

The Little Merperson: a Nonbinary Theatrical Adaptation of The Little Mermaid

SURG | Arts, Humanities, Performance (AHP)

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well, or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
Presents clear gap in knowledge, which is justified through a scholarly literature review appropriate to the particular creative field.	Participant recruitment methods should include how the researcher plans to contact their identified population.
Shows the importance of filling the gap in knowledge through background on nonbinary people and artists	
Feasibility of the project is emphasized through details about the languages of the texts being reviewed and through identifying particular analytic framework for the literature review.	
Student goes beyond listing qualifications like a resume, but instead interprets how each qualification applies to particular aspects of their project.	



Other Key Features to Take Note Of
Creative Arts projects must describe their creative process whether it is performance, writing, visual arts, or otherwise, and how that process helps to answer the identified research question.
Creative Arts projects should justify their medium (play, performance, poetry, etc) and make an argument for why this art is needed and/or will add to important conversations.
Creative Arts projects should describe their intended audience or impact on audience, which helps to justify the artist's vision and goals.

This summer I want to create a nonbinary theatrical adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s original *The Little Mermaid*. This adaptation requires research in the forms of directed interviews of nonbinary individuals and analysis of previous adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* and queer theory in relation to the tale and mermaids. My adaptation will be poetic, musical, and physical in form. By speaking directly to the experiences and metaphors from my interviews in the context of my other research, my show will be true to modern experience and true to the original tale. The original tale of *The Little Mermaid* is not, like Disney’s version, solely about unrequited love, but it rather tells a story of transformation and transcendence. The little mermaid grows up presented with the world in binaries: land and sea, male and female, and mermaid and human. In the original tale, Andersen reveals other options, air spirits and living amongst the stars as a soul, which ultimately free the little mermaid from their strict binary constraints. The little mermaid gives up everything, but the yearning for their true self. This is the risk of existing outside of the binary in our world: severed ties with family, immense pain and dysphoria with one’s body, unrequited love, struggles with self-love, and losing one’s voice. The little mermaid’s hopeful story is deeply connected to the empowering story of nonbinary self-actualization, and I hope to capture this in my play.

Researchers from centers and clinics for gender dysphoria, identity, interdisciplinary transgender health care, sexology, and gender as well as Departments of Psychology, Sex Research, Forensic Psychiatry, and Endocrinology all joined together to “review” what “limited literature” exists on nonbinary identities.¹ These researchers found that even by the start of 2016 nonbinary and genderqueer were only just now “increasingly being recognized in legal, medical and psychological systems and diagnostic classifications.”² By the spring of 2016, students attempting to learn more found that “trans studies ha[d] yet to devote any significant attention to nonbinary gender identity.”³ The research that does exist on nonbinary and genderqueer identities surrounds nonbinary identities in terms of race, internet, cuneiform culture, anxiety and depression levels, suicide, quality of life in Sweden, sexual orientation, the workplace, family, personality, gaming, community, and healthcare, with limited research within each category.⁴ The majority of this research is not from the perspective of nonbinary individuals, like myself, and some only addresses the nonbinary experience as a footnote to binary (male to female, female to male) transgenering. There is no research available on theatre. The closest I could find was a “count” of artists by gender participating in Irish theatre.⁵ Nonbinary research in theatre, a tool of increasing empathy and connection through storytelling, is essential. Researchers at Kent State examined theatre as a strategy for acceptance noting “the transformative potential of theatre in changing attitudes toward LGBT persons.”⁶ Their findings showed a shift in perspectives and acceptance of the audiences. By creating an informed show that communicates and relates the experience of nonbinary individuals, written by a nonbinary individual, is in and of itself a desperately needed piece of art and literature. Theatre can be “a form of ethical education” for the audience and “empowering too for the performers.”⁷ This powerful potential has already led to two queer adaptations of *The Little Mermaid*. One, *FISH*, focuses on a transition between the two binary genders as a transformation. The other queer adaptation, *Spish*, has open casting and plays with gender, but it does not center the story on nonbinary experience. My show can both give agency to nonbinary artists and increase understanding and openness to an identity marginalized within a larger marginalized community. I will insert a relatively unheard voice into a well-known, gendered, traditional story, a reclamation in itself. This adaptation will focus on the original tale, many large parts of which are not included in other adaptations, including the little mermaid’s motivation to gain a soul and ultimate form as an air spirit. My adaptation has the power to shine a light on nonbinary identity, newly emerging into the mainstream, and advance its cause of acceptance. What better way to do it than by simultaneously embracing and subverting the best known, classic story—a story full of content on gender and transformation, a story already linked to queer theory? A tale whose original author was closeted except

