

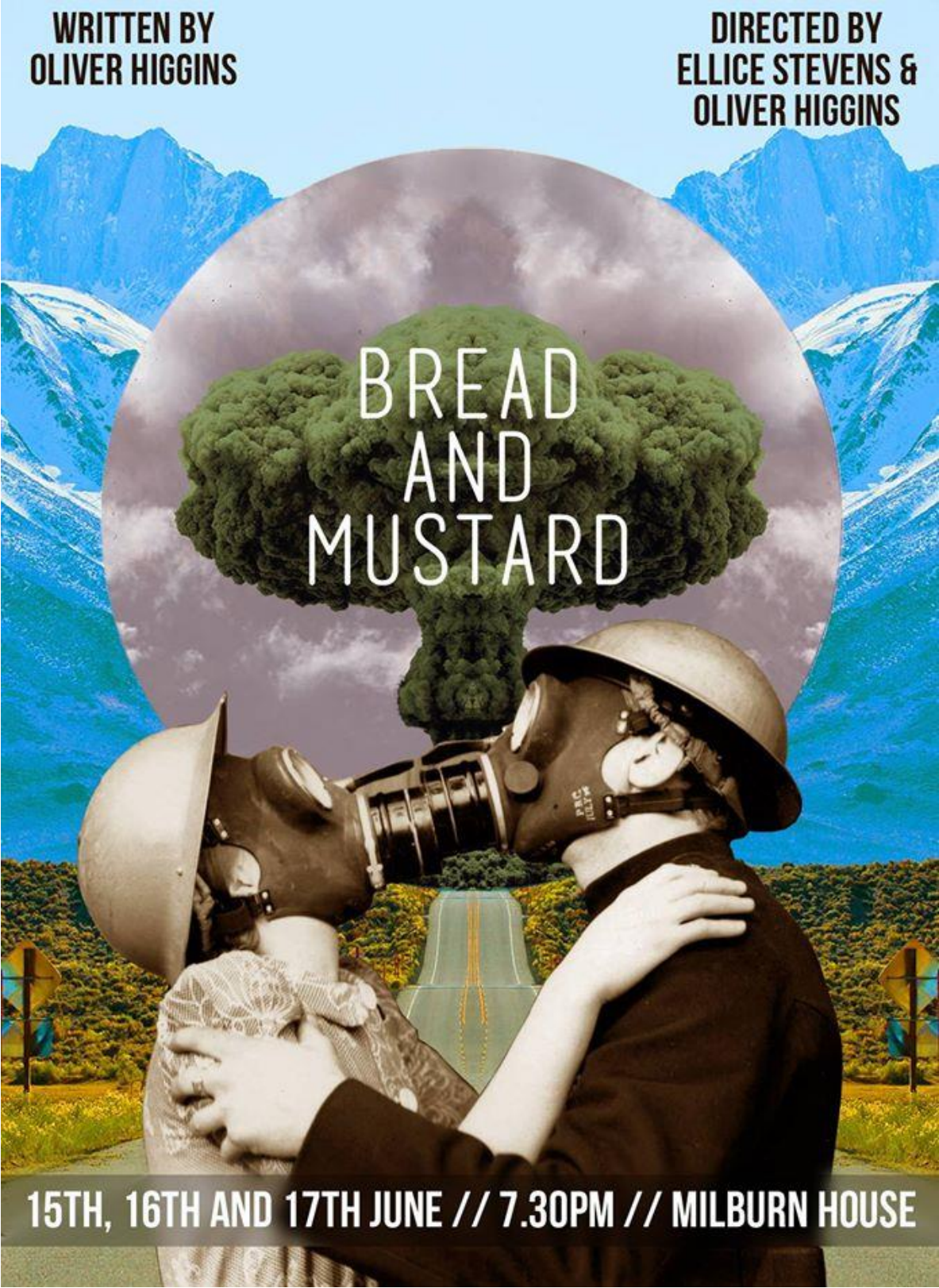
Oliver Higgins

Project Report: IATL Student as Producer Fund

"Bread and Mustard"

WRITTEN BY
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DIRECTED BY
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BREAD
AND
MUSTARD

15TH, 16TH AND 17TH JUNE // 7.30PM // MILBURN HOUSE

The project:

I first came across the story of Fritz Haber when I was sitting my A levels. I'd been trying to find a simplified explanation of how the Haber-Bosch process worked, but kept stumbling upon websites more interested in telling the story of Haber himself; the story of a man, tired of being subjugated because of his parent's religion, who puts his morals aside in order to make a name for himself. He was a brilliant mind, a powerful orator, a proud German, and a Jew. His work in the production of chemical fertiliser came at a critical point, just as we were nearing the point of a Malthusian crisis. Without the Haber-Bosch process, the planet earth would not be able to sustain more than around 4 billion humans. His work was varied and influential, but there is one area of it that interested me the most; his work on mustard gas. Fritz Haber was the godfather of chemical warfare.

