

Original queer fantasy 'The Gilded Throne' to premiere this weekend

Maddie Sparta as Abigail, the central character in Page to Stage Productions' upcoming show "The Gilded Throne." While the performance is an ensemble show, Sparta's character acts as a primary point of view for audiences. PHOTO BY SAMANTHA BRODY/ LIFE EDITOR

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Spotlit in the darkness of Schenker Hall, student-run theater group Page to Stage Productions has spent the past few months immersed in tales of blood, magic and fantasy. While in the midst of a tech rehearsal this past Tuesday, light glinted off swords and voices called out for microphone checks and makeup touchups as the group prepared for "The Gilded Throne."

At the center of this chaos stood Sawyer Ray — fitted with glasses, a sweater and a microphone, and with an assistant director at their side, there's no one more fit for the directorial role than a physics-student-turned-playwright with a vision.

"My words have only ever been my own until now," said Ray, who uses they/she/he pronouns. "And it's really, really remarkable to see so many people not only take seriously what I've written and care about it and say that it's great but also have their own perspectives and their own analysis on it."

"The Gilded Throne" is an original story written by Ray and based off an old Dungeons & Dragons campaign they had played in. Written with inspiration from "Game of Thrones" and Shakespeare plays, the story focuses on familial, platonic and romantic bonds against the backdrop of fascism in a fantastical world, according to Ray.

Ray spent two years at Quinebaug Valley Community College before transferring to the University of Connecticut. Now in her fourth semester at UConn, they originally studied physics before transitioning to English with a creative writing concentration.

While Ray's contribution to the production as writer and director is an essential piece of the puzzle for "The Gilded Throne," she's not the only one calling the shots. The entire production consists of 30 members, including cast, crew and an orchestral pit, but one person stands out amongst the rest.

Lucy Wiencek is a fourth-semester student studying pathobiology on the pre-veterinary track, with a minor in animal science. Alongside being the organization's outreach chair, and her role as not only choreographer but a few ensemble parts for "The Gilded Throne," she's also one of two assistant directors for the production, accompanied by student Quinn MacBride.

Wiencek first entered the world of theater thanks to a shared familial obsession over "Phantom of the Opera," which was the first show she had ever seen on Broadway. Wiencek grew up listening to CDs from old movie musicals, which contributed to her love of art and theater.

"It's also become a very fun form of self-expression and kind of an outlet, because I am such a STEM-oriented person," Wiencek said. "There's a lot of ways that you can artistically express yourself through theater."

Artistic expression is one of the primary advantages of working on an original production, according to Wiencek. All of the characters and settings at play in "The Gilded Throne" are completely novel, which leads to a wide range of interpretations.

"From the production side, it's kind of crazy to try and find ways to bring these new characters to life," Wiencek said. "It's been really insane, being not only the production team for the first time ever, but on an original production. There are no exact reference and there's just a lot of creativity that you can tap into and explore because it is such an original and unique show."

Wiencek said she particularly enjoys her role as choreographer for the show. Typically, Wiencek will refer to a production's original text to understand how the characters operate, which is impossible to do with "The Gilded Throne." Instead, as choreographer, Wiencek can develop and understand characters through their movement and body language.

"Even though there's one dance, there's a lot of fight scenes," Wiencek said. "I find it very easy to find a character through knowing how they live, being in their skin. I used to always say that, when I would assistant direct in high school, that you should be able to put your character on like a jacket and, like, live in their shoes."

One of the most notable characters in "The Gilded Throne" is Abigail, who Ray described as being the primary point-of-view for audiences. This weekend, Abigail will be played by Maddie Sparta, a fourth-semester nursing major.

Sparta said she was originally drawn to "The Gilded Throne" due to it bring inspired by "Game of Thrones," but that she especially enjoyed its queer themes and that it had been written by a student, which provided a unique challenge when it comes to playing Abigail.

"There's definitely a lot more freedom of choice, but there's also not, you know?" Sparta said. "The author is sitting right in front of you and it's like, I don't want to mess up what this character might mean to them... It's really hard to reconcile that but I think I've done a good job, hopefully."

Sparta noted that her typical approach to acting involves trying to relate her personal experience to the character. However, Sparta said Abigail is incredibly different from herself, which changed how Sparta views the character.

"I don't have another person's performance I can watch. She's nothing like me," Sparta said. "I can't put what I would do in this situation."