★ Identifies gap in knowledge

★ Justifies artistic medium (theatre)

★ Shows why gap should be filled

in his art: “Andersen could not tell the world of his own homosexual love...but the original manuscripts showed his feelings clearly.”⁸ My research will be the first step into a nonbinary theatrical adaptation of The Little Mermaid.

First, I will read a number of English translations of the original (I do not speak Danish). As I read each translation, I will outline the original tale and take notes on language variations and its effect on the story being told (see Appendix A). I will also begin reading on the history of mermaids and the intersection of queerness, mermaids, and The Little Mermaid (see Appendix B). I will make note of language used, ways the binary is used to contextualize queerness, and symbolism that fits queerness and mermaids for the script. In the second week, I will continue my Appendix B readings and begin an outline for the show based on my readings and story mapping up to this point. Next, I will immerse myself in the many adaptations of the Little Mermaid (see Appendix C). I will review each adaptation based on how they interact with gender, deviation from the original, and the adjectives, images, and metaphors used for the transformation. I have chosen the literature included in the appendixes based on relevance to the project and the standing of the authors/translators. Next, I will expand my outline of the script, detailing what moments require music, words, or movement. I will also conduct a set of interviews with transgender and non-binary individuals (see Appendix E). I want a diverse base of feedback (people of differing colors and age). In order to capture difference of experience with enough time for in-depth interviews and analysis, I will interview 12 to 15 individuals. I have a number of nonbinary and genderqueer connections with whom I can network and interview. I will also reach out to the organizations listed under Appendix D for potential interviewees. The interviews will provide a sense of stories, metaphors, and language they use and identify with and their relationship to the story. This will allow me to inform my adaptation with real experiences as well as more perceptions of the story. I will spend the remaining half of the summer writing and revising my show and its music, returning to my data and notes. I write by starting with the plot, then giving characters full personalities, then fleshing out the moments that are clearest in my mind—the moments of transformation—and then the momentum into them and reverberations out of them. I will also be composing music as a part of the show. My songwriting process is very organic, with pieces of songs coming to me through words that catch me in my reading on the subject, and chord combinations seizing me as I play on the piano.

This project requires that I write a language-sourced, poetry-based play with music. I have already co-written a musical that I am directing on campus in the spring. I have written, recorded, and released a full album of music to iTunes. I won second overall in the State of Michigan for my original poetry, so I am very conscious and caring with my use of words and metaphors. I spent a full quarter envisioning this specific show through the theatrical perspective of director with my sponsor David Catlin in an independent study. I took a class with Michael Rohd and Jessica Thebus on adapting a classical piece of literature (the story of Persephone) into a social justice piece of theatre-performance (The Persephone Project-an international story about women and environmentalism). This quarter I am taking Market Research and Consumer Insight, which give me knowledge on research methodology and question formatting, and a better understanding of the needs, associations and thought processes of humans on a deeper scale. This, with my training in communication as a theatre major, primes me for interviewing. I took Introduction to Sexuality through the Gender Studies Department, reading Butler, Foucault, and many other foundational queer theorists and theories. I also took a course on Women in Shakespeare in which I engaged in discourse on and analyzed the performance of gender in classical texts.

★
Methods are specific and detailed

★
Addresses project feasibility regarding language

★
Need to expand on recruitment methods

★
Justifies methods

★
Describes the creative process as methodology

Notes

¹ Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, Leighton Seal, Meg-John Barker, Timo O. Nieder, and Guy T'Sjoen, "Non-binary or Genderqueer Genders," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 95–

² Ibid.

³ Allie N. Mx. Sarfaty, "Not Trans Enough: The Intersections of Whiteness & Nonbinary Gender Identity" *Undergraduate Honors Theses University of Colorado, Boulder*, (2016). Paper 1029.

