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William H. Hannon Library Graduate Research Award

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Reflective Essay

It is with great excitement that I submit, “Virtual Reality in Theatre: A Survey of Audiences’ Empathy” to the William H. Hannon Library Graduate Research Award. This paper was initially a summative assessment for Dr. Arnab Banerji’s Fall 2019 Performance Pedagogy MFA Research and Writing Theatre seminar course, where I relied upon the tremendous staff and support available at the Hannon Library. I am happy to announce that this project will now be presented at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference.

In the beginning, I was utterly lost. I could identify my topic of study (virtual reality [VR] in theatre) but did not know where to start looking for resources. My journey began by attending a fantastic research symposium called, “Imagine If” where LMU showcased both current research and immersive technologies. I spoke with the support units from the Hannon Library, who informed me of the online assistance the library offered.

I begin my preliminary research by testing various VR keywords in the online library catalog with the hope of finding physical books I could immediately access. Any book or playscript not in stock, I requested using Link+. When I discovered a valuable text, I used the “more like this” button or clickable subject links listed on the book’s information page to increase the scope of my findings. This search process led me to my first obstacle.

VR and its relationship to acting is an emerging subject and does not have diverse primary sources to draw upon. Therefore, I decided that my project needed an original contribution of a qualitative research experiment to add to the discourse surrounding VR's role in theatre.

After revisiting the help desk, I discovered the Theatre Arts LMU LibGuide, and it changed my research strategies. The LibGuide introduced me to credible databases like JSTOR, International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance, and Academic Search Complete that addressed both my theatre arts and technology subjects. Each database required different search techniques to access free authoritative online peer-reviewed articles. I spent several weeks combing through lists - changing subject tags, and sentence structures. I searched authors work whose writings I found helpful, adjusted keywords using a thesaurus, and looked at article bibliographies to find new material. The LibGuide also made it easy to abide by RADAR guidelines and evaluate trustworthiness. This online investigation provided the bulk of my literature review, but eventually, I exhausted these avenues and hit yet another hurdle.

My inspiration renewed when Dr. Banerji took our class to visit Cynthia Becht, Head of Special Collections. This experience was instrumental in my research and personal life. I was fortunate enough to handle The Bard's First Folio from 1623. As a Shakespearean geek, seeing LMU's rare book collection motivated me to view the library as a collaborative partner in my studies rather than a place I went to work alone.

This collaboration proved most beneficial when the help-desk recommend I reach out to LMU's School of Film and Television to find a camera to use for my study. While the library rents out technical devices to students, VR equipment was not something offered at the time. After filling out the necessary paperwork, I was able to obtain an OneX 360 VR camera to use in

my work. Additionally, my collaboration with librarian Justice Alexander proved invaluable, as I would not have expanded my search to other scientific databases like; PsycINFO and ScienceDirect. He taught me how to use Onesearch+ more effectively, which, paradoxically, has the best resource, despite my narrowed topic. Because of its universality, I strategically used Onesearch+ to find opposing arguments for my thesis.

If the Hannon Library did not possess such a wide variety of tools, I would not have developed the confidence to pursue this topic and submit my findings to a national conference. This assignment and award grant has had an extraordinary impact on my critical thinking abilities, research methods, reading, and writing skills. This experience will stay with me until I graduate, as well as into my chosen career in higher education. Thank you for taking the time to read this essay and my research project.