Staging Chernobyl: The Regeneration of a Wasteland

What if the items and animals left behind in the Ukrainian city of Pripyat could tell us what happened when the nearby Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded on April 26, 1986? I want to use research on the nuclear accident paired with contemporary scientific studies of wildlife regeneration in the surrounding marshlands to creatively investigate the endurance of life in the face of disaster. I will imbue objects, animals, and human characters with the unique stories of Chernobyl in a play to be performed on campus during the 2014-2015 school year. Through the research and adaptation of this play—activities with which I hope to build a professional career after graduation—I will explore the universality of life and the power of the survival instinct in an unpredictable world.

When the Chernobyl plant caught fire and exploded after a faulty experiment, it released an amount of radiation “hundreds of times larger than the fallout from the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” according to scientists Alexey Yablokov and Vassily Nesterenko. TIME’s Kelly Knauer states that citizens in the nearest city, Pripyat, were unaware of what had happened until they started experiencing headaches, nausea, coughing, and a metallic taste in their mouths. The Exclusion Zone that is still observed around Chernobyl has a nineteen-mile radius with checkpoints under military control (Marples). It locks away flora and fauna as well as the artifacts left behind by their human cohabitants, who suffered thyroid and lung failure, genetic mutations, and forced abortions (Yablokov).

Despite the nearly thirty-year human desertion of the area, life has somehow begun to regenerate in the form of wolves, bison, horses, deer, lynx, and more, making Pripyat “the largest, if unintentional, wildlife sanctuary in Europe” (Helmuth). According to the PBS Chernobyl documentary Radioactive Wolves, it is possible that “mankind’s disaster gave nature a second chance,” cleaning out an invasive human population and allowing wildlife to return to its pre-human symbiosis. Sergey Gaschak, who has conducted catch-and-release studies on mice in the withered Red Forest nearby, says that “they lived as long as animals in relatively clean areas,” defying an otherwise life-altering radiation presence by adapting just as animals in untainted areas would (Mulvey). Due to the scope of the nuclear spill and the growing number of species in the Zone, there is still no definitive answer as to how life can continue, or whether this life is radioactive.

Besides the above scientific research, I will also consult dramatic works centering on Chernobyl. They will be jumping off points rather than direct inspiration because, while plays and movies have dealt with the disaster itself, no work thus far has put the event side-by-side with research on the current state of Pripyat as a developing habitat. Plays and movies included in my artistic research will be Sergei Kurginian’s austere nuclear labor exposé Compensation: A Liturgy of Fact (2001); Bradley Parker’s campy horror film Chernobyl Diaries (2012); and the first mainstream play ever written about the event, Vladimir Gubaryev’s Sarcophagus (1986).

In the research and writing of my play, I will learn more about how life regenerates and reimagines itself in the face of catastrophe. By allowing animals, forgotten objects, and humans who witnessed or were affected by the event to reveal both true and imagined secrets from Pripyat then and now, I hope to give a contemporary audience the chance to hear the Chernobyl story as if for the first time. The theatrical medium will allow me to go beyond clinical hypotheses and data collection to creatively answer the seemingly unfathomable mystery of life’s persistence despite destruction, suffering, and abandonment.

In order to write this play within eight weeks, I will split my work into three phases: Preparation, Creation, and Production (see appendix for a full schedule and reading list). During the Preparation Phase—the first two weeks—I will focus intensely on research, using Adriana
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Petryna’s *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl* and Alexey Yablokov et al’s *Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment* as research pillars. The first week will be specialized to scientific explanations of the Chernobyl explosion and its immediate effects on Pripyat life, and the second week will be focused on recent Chernobyl analysis, including the regeneration of the Pripyat wasteland and the explosion’s impact on world culture. I will collect at least twenty-five research takeaways (quotes, images, or scientific data) during each of these two weeks, and each week I will also create one character inspired by a research takeaway.