⁴ Abigail Oakley, "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr." *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 3 (2016).

Allie N. Mx. Sarfaty, "Not Trans Enough: The Intersections of Whiteness & Nonbinary Gender Identity" *Undergraduate Honors Theses University of Colorado, Boulder*, (2016). Paper 1029.

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Dee (Daniel) Shull, "Communicative Acts of Identity : Non-binary Individuals, Identity, and the Internet" *Masters Theses California State University*. (September 2015).

Diane Ehrensaft, "Boys will be Girls, Girls will be Boys: Children affect Parents as Parents affect Children in Gender Nonconformity." *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 28, no. 4 (October 2011): 528-548.

Elliot A. Tebbe, and Bonnie Moradi. "Suicide Risk in Trans Populations: An Application of Minority Stress Theory." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63, no. 5 (2016): 520.

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Sarah Beth Evans, and Elyse Janish, "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015): 125-150.

Skylar Davidson, "Gender Inequality: Nonbinary Transgender People in the Workplace" (2016). *Masters Theses* (May 2014): 321.

Sophus Helle, "The Dynamics of a Three-sex Model" Presentation at the Second Workshop on Gender, Methodology, and the Ancient Near East, Barcelona, Spain, February 1-3, 2017.

Samantha R. Pflum, Rylan J. Testa, Kimberly F. Balsam, Peter B. Goldblum, and Bruce Bongar, "Social support, trans community connectedness, and mental health symptoms among transgender and gender nonconforming adults." *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 2, no. 3 (Sep 2015): 281-286.

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⁵ "Trans and non-binary theatre makers! Be counted!" *wakingthefeminists.org*, Last modified Dec 20, 2016.

⁶ Susan V. Iverson, and Christin Seher, "Using Theatre to Change Attitudes Toward Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 11, no. 1 (January 2014): 40-61.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rictor Norton, *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries* (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1998).

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Appendix A Translations

Translations:

First Translation by H. P. Paull (1872)

Translation “The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen: A New Translation from the Danish” by Jeffrey Frank and Diana Crone Frank
M.R. James

Appendix B History and Intersection

Literature on Mermaid history

“Mermaids: The Myths, Legends, and Lore” by Skye Alexander

“Body or Soul: On Versions of “The Little Mermaid”” By Rachelle Cruz, A. N. Devers, Sarah Kuhn, Shana Mlawski

Literature on Intersection of Queerness and *the Little Mermaid*/Mermaids:

- “Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney” By Leland G. Spencer
- “Weeki Wachee girls and buccaneer boys: the evolution of mermaids, gender, and "man versus nature" tourism” By Jennifer A. Kokai
- “The Perversions of Children's Literature” By Nat Hurley
- “The Little Transgender Mermaid: A Shape-Shifting Tale” By Nat Hurley
- “Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England” By Garrison, John
- "Breaking the Disney Spell." By Jack Zipes
- “From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture” Ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells
- “Queer subtext in *The Little Mermaid* From Hans Christian Andersen’s Original to Disney’s Adaptation” By Maddy Myers
- Transgender and Gender Comparisons to Mermaids:
 - “9 Transgender People Talk about When They Knew, Coming Out, and Finding Love” By German Lopez
 - “4 Unique Struggles That Queer and Trans People of Color Have to Deal With” By Joamette Gil
 - “Transgender Mermaids: The Untold Story” by Slicklion

Supplemental References

Leslie A. Rodnan - Snakes and Snails and Mermaid Tails: Raising a Gender-Variant Son

Excerpts from *I Am Jazz* By Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings.