Despite the challenges Abigail has brought, Sparta said she's been looking forward to this weekend when "The Gilded Throne" will finally premiere.

"I'm really happy to perform," Sparta said. "I'm finally going to show it off to everyone because I'm really proud of what we've done."

Sparta's sentiment is one shared with other members of the production, Ray included. Ray noted they've specifically been looking forward to the final show, when "The Gilded Throne" will finally end.

"I think there's a lot of real value in things that expire, and the fact that this is so alive and then will die," Ray said. "I think that makes it all the more valuable and exciting."

Page to Stage first began holding auditions in January and February, according to the organization's Instagram. Since then, the cast, crew and pit of "The Gilded Throne" has been working to bring it to life. Just two and a half months later, Ray will see it conclude.

"This whole play is about endings," Ray said. "One of the things I mentioned in the director's note is how tragedies are never complete when they're on stage because you don't see the characters pick up the pieces afterward."

Those interested in seeing the life and death of Ray's story can see "The Gilded Throne" this weekend at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. on Saturday or at 7 p.m. on Sunday in the Student Union Theater.

"Look out for the last scene before intermission," Ray said.

Point-Counterpoint: Is fanfiction worth your time?

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I grew up loving stories — from elementary school up through middle school, I had a book with me at every hour of the day and was often capable of finishing an entire novel in 24 hours. I even once read the entire "Harry Potter" series in a week, just to prove to myself that I could. Given this obsession with reading, it should be no surprise to anyone that internet access led me to one highly notable corner of the internet: fanfiction.net.

As a reader and former writer (but not poster, so don't bother looking!) of fanfiction, I can confidently say that fanfiction is one of the most important mechanisms of artistic expression that a human being can partake in.

Fandom, fan culture and media obsession are all common in our modern internet-powered society. Fandoms aren't even restricted to pieces of fictional media — if you own an Alex Karaban jersey, do your best to watch every University of Connecticut basketball game and listen to the radio or podcasts about the team, then I'd say you're part of a fandom.

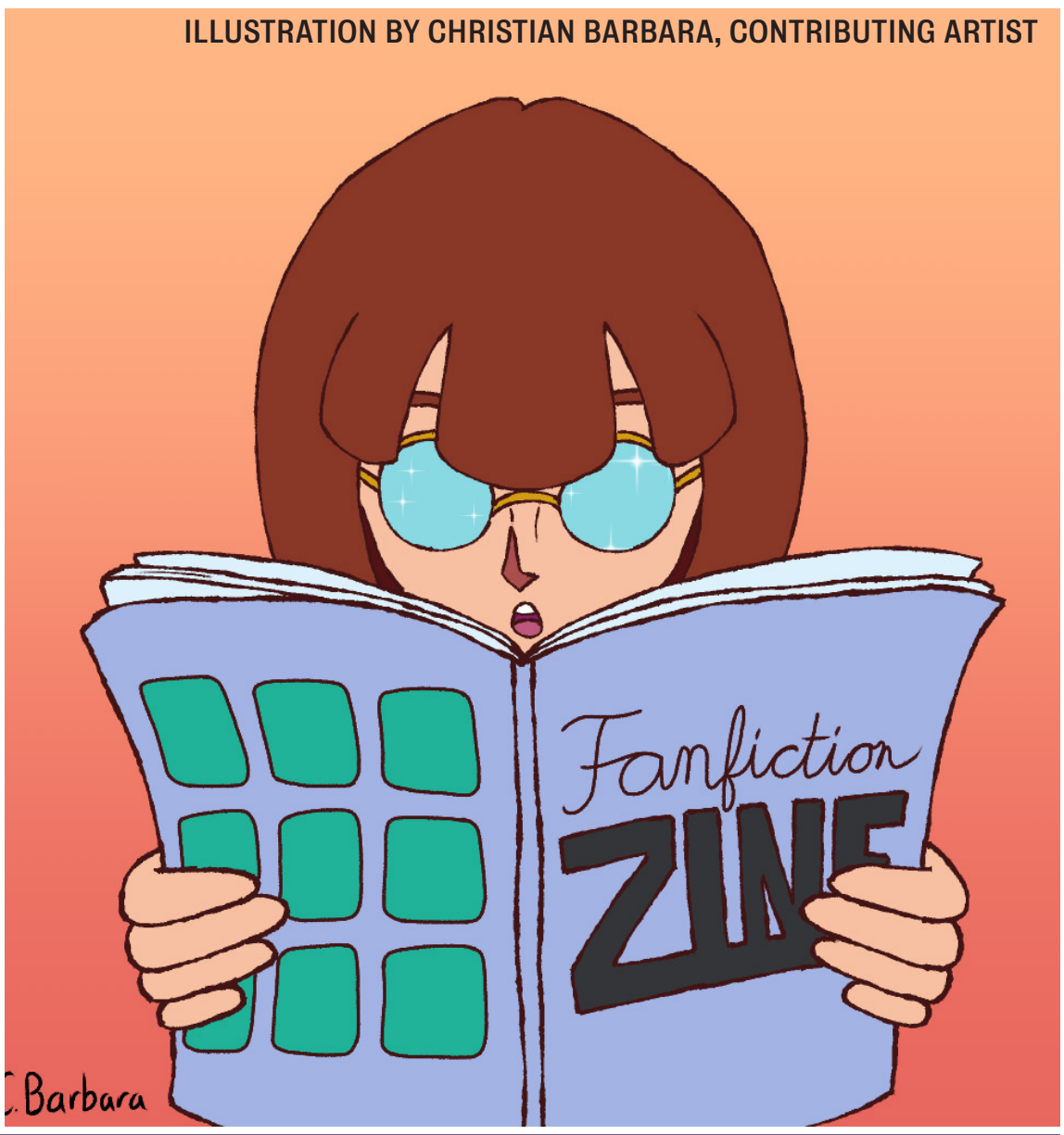
First of all, fanfiction is all about sharing. Fans will spend countless hours writing, but even more hours reading the work of others. This constant engagement creates a shared space for people who can bond over their love for an idea.

