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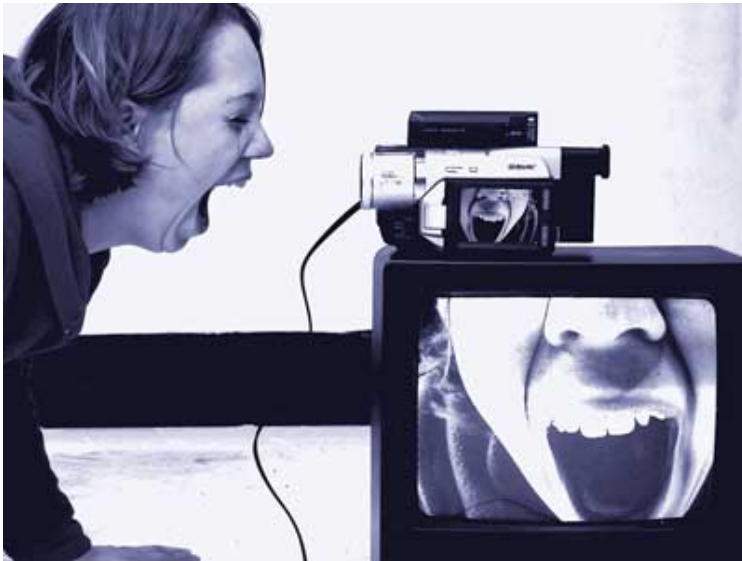
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Live Wired

The Big Picture Group challenges audiences' expectations by bringing theatre into the digital age.

Story by MAC McCORMICK '04



BPG's latest production, *dependent study*, features an intense performance by IWU alumni Sally Bell '05. (Photo courtesy Big Picture Group)

Some people like to talk about what they really want to do, and some people just go out and do it. Members of the Big Picture Group (BPG) — all of whom happen to be Illinois Wesleyan alumni or former faculty — fit in the latter category. In fact, they've just gone out and done it for the second time. Their new show, *dependent study*, premiered in January at Chicago's Live Bait Theater.

"If I won the lottery, I'd buy us a theater," says company member Erin Liston '03 at the reception after the show. "I would think I'd buy myself a house or something, but no. I'd buy us a theater." Her comment sums up what makes the Big Picture Group work — everyone involved is dedicated to the point where yes, if they could, they would buy the group a theater before they bought a house. They are dedicated to making this company work, and they are willing to work as hard as they can to get it done. Besides, they could always live in the dressing rooms.

Cut to about a year earlier. There is no Big Picture Group, and the three would-be founders aren't even in the same city. Allan Aquino-Quiaoit '04 is on tour with a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Andrew Schneider '03 is in Manhattan studying interactive communications at New York University, and Roger Bechtel is teaching theatre at Illinois Wesleyan. The three had previously worked together on an IWU production of *Hamletmachine*, for which Schneider designed the video. "I had always been very impressed with Andrew's multimedia work and knew that our aesthetic sensibilities and artistic interests were very similar," Bechtel explains. "It turned out to be a wonderful collaboration, and before he went back to New York we spoke briefly and vaguely about working on some future project together." Bechtel then had a similar conversation with Allan, and a few months later, he called back.

"When Roger called, I assumed it was to tell us that he couldn't be involved because he was getting too busy," Schneider says. "When we finally did meet, it was just the opposite." The meeting was a lunch at the Bourgeoisie Pig Café in Chicago, the city that would soon become the group's home. They spent the day there, working out the details of making a theatre company — details that can be, apparently, rather complicated. One decision, however, was easy.

Stephanie Ehemann '03 was everyone's first choice for managing director, and when they told her about it, her response was quick: "I didn't need to hear any more, I said yes immediately. Roger, Allan, and Andrew are most likely the three most talented and visionary people I had and have ever worked with." The new group felt

largely the same about her; with a double degree in business and theatre, she was the only person the group could imagine as capable of managing the company.

By the time they left Chicago, the three founders had come up with a project and a short list of people to work with. “I went home and called everyone on that list the next day and they were all eager to get on board,” says Bechtel. A suitable theater was found to rent, and the company was ready to go, except for one thing: the name. “Later that spring the three of us managed to meet up in New York City at a favorite café there, and spent four hours one Saturday night sorting through a list of names for the company. It came down to Acme Performance Ensemble and the Big Picture Group ...”

