, as I had seen my colleagues do a lot of pieces like that. I knew I had the potential to do something that could really pull at the heartstrings if I tried, and at that point, I also felt that that was something I was missing from my list of songs and performances that I had done so far.

So I did just that. My next assignment turned out to be a "classmate pick for you" week, and so my friend Cara Niebling picked "Just Around the Riverbend," from *Pocahontis* for me. I was very thankful that she picked this for me, because it made me see my opportunity for vulnerability. I decided that this song would be perfect to tell the story of my college audition process, and how at that time, I had seen my acting career and BFA, "just around the riverbend."

Putting together that number was certainly an emotional rollercoaster for me. I loved the song so much when I was assigned it, and I immediately knew exactly what story to put to it, and I felt so passionate and connected to the song and the story. In this regard, it was very easy to change the lyrics and write the patter.

The week that I recorded this piece, however, was when I was right about to open Ball State's production of the play *The Children's Hour*. Crazy in life was pretty much at a peak, and I did not have a lot of time to spare, so I was trying to cram in everything I could while rehearsing for the show.

That Wednesday, I rushed to record the piece just before my call time for rehearsal that night, and then, lo and behold, when I watched them back, I liked none of my takes. It was extremely frustrating. I felt like my breath support was lacking, and my heart was not in my performance. This was especially frustrating because I felt that I had worked so hard to look more professional and have the best tape I could, so I felt that all my hard work had gone to waste.

Thankfully I found some time the next day to re-record my piece, and I was much happier with the result that second time around. I was still feeling pretty self-conscious about my vocals after that second go-through, but I had improved the piece a good amount overall. I even used the fact that I was in that show at Ball State as part of my story, and I believe that it added a much-needed full circle aspect to my story.

I submitted it to YouTube, and when class time came, I was so very shaky and nervous. I felt like everyone was doing so much better than me, and that other people's stories were better, more real and more honest than mine.

When it was time to watch mine, I suddenly began crying and shaking, because I finally realized that it was good, and that people did like it, and that I should not doubt myself as much as I do. Johnna said, in response to this, that she doesn't remember everyone's auditions for the Musical Theatre program at Ball State, but she remembered mine, which also made me super emotional.

Michael Rafter also responded positively, and said something that I have not forgotten since: he pointed to a poster of a female singer on his office wall, and said that unlike Sutton Foster (with whom he often works), this lady can really only sing when she is telling a story she is connected to. He noted that I am just like her in that way; that I only get into vocal trouble when I am not connected to the story I am telling, and that note really gave me a lot of insight about myself, and I took this note into the future of my work, both on this project and in my performance career in general.

After that class, I received so many text messages from my classmates telling me that I am amazing, and I should trust myself. They truly poured love all over me, and reminded me just how lucky I am. It was a very special moment in a very weird time in the semester and in my life.

The next assignment we received really provided me some levity from my previous task. Our professors provided us with songs, and I got paired with my classmate, the talented Tatum Langley to perform a duet to “Life’s a Happy Song” from *The Muppets*. This song was a simple song about how everything is wonderful despite all of life’s challenges. I genuinely think that was the best cabaret piece I have done in the whole class. It really defined who Tatum and I are as people. We really went all out with the production value: we wore suits and bow ties that we borrowed from her roommate, leggings, and what we call “power boots” (boots with heels). We looked EXACTLY the same with our short wavy blonde hair and similar body types, so that when we turned around, it was genuinely difficult to tell us apart. We included the rest of our class to have cameos in the video we produced, and I feel like it was channeling the original Muppets, when they often create quick cameos for different celebrities.

This video performance was definitely the most both Tatum and I edited and produced technology-wise: I edited the video and Tatum edited the audio; on iMovie and GarageBand respectively. We agreed through our brainstorming sessions that there was absolutely no other way to do it.

The actual movie looks very edited to give it that cheesy-like *Muppets* feel, so we did something similar for our performance, so that hopefully, at the end, our version looked like an actual music video. We recorded our voices over the karaoke version of the song that Tatum found, and then Tatum mixed it together and balanced the audio nicely. We also got dubs of everyone in our class to put on top of the track for their little cameos. Then, we recorded the whole thing on the street we both live on, with the costumes we had planned.

For the actual shooting of the video, we choreographed some dance breaks to add to the goofy look we were going for, with a tap dance section and step-touch moves. I was so excited about our final product, I edited it in one night and then uploaded it to YouTube that same night. The final performance was goofy, cheesy, and honestly one of the most fun things I have done in my life. It ended up being so much work, because Tatum and I really wanted to make the performance spectacular, but it really felt like no work at all. I was having so much fun and Tatum and I were laughing and giggling the whole time and we worked very well together. As far as my wishes for a “big comedic piece,” I think this is the closest I got to that throughout the span of the semester.

Turns out, the video we put so much work into was a hit! Tatum and I were *thrilled*. Although Zoom glitched a lot during the initial showing that Thursday, a lot of my colleagues told me that they went back to re-watch it on our YouTube channel afterwards in order to get the full effect. They said they absolutely loved it and even weeks later people told us that they went



back to watch it a second time, just to enjoy our work. It was such a high compliment and it made me feel really proud of the work Tatum and I put into the number.