And as it turns out, love is where it's at. Fanfiction spawns from love and care for a piece of media, which certainly makes it a worthwhile form of art (and yes, it's art). This love and sense of community also can bring a lot of fun and excitement for people who engage in fan spaces. You may not have to engage with it, but if you happen to hate on it, I'd call you boring.

Also, let's get real here: to a degree, all writing is fanfiction. Every piece of written fiction was based on something else, and that goes all the way back to the Bible (maybe even before, depending on your belief system). Authors looking to publish original work will change names and plot points, but everything is based on something else.

Just as a little side note, fanfiction is also a great way to practice writing. I wrote fanfiction fairly consistently from third grade to about freshman year of high school, which makes for plenty of writing reps. Thanks to that experience, I'm now an honors journalism and political science student with a prominent position in my student paper. Stay in school, kids, but also stay on AO3.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN BARBARA, CONTRIBUTING ARTIST



From Wattpad to Archive of Our Own, fanfiction can be found all over the internet. But with widespread accessibility comes widespread criticism, and fanfiction has found itself to become heavily associated with nerd culture. Two writers of the Life section have come together to finally settle this debate and decide if fanfiction really is the epitome of cringe.

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Fanfiction is simply what it is in its name. Fiction. It is a fake form of writing, and its purpose should be seen as a private, creative outlet; something that people do for enjoyment and creative expression rather than a medium for public validation or attention. In many fanfiction spaces, a notable one being Wattpad, writers already use pseudonyms, and that choice reveals something important: the act of separating the work from the self.

Writing under a different name creates a boundary between who you are in your daily life and the imaginative space you create when you write fanfiction. When your name is not directly attached to your work, you have created a kind of distance between oneself and the work you create. It functions like a form of "life art," where writing reflects identity, imagination and personal experiences without the pressure of professionalism. And as a future educator, it is something that I'll allow my students to partake in class when it comes to creative expression. Fanfiction is a cute medium of expression; there is no shame in writing it, but it should be yours and yours only.

There is also something deeply human about having a creative space that only belongs to you. When I doodle in Procreate, there is no need to post it on the 'gram for everyone to see. The secrecy about having pages upon pages about your favorite celebrity or fictional character tucked away in a notebook or a Google Doc is the real gold about writing fanfiction.

Not everything needs to be posted or consumed by others to matter.

In fact, part of the joy of writing can stem from the quiet ownership of it; the feeling that something exists in your mind and your words that no one else fully has access to.

Keeping fanfiction private allows for that sense of freedom to stay intact.

Writers are allowed to explore ideas, relationships and emotions without the pressure of judgement or misunderstanding from outside audiences. And that is what preserves the original purpose of fanfiction: fun, creativity and personal expression.