A giant, jewel-encrusted marlin hangs above the entrance to the Live Bait’s storefront auditorium, and a poem by Garrison Keillor is framed on the wall nearby. Wine and cheese are splayed out on the table with crackers, and people are eating and drinking and discussing the show. The premiere is over, and at this after-show reception everyone can relax — for a second. “It’ll be a whole different show tomorrow,” Aquino-Quiaoit says. “You never know with Andrew.”

Schneider wrote and is directing *dependent study*, a non-linear set of vignettes about love in the digital age, which he first produced while at Illinois Wesleyan and later reworked for the New York International Fringe Festival this past fall. “The fringe scene irks me,” he says. Irksome or not, the scene appreciated his work — it was deemed “one of the best shows in the Festival” by the New York art weblog www.gothamist.com.

Tonight’s performance has a whole new cast and crew, a whole new city, and the play will have a much longer run: four weeks. Sally Bell ’05 rests her head on the shoulder of a friend as she is congratulated by audience members who stuck around for the reception. She and Aquino-Quiaoit perform the play’s only two roles — Boy and Girl — and have been exhausted in the recent weeks, trying to balance rehearsals, work, and the most neglected aspect of their lives: sleep. When asked about the stress, Bell says she thinks about it this way: “We started this company, and we’re all friends. So when it’s stressful, it’s okay. Sometimes [a situation] is stressful and everyone hates each other, so it sucks. But here, it’s okay.” It’s easy to see she’s absolutely right.



As Boy and Girl, Bell and Aquino-Quiaoit (above) are the only actors in *dependent study*, but not the only characters. According to writer/director Andrew Schneider ’03, “Script, sound, video, and character are all given equal weight. Video

becomes character.” (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

Six months after settling on a name, the Big Picture Group had its first show ready to go. They chose a modern adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, which Betchel says “was an absolutely insane idea — it came from a gut-level instinct about the play meshing with our interests, but actually realizing it almost killed us.” Premiering at Chicago’s Breadline Theatre in June 2005, *.duck* was adapted and directed by Betchel and starred Amber Robinson ’08, Bell, Ken Pierce ’03, Schneider, and Aquino-Quiaoit, among others. It featured video and digital technology that Schneider designed, an aspect that set it apart from other modernized versions of Ibsen’s play.

The rehearsals for the show took place on IWU’s campus at the Lab Theatre. The students and faculty were extremely supportive, as was the University’s Publications, Printing, and Mailing Services (which assisted with flyers and mailings), and after working it out for a month in May, they took the show up to Chicago. “We had one week to take it to Chicago, tech it, have a press preview, and put it on,” Aquino-Quiaoit recalls. That week was madness, with most of the cast and crew sleeping in the theater and forsaking showers just to have enough time — it was all very quick, exciting, and extremely hard work. And it worked out.

When the show opened, the audience consisted mostly of “friends and family at first,” he explains. “Then strangers started showing up.” The show was reviewed in several local newspapers, and Nina Metz of the *Chicago Tribune* called it an “auspicious debut. ... Finally, here is a theater production that makes a strong case for its multimedia approach.” The strong review caused a bump in ticket sales, and the group began to develop contacts with an audience. After the show’s four-week run, they were on the map.

When the show closed, the group was exhausted. They had some down-time, and had to make a choice: “Roger was having a baby and moving to Ohio, so we all had a meeting about the future,” Aquino-Quiaoit recalls. “Is it possible to keep doing this?” They settled on a schedule for the group that they thought they could handle and, more importantly, afford — Betchel, Aquino-Quiaoit, and Schneider had put up most of the money for *.duck*. The plan was for a limited rotation of two shows per year, one in winter, one in summer, with some festival dates interspersed throughout.

After a little rest, it was time to get back to work.

