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Nowhere to Hide

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Led by performance artist Andrew Schneider '03, IWU theatre students conducted an experiment in bravery, creating and performing versions of their inner selves on the Lab Theatre stage.

Story by KATE ARTHUR
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY & AMY YOUNG

Let the audience decide for themselves the meaning of your work. Be wild in concept but disciplined in method. Be bold, even weird, but do it from an honest place. Flash some bright lights but don't be afraid to go dark.

Those are some of the lessons that School of Theatre Arts students took away in their collaboration with award-winning performance artist Andrew Schneider '03 in the creation of an original production performed this fall. They began with no ideas at all and ended three weeks later with a show filled with deep philosophical musings — brought forth by the students themselves and expressed through monologues, true confessions and mind games, surreal jokes, music and dance. There were bright, flashing lights and also moments when the performers and audience were enveloped in blackness and silence, breaths held, waiting for whatever was next.

"We have no idea what we're doing, but I like working from a place like that," Schneider said, putting miles on his Chuck Taylors during a hectic rehearsal just days before the premiere performance of *Nervous/System* on Sept. 19 at the E. Melba Johnson Kirkpatrick Laboratory Theatre.

Schneider has been praised for the results of his chaotic creative process. His acclaimed *YOUARENOWHERE* (which can be read as both "You are now here" and "You are nowhere") was described as "inventive" and "astounding" by the *New York Times* in its five-star review. Created and performed by Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE* is "a weird hybrid of an inspirational seminar, confessional one-man show, introductory lecture on relativity and visually gorgeous prediction of what will happen when the machines take over," wrote Helen Shaw in her five-star *Time Out New York* review of the show, which she declared "a tour de force — both of acting and design."

YOUARENOWHERE won an Obie, the highest award given for off-Broadway productions, was nominated for a Drama Desk award for unique theatrical experience and has sold out performances in New York City as well as France, Slovenia and Melbourne. The morning after the final performance of *Nervous/System*, he was headed to Prague to perform *YOUARENOWHERE* at the International Festival of Contemporary Art.

Schneider majored in theatre at Illinois Wesleyan but says that courses such as philosophy also influenced his direction as performer, writer and interactive-electronics artist. In the same way that his liberal arts



Schneider guides the creative process on the Lab Theatre stage. The alumnus took a break from touring his critically acclaimed "YOUARENOWHERE," which won the top award given for off-Broadway productions.

education opened up the world for him, Schneider said he found it fascinating to interact with IWU students going through the same process.

To create the script for *Nervous/System*, Schneider first sat down with the cast and asked about their views of the world, their fears, beliefs, perceptions of God and evil, and why they existed. He told them to trust the creative process, even when they had doubts, as he did, and the show would gradually reveal itself.

“He immediately created a bond of trust between the cast and made rehearsal a place we felt free to be ourselves, or actually find ourselves again,” said cast member Cadence Lamb ’19, an acting major from Scottsdale, Ariz. “We were forced to think about what makes us different. One of the most important things we all learned is that we have more control of our identity than we realize or use.”

Working with Schneider taught her how to be a “brave artist,” said Lamb, who described the experience as life-changing. “Watching him follow his instincts, knowing they may fail but committing completely to them was eye opening.”

According to Associate Professor of Theatre Marcia McDonald, the plan was to have Schneider perform *YOUARENOWHERE* on campus as part of a Midwestern tour. When the tour didn’t pan out, the two came up with the idea of an original production.



Actress Paola Lehman '19 contemplates one of the show's many complex lighting and stage effects.

Schneider said he usually has much more of an idea of a performance piece’s content than he did when he arrived on campus Aug. 26. “I wanted to challenge myself as well as challenge the students. I didn’t want to repeat anything that I’d done before, so I really wanted to keep ideas open.” The content, he said, came from discussions about things the student performers and designers were thinking about or were pressing upon them in their daily lives.

“Every day in rehearsals, it’s like a pseudo therapy session,” Schneider said. “The content we are working on is *them*. You are playing a version of yourself, so that forces you to just really be there and be present. For some of them, that’s really hard.”

In *Nervous/System*, there is no storyline, no set, just actors talking directly to the audience about their lives, while complex visual and sound effects, along with slow-moving

haze, poke holes in reality. “It’s an experience with people in the room,” Schneider said. “These actors are having a catharsis for us. They show grief and rage and they’re feeling it for us. We’re not transported to 17th-century Russia through the suspension of disbelief. We’re all in this theatre, and we’re all acknowledging that.”

“We don’t do that type of theatre here very often. We do linear pieces, and that’s great,” said McDonald, while Schneider ventures into more boldly experimental territory. “For him to be able to get those performances out of the students was amazing,” she added. “That’s such a hard thing to get from young actors.”

For inspiration and content, the actors drew from past and present experiences that profoundly affected *them*. Megan Lai ’19, an acting major from Algonquin, Ill., talked about being shy, which sometimes isolates her. Schneider asked if she ever wore headphones. She didn’t. But he stuck with that thought and had her do her monologue with headphones, giving her a safe place to play a version of herself.

“It was a physical representation of shyness, and it was an easy way to show my isolation from other people,” Lai said, adding that her mother loved the show. “She connected a lot with my character, not just because I’m her daughter, but because she grew up really shy too and that meant a lot for her to see my character open up on stage.”