The second group number was specifically an opener/closer assignment for our group cabaret. I will abstain from writing about this process in detail, because these two numbers we were assigned to create will be more specifically used for our group cabaret performance for the class. However, I will say that the collaboration in this group project, just like the last one, was so much fun, and I think Tatum Langley's arrangement of "New York, New York," "I'm Walking Right Down the Middle of Main Street, USA," and "When You Wish Upon a Star," was just such a great mashup and it was just so beautiful overall.

Our last assignment was awesome because it was a "wild card" week. We got permission to do any of the songs or stories we had ideas about that we felt like did not get their chance to shine in any of the previous assignments, and I really feel like I stepped up to the plate for this assignment. I went back to my previous notes to look for any type of inspiration, and I found a note scribbled on a random sheet of notes that I really liked: "Timmy coming out story?" This was an idea I had about telling the story of my best friend coming out to me as gay.

I believe that this idea would be something that would be extremely emotionally charged for me (and others) if I chose the right songs, and I was right. I chose "That's How You Know" from the movie *Enchanted*, and "Suddenly Seymour" from the musical *Little Shop of Horrors*. I really liked how I mixed them and re-wrote the lyrics to make the songs more about my specific story. I got really good feedback from this assignment, because I really did feel so emotionally available the entire time I was singing it, and like Michael Rafter said, that really helped my vocal abilities shine.

When it came time to start organizing our group cabaret into one large show, I learned a lot about how to format my own cabaret piece and how to put the songs in an organized order that makes sense to the audience. As far as the process of getting everything completed and into one final video, a lot more went into this than I had originally anticipated. I assumed that it would just be me uploading all of my existent videos into one long video, but it turns out creating this video as one art piece is much more complicated than I had expected.

At first, I tried to put all of my videos together in an online editor, since my computer currently does not have much disc space, but after an entire week of troubleshooting with the editor, I realized that all of the work I had done on it would not export and therefore I was not going to be able to save the video I had created.

Although I was finally able to create enough space on my computer to try the first draft of my video in iMovie, I had learned a lot from initially trying to edit my videos together. I realized that there were some themes I could think about (unity, togetherness, a sense of home wherever you physically are), that I wanted to re-record one of my videos, and that I was thinking I needed a closing number, because at the moment, nothing was really tying the whole thing up in one big bow.

Another thing I noticed from watching the first video back was that it was very jarring to just immediately see one video go straight to the next. The fact that I do not have much patter before any of my songs certainly did not help, as starting the next video right off by singing is particularly jarring, but overall it did not feel like a smooth transition from one song to the next. To remedy this, I was considering creating five to ten second transition videos so that I could provide a little context to the viewer about the next video they were about to see before they saw it. Hopefully this would help ease each audience member from one video to the next.

Something we have spoken about in my cabaret class, and something I certainly needed to consider for this project, was order of songs. Although this may seem like a relatively small detail in the grand scheme of this project, I learned through the creation of this video and from class that order is everything in a cabaret. Sutton Foster, who usually is involved in teaching the cabaret class (this year she was prevented from doing so due to COVID), usually says about order (according to one of my professors, William Jenkins), that a cabaret should have three separate parts. Whether these parts are split up by subject matter, sound, theme, or otherwise, there should be a thorough line that includes three distinct parts to create ultimate satisfaction and entertainment for the viewer.

In creating the order through group discussion for the cabaret I am doing with my classmates, I was able to learn a great deal about how I should order my songs in my final thesis project. Although at that time I was still considering how to order my songs in a way that is satisfying to the viewer, and takes the idea of these three parts into consideration, it was certainly helpful to kick start me into thinking about this process. I spoke with Beth, and we both agreed that the order I had done the songs in class was a good order to use for my final project.

Then I got to work on re-recording my first piece with an introduction to my thesis, recording my transitions, and creating the final number. Although re-recording “Try Everything” and recording my transitions I would use from one piece to the next was fairly simple and straightforward (at this point, I had had a lot of experience recording myself in front of a navy blue sheet duct taped to my wall), recording the final song was not as smooth as I had anticipated.

I had decided a good way to wrap up my video was to sing a cover of “You’ll Always Find Your Way Back Home” from *The Hannah Montana Movie* and feature all of my classmates

doing something cute in the final video. It was not too difficult to get all of my friends to send me short, five second videos of them dancing, or doing something silly, but my mistake came when I tried to record the cover over the karaoke track instead of singing the song live to the camera.

Because I had past voiceover experience, I thought it would be a good idea to use the nice microphone I had and my audio editing software to record my cover of the song. However, I had no idea how complicated mixing music could be. When I recorded my voice over the karaoke track, everything sounded perfect in the software I was using, but when I decided to export the piece to iTunes, my vocal sounded way too loud and, to spare the gorey details of about two hours messing around, googling, and restarting my computer, I finally got the song to sound the way I wanted it to. The only positive thing I took from that experience was that now I am an expert at using audio editing software.

After that trial and tribulation, I put the videos all together and exported the final project onto my computer. I had finally completed my project, and I am very proud of the work, creativity, and effort I put into it, and I hope that everyone who watches it has as much fun as I did making it.

Link to the Cabaret: <https://youtu.be/uARAb-do4ug>