“Rebirth makes people feel sexy in their own skin” by Zoe Eitel

"Past Present" By Gwyneth Cravens for The Nation

Appendix C Adaptations

Adaptation Reference List

Opera-Ballet:

Rusalka, an Opera by Dvorak (1901)

Theatre-Live Productions:

The Garden of Paradise, a play by Edward Sheldon (1914)

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The Little Mermaid, Lior Navok's version for an actress, two pianos and chamber ensemble/orchestra (July 28, 2007)

FISH, a riff on the little mermaid by WITCH HAZEL –Ariel Zetina (2014)

Splish “Mermaid Masque” site-specific cabaret, interactive theatre and live music, as well as newly commissioned art by Nina Nichols (2015)

Movies:

“The Little Mermaid” animated film by the Walt Disney studio (1989)

Sequel “The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea,” concerning the adventures of the Little Mermaid's human daughter Melody, who longs to be a mermaid, by The Walt Disney Company (2000)

Prequel “The Little Mermaid: Ariel's Beginning,” the story is set before the events of the original film, in which King Triton has banned music from Atlantica. The movie also explains the absence of the Little Mermaid's mother (2008)

Supplemental Material

(Based on availability and relevance during research)

Opera-Ballet:

The Little Mermaid by Russian-American composer Lera Auerbach for Royal Danish Ballet, choreographed by John Neumeier (April 15, 2005) performed by San Francisco Ballet (U.S. Premier: March 20, 2010)

Theatre-Live Productions:

Below, a stage adaptation by Adapt Theatre Productions, a small fringe-theatre production company in Chicago, Illinois. The story is written in blank verse by actor/playwright Lane Flores and is from the perspective of the little mermaid's sisters, who have kidnapped the story's prince to judge his compassion for their deceased sister (2013) Script not readily accessible, would read about show rather than read the show itself.

The Little Mermaid by Callum Hughes, a theatrical adaptation by Blind Tiger, a London-based Actor Musician theatre company, focuses on Hans Christian Andersen's influences when creating the fairytale. Script not readily accessible, would read about show rather than read the show itself. The show opened in December 2013 at Riverside Studios (2013)

Movies-TV productions:

The little Mermaid (Malá mořská víla) film adaptation of the Czech production Miroslava Šafránková- Mermaid and Libuse Safránková (1976)

“The Little Mermaid,” by Golden Films distributed by GoodTimes Entertainment (1992)

Rusalka, Russian movie by Anna Melikyan, a modern-day adaptation set in Russia (2007)

Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea, a Hayao Miyazaki film inspired by and based loosely on The Little Mermaid (2008)

Little From the Fish Shop, a modern-day stop-motion film adaptation by Czech artist Jan Balej (2014)

The Silver Moonlight, an experimental film by Russian-born filmmaker Evgueni Mlodik, retelling the story of The Little Mermaid in the style of a 1930s German melodrama made under the Nazis (2015)

The Lure, a Polish film based on the Hans Christian Andersen story (2016)

The Little Mermaid, a 50-minute animated adaptation by Burbank Films Australia (1998)

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TV/short episodes:

“The Little Mermaid” Reader’s Digest 30-minute animated adaptation narrated by Richard Chamberlain (1974)

“The Little Mermaid” Faerie Tale Theatre by Shelley Duvall (1987)

Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales for Every Child Season 2 Episode 7 (1997)

Appendix D Organizations in the Chicago Area

Genderqueer Chicago <http://genderqueerchicago.blogspot.com>

Gender JUST <http://genderjust.wixsite.com/genderjust>

Affinity Community Services <http://affinity95.org/accontent/>

Appendix E Interview Questions

1. What pronouns do you use?
2. How do you identify? What labels feel fitting, if any? Why, or why not?
3. In whatever way you’d like please describe your life pre-transition.
4. What are three to five adjectives you would use to characterize that time in your life?
5. What metaphor or metaphors would you use to characterize that time in your life?
6. Please describe your life post-transition.
7. What are three to five adjectives you would use to characterize that time in your life?
8. What metaphor or metaphors would you use to characterize that time in your life?
9. Please speak to the experience of transitioning. What does that mean to you?
10. What are three to five adjectives you would use to characterize that experience?
11. What metaphor or metaphors would you use to characterize that experience?
12. Can you speak to the moment you first heard and/or first identified with the label (insert labels they listed as fitting)
OR
Can you speak to the moment you first heard and/or first identified with this experience and/identity (if they speak to not identifying with labels)
13. Can you speak to a moment your identity felt/was invalidated?
14. Can you speak to the relationship with your family and your identity?
15. What do you think of mermaids?
16. What is your perception of the tale of *The Little Mermaid*?
17. When did you first encounter the *Little Mermaid*?