That’s exactly what is supposed to happen, said Schneider, as the audience begins to see themselves in the actors, which is different from audience participation. It’s a much safer space for them, he added, admitting he shrinks when performance demands the audience be an essential part of the show.

“I try to straddle this fine line of having an audience be complicit in what’s happening but not putting them on the spot too much.”

Thought Process

If Schneider had one wish, he'd do away with unnecessary car honking. He believes the best day in his life may have already happened. He's had staring contests with strangers, later realizing that was creepy. His biggest fear in life is being judged. He judges every single person he sees. When a dog barks at him, it makes him feel ashamed. He has traveled 36 straight hours to see a woman for 15 minutes. He hopes no one ever discovers how to achieve immortality. It makes him sad he can't be inside other people and experience things like they do.

Those are just a few of the confessions he makes in *YOUARENOWHERE*, but whether they are factual admissions is open to conjecture. The character he plays in the show represents him but also not him (in ways that offer jolting twists as the performance unravels and unfolds).

To find out what Schneider actually thinks, you first need to get him to sit down long enough to



Fellow actors give Megan Lai '19 a boost in an exhilarating scene from "Nervous/System."

talk — an effort, understandably, given his time constraints while on campus, but likely also a product of his personality. Beneath his calm, polite veneer bubbles restless energy and boundless curiosity.

He was that way as a kid, growing up in Milwaukee. His parents were educators and he was the youngest of three, the one known for sticking forks in outlets. When a kindergarten teacher asked him to make a button with what he wanted to be, Schneider made two: an artist and a scientist.

While back on campus, Schneider flashed back to his senior year at IWU. "I projected my face onto this huge severed head of Aphrodite, which was a prop for Charles Mee's *Big Love*," he recalled in a caption for [a video](#) of the surreal event that he posted on Vimeo. "After the show closed, the head was thankfully placed not in storage, but on the awning of our theatre building. Something had to be done."

Although he loved studying traditional theatre as an acting major, Schneider was also drawn to video technology but never thought to wed the two until theatre professor Roger Betchel (now teaching at Carleton College) showed him how performers in New York City were doing just that. "He gave me videos and texts of a lot of performances from New York," said Schneider, "and I was like, 'I have to go to New York.' This is exactly what I want to do."

His enrolled in a master's program in interactive telecommunications at New York University in the heart of Manhattan — a decision that initially disappointed his parents. "They had the opposite reaction most parents have when their kid tells them they no longer want to do musical theatre," he said, laughing. Schneider also created and taught a NYU course titled "Integrating the Virtual and the Theatrical." Invited to join the experimental Wooster Group, his work in video and interactive electronics design was featured in Art Forum and Wired and displayed at high-profile venues such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He also was creating wearable, interactive electronic art works such as a "Solar Bikini" that charges your iPod and wireless programmable sound-effect gloves.

"I saw it then," said McDonald, referring to her former student's diverse and wildly creative talents. She calls Schneider an original. "There's not a space on the shelf for this one. He's his own shelf."

For his next show, *The Field*, opening in New York City in 2017, he's working with neuroscientists, exploring hallucinations, sensory deprivation and mountaineering. Mountaineering?

"Yes," he said, laughing.



A scene from *YOUARENOWHERE*, created and performed by Schneider. His fascination with mixing theatre and technology was sparked by an Illinois Wesleyan professor.

If there's a theme that runs through his work, it's a long-held fascination with how people think. "My thing right now is existence," he explained. "And how we interact with the world, and how we interact with each other using rudimentary tools of communication like language, but always coming from a place of my experience, never your experience. We can't have the same experience. In a way, we're sort of trapped inside of our own bodies, our own minds. All of our happenings are in the mind, and that's how we engage in the world, and that fascinates me."

Schneider recalled a professor who told him he would likely do the same project for the rest of his life but he wouldn't realize it and that would be okay because he'd be exhausting all the possibilities. "It might be a trap for me later on in my career but I keep making shows about an audience that comes to a theater to see a show and the fallout from that," he said.

As for the fallout from *Nervous/System*, Schneider couldn't have been happier, tweeting out after the first Wesleyan performance: "3 weeks ago today we walked into a room without a script, and no one had any idea what was going to happen next. I am blown away by what this collaboration has yielded."

So was Jean Muza '19, an acting major from Medway, Mass., who was in her first casting pool and very nervous about it. But she felt comfortable opening up about her fears with Schneider

and the cast. "It came up that my biggest thing is wanting to know the future, to control the future, to make sure I'm going to be all right. I see all the things that can go wrong."

She built those fears into a high-wire monologue that opened *Nervous/System*. Pacing frantically in circles around the dimly light stage, she warned the audience about all the things that could go wrong in life, from nuclear annihilation to a balloon floating away. Also on the list was losing \$60 at a bus stop, washing a winning scratch-off ticket, misinterpreting final-exam directions, biting down on the inside of your cheek while eating a sloppy joe, getting shortchanged at a charity bake sale and worrying everyone will find out you're a fraud. Her laughter-inducing meltdown was punctuated with a single sigh.

Muza says the biggest thing learned from the experience was how to be completely vulnerable on stage. "When you're given a character, it's really easy to hide behind the character. When you're playing a version of yourself, it's much harder to hide. One day I realized, there was nowhere to hide."

To watch a video about the making of *Nervous/System*, go to www.iwu.edu/schneider.

Learn more about IWU's [School of Theatre Arts](#).

Read more about Andrew Schneider and his latest projects and performances at <http://andrewjs.com/>.