By the beginning of the Creation Phase—weeks three through six—I will be ready to devote half my time to continued research and half to structuring and writing my play. Week three’s writing time is reserved for creating an outline, in which I delineate each character and his or her background, as well as each scene’s action and the overall dramatic arc of the play. In weeks four through six, I will work through each scene on my outline, creating dialogue and tracing central themes and plotlines through the entire piece, always informed by the additional reading I will be doing. By the end of week six I will have a finished draft of my play (60-100 pages), and I will go into the two-week Production Phase. I will have two invited readings of my play each week (four readings total) with friends acting and professors/other students attending and giving feedback in roundtable discussions. Time between readings will be filled with additional research and editing the play. By the end of the eight weeks, I will have a tried-and-tested script for five to eight actors, as well as at least fifty research takeaways and inspiration images to give designers for a 2014-2015 school year on-campus production.

This summer is the most appropriate time for me to take on a large-scale historical playwriting project because I will have just finished my Adapting and Devising Theatre Module from the School of Communication. For the completion of my module, I took a variety of Theatre and Performance Studies courses that taught me the playwriting and adaptation process. Additionally, in the last two years I have had multiple experiences adapting and directing student productions based on historical tragic events such as the 2006 Amish schoolhouse shooting in Pennsylvania and a family’s survival of the Holocaust. For both of these productions I reached out to local organizations (NU Active Minds and the Illinois Holocaust Center, respectively) to pair the productions with campus-relevant discussions. Due to my experience in telling true but little-known stories in inventive theatrical ways, I feel very prepared to create this play and oversee its first production.

At the end of my eight-week writing process, I will have everything I need to begin gathering designers and other production team members for a full production of my play on campus with student actors. Because of my involvement in student- and Theatre Department-sponsored performances, I feel confident in my abilities to gather interested students, audition actors, reserve a performance space, and raise the funds necessary to realize my script. After senior year, I plan to stay in the Chicago area to continue writing and directing theatre, and having a finished play to submit to new work festivals and local theatre companies would be an ideal way to begin a professional relationship with the Chicago theatre community. Besides career and educational goals, being able to focus solely on research and writing for an extended period will provide a unique and otherwise-impossible education in the art of adaptation. My commitment to telling the stories of those who suffered the Chernobyl explosion with integrity and clarity will be greatly served by the product-based mentality of the experience that this grant offers.
Works Cited
Preparation Phase: Research Intensive

_Week 1:_ Research the explosion and its immediate effects on the surrounding area; 25 research takeaways
- _Chernobyl Notebook_ by Grigoriy Medvedev
- _Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl_ by Adriana Petryna (2013)
- _Chernobyl: A Russian Journalist’s Eyewitness Account_ by Andrey Ilesh

_Week 2:_ Research Chernobyl’s cultural impact and contemporary findings on the biology of the Pripyat marshland; 25 research takeaways
- _Radioactive Wolves_ : PBS Nature Series Documentary
- _Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster_ by Svetlana Alexeivich & Keith Gessen
- _Visit Sunny Chernobyl: And Other Adventures in the World’s Most Polluted Places_ by Andrew Blackwell
- _Decade of Disaster_ by Ann Larabee
- _Chernobyl plays and films in addition to the above research:_
  - _Sarcophagus,_ play by Vladimir Gubaryev
  - _Chernobyl Diaries,_ film directed by Bradley Parker
  - _Compensation: A Liturgy of Fact_ by Sergei Kurginian
  - _My Chernobyl,_ play by Aaron Bushkowsky

Creation Phase: Research & Writing

_Week 3:_ Full character list and outline, Chernobyl and adaptation research
- _Life After People,_ History Channel Documentary Series
- _Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment_ by Alexey V. Yablokov, et al.
- _A Theory of Adaptation_ by Linda Hutcheon

_Weeks 4-6:_ First full-length draft, Chernobyl and adaptation research
- _Chernobyl: Crime Without Punishment_ by Alla A. Yaroshinskaya
- _Acting On the Past: Historical Performance Across the Disciplines_ by Mark Franko & Annette Richards

Production Phase: Research, Workshop, & Editing

_Week 7:_ First two readings, Chernobyl and adaptation research
- _Chernobyl Record: The Definitive History of the Chernobyl Catastrophe_ by R.F. Mould
  - “Diegetic Theatre as a ‘Place’ For the Theatricalised Spectator” by Jane Turner

_Week 8:_ Final two readings, additional research
- _Chernobyl Heart,_ documentary by Maryann DeLeo
- _Legacy of Chernobyl_ by Zhores Medvedev