Six months later, the Big Picture Group is at the Four Moon Tavern, a bar in the Roscoe Village neighborhood of Chicago’s north side. Upon entering, unsuspecting patrons are handed wrist bands and advertisements for the new show, *dependent study*. Brendan Hendrick ’03 is doing the handing. “I got my start in politics,” he explains, “so I know about raising money.” Hendrick is the director of development for the Big Picture Group, as well as one of their major Chicago contacts. He’s worked for the Goodman Theatre, and has a great deal of experience with the “storefront” theatre scene, as well as the city itself.

The company members who live in Chicago have been meeting for months now, planning events and coming up with ways to raise money. They’ve set up an account at www.iGive.com, a site that donates percentages of purchases from a variety of retailers to the group. They’ve also secured a variety of donations from local businesses to be raffled off tonight, including complimentary yoga lessons, free groceries, a party at a different bar down the street, and coffee from Julius Meinl, the café where everyone in the company seems to work.

A broken television with the group’s logo replacing the screen flickers on a table near the door, where piles of Big Picture swag wait to be handed out. People are playing pool, eating cheeseburgers, and catching up — depending on his/her graduation year, an IWU alum would find nearly everyone in the bar very familiar. The tavern’s regulars are all puzzled by the energetic crowd but seem happy to have them around.

“We may only do two shows a year, but my life completely revolves around them,” Liston explains as she gets ready for the next raffle announcement. Aquino-Quiaoit buys drinks for anyone who looks thirsty, and everyone is hoping the group can raise some money in the next few hours — the bar has agreed to a percentage of their profits to the company until 9 p.m. In the coming week Schneider will arrive from New York and rehearsals will begin, making this the last chance for many of them to relax until the show ends. Two months from now.

A group of regulars at one of the tables seems to win every raffle prize, which causes them to scream and laugh every few minutes. Hopefully, they’ll remember to go to the show.

Later in the month, Aquino-Quiaoit’s apartment has become an ersatz rehearsal studio. Schneider is sitting in the corner, giving directions. “Watch the hands,” he says. The actor is moving his hands and shouldn’t be.

They’ve been rehearsing the show for weeks now, but this is their first night of running through the whole thing. Everyone is a little tense, but ready to push through the script without stopping.

Tonight is the designer run, where the lighting, costume, and video/sound designers get to see the play and work out their respective specialties. It is also the first night that Colton Kuddes, the new video operator, will meet everyone. “I just hope he knows we can’t afford to pay him,” Ehemann jokes.

The apartment, which is usually somewhat dark and full of furniture, looks ready to rent out. Well, half of it does. All of the usual contents have been crammed into a bedroom or somewhere out of the way so the actors have a decent amount of space in which to work. The chairs they have represent ... chairs, and televisions will wheel about the stage. Schneider tries to help the designers visualize it.

A pot of rice sits cooking on a counter next to a coffeepot. “We pretty much live on rice and coffee these days,” Aquino-Quiaoit quips.

They’re playing to a crowd of seven, all of whom they know, but they’re still nervous. They get through the run-through and Schneider talks with each of the designers. “Ping-pong balls are a good light diffuser,” he informs Stine (pronounced “Steen,” as in Christine Shallenberg ’03), the lighting designer, who also designed the lights for the Fringe show. It always takes a little *McGuyver-ing* to get a theatre company off the ground.

By 1 a.m., everyone’s been briefed and it’s time to go home. “I’m creative, but sometimes it’s lacking if I’m not excited about what I’m doing,” Kuddes tells the group before he leaves. If he’s anything like the rest of them, it won’t be a problem.

Machine-gun is a phrase everyone uses to describe the tech process. The show has been planned for months, but things like locations, space, scheduling, and money — especially money — make everything a last-minute, mad dash to the finish line. Speaking of which, Hendrick suddenly comes running — yes, running, up on his toes like a track star — across the stage. “Where’s he going?” someone asks quietly.



Wires and electrical tape are essential tools as BPG’s managing director Stephanie Ehemann ’03 (above) prepares for the opening night performance of *dependent study*. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

“I think he’s getting some tape,” Schneider says calmly. The press preview is tonight, but for now everyone is somehow very calm. Exhausted, but calm.

“It’s going to be fine, right?” Ehemann asks. “Tell me it’s going to be fine.”

The preview is fine, and everyone gets to sleep in the next day, a nice change of pace. Then:

Saturday, January 6, has arrived, and the atmosphere is suddenly different. “Why is this so much more stressful than yesterday?” Schneider asks no one in particular.

It is more stressful. And tense. Very tense. A rumor has spread that a big reviewer is coming to the opening instead of the preview, and however hard everyone tried to keep it from the actors, everyone knows that something’s up. “Well, we’re sold out. I told you. Well, you should have reserved them,” someone scolds a delinquent family member on a cell phone.

“Is everybody ready?” Ehemann shouts. “Is everybody ready? Are we in the right light cue? Is everybody here?” She’s stage-managing the show, and has to make sure everyone is exactly where they need to be. It’s not easy.

“Is this thing charged?” Kuddes asks from the control room. He holds a handheld video camera, which appears to have a low battery. The room he’s in is filled with television screens, mixing boards, and cameras — it looks like a security station, a place where the Wizard of Oz would feel at home.

Right behind the control room is the dressing room, which combines all of the charm of a freshman dorm, a mad scientist’s workshop, and a clanky boiler room. A significant percentage of everyone’s belongings are spread across the floor. The whole theatre is splattered with a strange combination of tools, clothing, and video equipment.

Schneider sits in a corner, tapping at a laptop, trying to make everything — TV, live video and sound, slide projection— perfect. The multimedia aspects help set the group apart from other companies, but they also make everything that much more difficult. Right now, he’s the only person not in constant motion. “You can keep working on it forever,” he says.

“Where’s the staple gun?”

“We don’t have one.”

“Can I move your car?”

“Where’d that black masking go?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Here.”

“Can somebody turn this light on?”

“We have to clean!”

“How does this work?”

Schallenberg bursts in with a binder full of gels for the lights, a long winter coat flying behind her. She grabs a ladder and starts frantically cutting them down to size.

“We’re at 15!” Ehemann warns.

Bell is spouting gibberish, warming up her voice. Aquino-Quiaoit does pushups and lunges. Schneider comes in and grabs Ehemann — the ticket office seems to be turning people away. It’s a frantic mess. She comes back into the theatre, flailing her arms. “I hate this.”

She’s lying.



A still-life shows the stress of rehearsals for *dependent study* — complete with script, coffee, and vitamin C. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

If the Big Picture Group does anything, it keeps moving. *Sisters 3.0*, an adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*, opens in June at Chicago’s Athenaeum Theatre. Erin Liston, Amber Robinson, and Simone Roos ’03 will play the title characters, but the cast is larger than *.duck*, and they will have to run auditions. They also need to get publicity running and — the perennial problem — start raising money. “Money is always the issue,” says Bechtel. “The solution is usually cunning.”

“If you would’ve told us five years ago that we would be doing this now, I highly doubt we would’ve believed you for a second,” Aquino-Quiaoit says. They’re tired, they’re poor, and some of them have to work two jobs to fund this group, but they’ve never been happier.

While Big Picture’s uncompromising perspective is clearly exciting to many who attend their performances, others leave a bit puzzled. As one online critic wrote about *dependent study*, “There is an audience for this type of theatre, just be warned it is way, way out there.” But for the company, that’s exactly the point. “We believe in inspiring people through a totally different means. Whatever that means. We use the theatre as a vehicle to question, rather than to express our answers,” Aquino-Quiaoit explains. This challenge, of the audience as well as themselves, is what the group is all about.

“The nice thing about BPG is most of us are in it for the same reason. Not just because we love theatre, or art, or media. But because we are dedicated to creating new — NEW! — art and theatre and media,” Schneider says. “And we feel we have something to say and we have questions to ask.

“I would like to always be there.”

The house is open. The show has sold out, and then some. Another row of chairs is added to accommodate the overflow. Vaguely classical music plays as grainy images of the stage, the control room, and the audience flicker on the two televisions. Quiet talking. People read their programs. Some are old, others young. Some faces are familiar, some new. The lights go down, and everyone becomes quiet. Two actors burst onto the stage, soaking wet. They breathe heavily, nervously, full of anticipation. Aquino-Quiaoit delivers the first line:

“Where to start, where to start, where to start?”