His story was complex, dark and tragic. It reflected the attitudes held at the time, not just in Germany, but around the world, and held interesting parallels to the ongoing use of technological innovation in modern warfare. The advent of chemical weapons was one of the first major innovations in warfare since the development of the cannon. Without it, would we have had the atom bomb? Perhaps not. Would we have had tear gas and anthrax? Again, probably not.

For these reasons, it seemed like adapting Haber's story for the stage would be relevant for a modern audience. I also had something of an academic interest in his work, as I was finishing my 4th year of a degree in Medicinal Chemistry. It struck me as exciting that I could marry my knowledge of chemistry and my love of theatre in order to create a piece that was both scientifically sound, and engaging for an audience who do not regularly engage with the sciences. To that end, I began drafting the script, and looking into applying for the IATL Student as Producer Fund, with a view to developing the script and staging the production.

Writing the script

As you can probably imagine, it's not easy to condense the entire life of an early 20th century chemistry professor into a 2 hour play. It's an even bigger challenge to keep that play relevant and engaging to an audience, many of whom knew very little about chemistry, or the context in which Haber's work is used. This was not an easy task, but after 8 or 9 drafts of the play I finally finished a draft I was comfortable with. I chose to focus the first act on Haber himself, as he lies dying in a hotel room in 1933.

The second act focuses on his son, 13 years later, as he reflects on his life, and the use of the atom bomb at the end of the war. This structure allowed me to look at a great deal of the positive and negative aspects of Haber's work, as well as provide a retrospective on some of the lasting effects of his influence. Being able to hear the script aloud, and have actors give their opinions on its pacing and development helped a great deal in finalising the characters and their relationships. In fact, the script changed a good deal during the rehearsal process, owing to the input from the actors.

I was keen to include the right balance of science, action and pathos in the script, in order to ensure that I was creating an exciting piece of theatre, while keeping the piece accurate and informative. The last thing I wanted to do was to 'dumb it down' for those unfamiliar with the theory, but I feel that by using metaphor and movement, the piece was able to convey the basics of a good deal of scientific concepts clearly, concisely, and in a way that did not feel at odds with the narrative.

The ensemble

Open auditions were held for the project and publicised on a wide variety of platforms. An ensemble was assembled from several departments including chemistry, English, theatre studies, and politics. This allowed a wide diversity in approaches to the script development and devising process, which is one of the advantages of the type of work that IATL is associated with. The eventual cast of the production consisted of:

Fritz Haber - Thomas Bulpett
Clara Immerwahr - Amy Brandis
Hermann Haber - Charlie Tooke
Rudolf Stern - Thomas Wright
Marga Stern - Amy Morgan
Oppenheimer/Soldier - Oscar Owen

Rehearsal/Staging

Due to exam commitments we had to put the show together in an extraordinarily short amount of time. Over the course of 10 days we had a read-through, blocked the play, re-thought parts of the script and still had time for some character work. I was very impressed with the cast's ability to learn the lines in such a short amount of time, especially considering the density of dialogue in the play, and the highly technical language that is often used. Thanks to the generosity of the theatre department, the play was staged with basic lighting in G55, one of the studio rooms in Milburn house.

Because of the unfinished nature of the script at the start of the process, Ellice and I did not have any set ideas for what the set would entail in the end. Partly due to the time constraints, and partly to match the dreamy-nature of the piece, the set was left fairly sparse. It was staged in traverse, with only an arm chair and table on stage throughout. We managed to buy most of our props extremely cheaply from charity shops or princes drive refuge centre, as well as sourcing many of them for free from friends and drama societies.

Fairly late in the process it was decided that we could also use remote-controlled LED strips, and fluff-covered paper lanterns to create cloud formations that changed colours at various points during the play. These combined with the sparse set that we used, helped us to create the dreamy, childish atmosphere that pervaded the final piece.

The performance

The play was performed on three separate nights to audiences of around 40 people each time. The performance was filmed, and will be available on YouTube for the foreseeable future. If you'd like to see a copy of the script, I'd ask you to please email me on OliverHiggins93@hotmail.co.uk

Act 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBmu4QoY7NY>

Act 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sg1pdMN5Qj4>

The future of the Work

The project allowed us to develop this script to a performance-ready state, as well as stage a well-received run of three performances. The piece received Warwick University Drama Society's 'Best New Play' award for 2015, and received a wealth of positive feedback, and potential improvements.

The future of the project will be to attempt to secure funding to subsidise us taking the work into schools, pairing it with workshops and lectures on chemistry and history. We plan on applying for funding from the Royal Society of Chemistry's outreach programme, and other such companies, in order to allow us the funding to develop the show further, and hopefully travel to locations around the UK. Further from this, I will continue to re-work the script following the feedback received and developments made during the project and send it to producing theatres around the UK.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all members of IATL for their help and support, as well as their generous funding, as well as the theatre department for allowing us to use the rehearsal studios in Milburn house. Furthermore, I would like to thank the ensemble for all their time and hard work, our director Ellice Stevens, and our producer Jamie Wright, without whom this project would never have been possible.

Photos from Rehearsals:

