

JOURNEY TO NATIONALS

How an underdog team made it to Daytona

BY CELISA CALACAL
SENIOR WRITER

The Ithaca College cheerleading team stands on a parched strip of grass outside the Ocean Center arena in Daytona Beach, the harsh Florida sun warming exposed skin that hasn't seen sunlight in weeks.

The team stands in their four stunt groups, rehearsing the first stunt sequence in their competition routine. This weekend marks the National Cheerleaders Association collegiate cheer championship. It's the pinnacle of college cheerleading, the tense climax to eight months of constant preparation. For every team, including this one, the ultimate goal is a flawless routine — no falls, not even a wobble.

Coach Alicia Trahan, a petite woman who speaks with a slight Texas twang in her voice, stands in front of the team, watching. She presses play on the speaker on the ground, and the energetic beats in the team's music engulf the space around them.

The four flyers stand facing away from their groups, silently counting along to the music. On three, they shrug and whip their bodies backward, their hands meeting grass to form a lowercase "n." Their bases and back spots catch their feet on the other side and immediately flip them back over so their feet are now perched in their hands, the flyers' arms quivering to steady themselves on their bases' shoulders.

With a dip of the legs, the flyers are lifted into the air and then immediately switch from standing on two feet to one, squeezing every muscle in their body in an attempt not to fall.

But for Rochelle MacNeil, it doesn't work, and her body tips to the side, sending her straight down. She doesn't hit the ground though; her group, whose eyes have been trained on her the whole time, catches her arms and legs before she even has a chance to collide with the dirt.

Alicia pauses the music and lets out a sigh.

"You want to go home on an almost-good one?" she asks the team as more of a rhetorical question.

She knows how tired they are — they've been traveling all day and barely had any time to rest before jumping into practice under the searing sun. But if they can hit this stunt now, in spite of the exhaustion and the sweat and the heat, they can hit it tomorrow. They just have to push through.

A chorus of no's erupt from the team, fully aware that they compete in 18 hours. If they want to make it past the prelims tomorrow, if they want to compete at the Bandshell, every group has to hit this stunt. Every flyer has to stay in the air. Almost good isn't good enough.

Nine Months

It was the middle of summer, and with pre-season rapidly approaching, the cheer team realized they had a problem: they had no coach. After their coach abruptly left the program during the Fall 2016 semester, their captain took over along with an assistant coach. But then they found out that the assistant coach technically couldn't continue to lead the team anymore, according to an Ithaca College policy saying their coach must be at

least 21. He was only 18.

They needed to find a new coach, fast.

Alicia never thought she would find herself in a small city in upstate New York. She had never even lived farther than three hours away from her hometown in Texas before. But postgrad adult life means big changes, which sometimes means moving to Ithaca, New York, just two weeks after getting married because your husband, Brody Trahan, was recently hired as the college's football team's newest coach.

During Brody's interview process, the prospect of Alicia coaching existed more as a what-if than a serious idea. Sure, Alicia had cheered since she was 8 years old and had dedicated three years to the Baylor University coed team, but she figured she would put her cheerleading career to rest after graduating. She never even considered coaching.

Still, the inkling of that possibility remained in the back of her head, only becoming more prominent when Brody was hired and the couple moved to Ithaca. Deciding to pursue some of the what-ifs in her head, Alicia reached out to the team.

After a constant back-and-forth through email, Alicia talked to Danielle Leiffer in a FaceTime call that lasted for two hours.

Alicia learned that the cheer team was a club sports team at the college, meaning they were reliant on themselves and the club sports team fund to finance, well, just about everything: their practice clothes, shoes, pompoms, hair bows, registration to competitions and any necessary travel. Even getting to Florida for NCAs remained up in the air until the team secured the \$35,000 in funding just to get there.

Before the start of the team's preseason in mid-August, Danielle invited Alicia to her apartment to meet her and the executive board for the first time.

They offer her the position of head coach. "You're the one," Danielle tells her. "You're it."

16 Days

It's the middle of practice on a Tuesday night, and

CHECK IT OUT

See pages 5-8 for
ACTS OF
VIOLENCE



The Ithaca College club cheerleading team practices before the championship in Daytona. The Bombers traveled to Florida to compete against teams from all across the country.

CAITIE IHRIG/THE ITHACAN

ITHACA COLLEGE
CLUB CHEERLEADING ROSTER

Coach: Alicia Drever Trahan

NAME	CLASS	POSITION
Jillian Hodsdon	Senior	Back spot
Danielle Leiffer	Senior	Base
Emma Venard	Sophomore	Flyer
Alicia Armstrong	Sophomore	Base
Jenna Gooch	Sophomore	Base
Aisha Mughal	Sophomore	Base
Anton Rizzo	Sophomore	Base
Lauren Rommens	Sophomore	Back spot
Emma Schaefer	Sophomore	Flyer
Rachel Vota	Sophomore	Back spot
Katelyn Walsh	Sophomore	Base
Emma Balestriere	Freshman	Back spot
Taylor Foster	Freshman	Base
Camryn Heister	Freshman	Base
Rochelle MacNeil	Freshman	Flyer
Shoshana Maniscalco	Freshman	Base
Amy Paiva	Freshman	Back spot
Brianna Reed	Freshman	Flyer

DESIGN BY MAYA RODGERS

Rochelle’s getting frustrated.

Elevated in the air, right foot gripped in Alicia Armstrong’s and Camryn Heister’s overlapping hands, the top half of Rochelle’s body leans to the side, an unsteady Jenga tower slowly losing its center of gravity. Eyes unwavering, she bites her lip in her Herculean effort not to fall.

Squeeze everything in your body. Don’t breathe. If you breathe, you’ll move. You’ll fall.

On the fifth beat, Alicia and Camryn drop their arms to their shoulders, and the change in height causes Rochelle to plunge into their arms. She lets out a huff and tightens her high brown ponytail in exasperation. But she knows she can’t give up — she has to keep going.

A year ago, Rochelle never even dreamed of being a flyer. During her 11 years as an all-star cheerleader, she had been a base, throwing cheerleaders into the air in the same ways she was being tossed around now. That all changed during preseason.

Standing on Camryn’s and Alicia’s hands at shoulder level, Rochelle tightens her knees and muscles once more, physically and mentally resisting the urge to come down and let gravity win. This time, Rochelle

remains in the air in time for Alicia, Camryn, and Lauren Rommens to thrust her upward.

After finally hitting this sequence, Rochelle thinks about the twisting dismount that finishes the stunt. She takes a big breath in preparation. She doesn’t like twisting, like, at any stage in life.

“You’re gonna twist, and it’s going to be beautiful,” Alicia says with peppy encouragement.

Rochelle nods. She’s right. She can do this.

At the end of the sequence, Rochelle waits for that faint dip that precedes the toss.

She doesn’t twist.

On the ground, Rochelle pauses to watch Emma Schaefer as she practices the same sequence beside her, staring as Emma effortlessly whiplashes her body around in the split second she floats in the air before landing in her group’s arms.

I want to do that, Rochelle tells herself.

One more time in the air. *Don’t sink, don’t bend your knee, don’t breathe, keep squeezing.*

Don’t be that girl. Twist.



Sophomore Emma Schaefer performs a heel stretch as part of a one-legged stunt.
CELISA CALACAL/THE ITHACAN

Popped from Alicia’s and Camryn’s hands, Rochelle whips her head around before the rest of her body follows, a tightly wound coil falling out of the sky.

15 Days

Emma starts with one foot on the mat and the other foot in Danielle’s and Taylor Foster’s hands. Her eyes pointed upward, she concentrates on a spot on the wall, her target. With their legs in a deep squat and their hands gripping her single shoe, Danielle and Taylor take a deep dip and lift her in the air, their outstretched arms fighting the strength of gravity to hold Emma in the air.

As she travels upward, Emma switches her standing leg, her foot easily falling into Danielle’s and Taylor’s grips like two puzzle pieces coming together. Standing sturdy, Emma pulls the other foot to her knee, toe pointed, and raises her arms to make a V around her head.

Stay tight. Squeeze your butt. Lift your hip. Don’t look down, look up. If you look up, you’ll stay up.

On the next third beat, Emma brings her other foot down into Danielle’s hands, and together Danielle and Taylor bring Emma down to shoulder level. With a bend of the knees, their legs shake, feeling Emma’s full weight before popping her into the air. Emma falls into her group’s arms with a dull thud, her brows furrowing and her eyes widening as apprehension clouds her face.

“Why didn’t you flip?” Danielle asks her with a mix of confusion and concern.

“I’m getting scared.” Emma’s voice is quiet, timid. She’s surprised. She just did the skill yesterday at practice — it should be a no-brainer at this point.

“OKWW, no ma’am,” Alicia says, her voice stern and her head shaking. “Not acceptable.”

Emma tightens her blonde ponytail in response and returns to her group. The stunt runs as smoothly as

before. Then, Taylor and Danielle bring Emma down to their shoulders in preparation for the throw.

Flip, Emma tells herself, her forehead wrinkling in concentration. *Come on, do it.*

Emma folds her chest to her knees but fails to flip when her green eyes spot the floor in a split-second psych-out. She falls clumsily in her group’s arms, causing them to stumble sideways in an effort to safely catch her.

Watching from the front of the mats, Alicia isn’t too worried — Emma’s the most veteran flyer on the team. Alicia knows she’ll be fine. Even the most experienced people get a little mental sometimes.

After a quick water break, Alicia tells the team to run the routine full-out. With one knee on the floor, waiting for the music to play, Emma tries to quiet the nagging voice in her head telling her she can’t do it, that the unassisted front flip is actually really scary. She can’t freak out now, not with the team’s first competition just three days away. Her group is relying on her.

“Let’s go, Bombers!” the opening lines to the music play, startling Emma from her overthinking. She whips her head up and a smile appears on her face.

Once she reaches the second stunt, all Emma thinks about is the laundry list she must remember when she’s flying: *stay tight, pull up, lock your knees, smile, don’t look down.*

Flip.

Now free from Danielle’s, Taylor’s and Rachel Vota’s grips, Emma folds her body in half, flipping like a quarter through the air and landing in their arms. Emma’s smile grows even bigger now as she finishes the rest of the routine.

It was just all in her head.

Albany

Alicia checks the time on her phone as the cheer





Sophomores Aisha Mughal and Jenna Gooch lift freshman Brianna Reed.
CELISA CALACAL/THE ITHACAN



Freshman Taylor Foster and senior Danielle Leiffer wait to catch Schaefer during practice.
CELISA CALACAL/THE ITHACAN

team fixes their makeup and hair at the University of Albany sports arena. 2:45 p.m. Time to get ready. She leads the team to the arena floor to stretch and warm up. Not every stunt is perfectly executed here, but Alicia is unfazed — win or lose, this competition is relatively inconsequential when compared to the behemoth that is the NCAs. It has no real significance on moving forward to Daytona, which makes it the perfect opportunity for rookies on the team to test the competition waters. It's the dress rehearsal before opening night.

"And now, taking the floor," a peppy male voice announces, "Ithaca College!"

The team members come running onto the mats, waving and smiling at the crowd as the overhead spotlights illuminate the floor. They take their places, drawing one last deep breath.

A beat of silence. Then, music.

Alex moves through the routine like she hadn't just learned everything two days ago — it was like she'd been a part of the team all along. As she lifts Emma into the air, the adrenaline-pumping, blackout-inducing thrill of competing floods her senses once more.

Once the two minutes and 15 seconds are over, which to some feels more like five seconds, the team hurries off the mat with bright smiles and astonished eyes. They can't believe it. That's the best they've ever performed that routine.

After another hour, the awards ceremony finally

begins. Swarms of cheer teams descend onto the mats, sitting in circles, anxiously waiting.

"If they win first place, I'm gonna cry," Alicia says, half-joking and half-serious. The IC team competed against three other college cheer teams from around the New York area, and all four teams displayed similar skill levels. And no team hit a flawless routine. Alicia knows IC scored a 90.35 out of 100. They have a chance.

The announcer begins to call out the placements for the collegiate division. Members of the team look at one another now, holding their breaths, eyebrows raised in nervousness. Only two teams left to call.

"In second place, SUNY Oneonta!"

A look of joyous disbelief washes over many faces as their minds follow this nerve-racking game of deduction. Finding it difficult to mask

their emotions even before the announcer has officially said their name, several of the cheerleaders' eyes widen in disbelief and their lips part in a knowing O-shape.

"Annnnnnd first place, Ithaca College!"

The entire team immediately leaps up from the mat, enveloping one another in jumping hugs and excited screams as a woman hands them a black banner that reads, "First Place."

Alicia isn't crying, but the shining grin stretching across her face is difficult to wipe off.

One Week

"Come on, Bree!"

"Don't sink!"

"S T A Y TIGHT!"

Standing on one leg in her bases' hands in the gymnastics room, Brianna Reed raises her free leg to extend it behind her head, resembling a precarious sideways "I" several feet in the air. A smile frozen on her face — *"I hit better when I'm smiling"* — Bree anticipates the dip of Aisha Mughal and Jenna Gooch beneath her before dropping into the net of their outstretched arms. Alicia nods without smiling, 90 percent satisfied with how the team is progressing, except...

"I'm done seeing straight cradles," Alicia tells Bree. "I need you to twist."

They're running out of time, and Alicia needs Bree to start executing this skill. If she doesn't start working on it, she'll never get there.

Bree hits the arabesque once more. Everything, technically, is still the same. The only difference is that Bree must now whip her body around to look like a human Twizzler in the air.

Bree only twists halfway this first time, instead resembling a flailing fish on her way down. Watching from a distance, Alicia pinches the bridge of her nose and squeezes her eyes shut, blowing air between her lips. *Come. On.*

The smile now gone from her face, Bree extracts herself from her group, prepared to try again.

It's not that hard, it's just a twist. Do it for the team. Do it for Daytona.

A delicate statue in the air, Bree twirls her body all the way around, landing upright in her group's arms.

Alicia claps her hands together, and the team collectively pauses. She tells the team to grab water and then get in position to run the whole routine.

With just one more week until NCAs, they know they won't win. Not when they're a club

sports team competing against Varsity programs. Not when they've placed 13th in the All-Girl Division III for the past three years. Not when their skill set doesn't match that of the other teams in the division. Not when they've had to raise more than \$35,000 all year just to get to Daytona in the first place.

It was an uphill battle from the start.

The team assembles in their three-line beginning formation.

"Breathe," Alicia reminds the team. "You have time."

One final, deep breath. "WHO ARE WE?" Jillian yells.

"IC!"

"Music's on," Alicia says. They launch into the routine, running through every single reminder their coach has ever told them.

Stay clean, point your toes, squeeze your legs together, remember the counts, stay tight, squueeeeeeze, lift your hip, keep your eyes on the flyer, dip with your legs, TWIST, big throws, ride UP before you tuck, listen to your teammates, stay in sync, count... in... your... head, SQUEEZE, don't sink, don't kick your leg out, SMILE, FLIP, twist off the front, hold the

BASES: Usually as a pair, these cheerleaders support the feet of the flyer, using mainly their leg muscles.

FLYER: The cheerleader lifted and tossed into the air to perform flips and twirls and hit body positions with their arms and legs. Body control and core strength are key.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MAYA RODGERS

bandstand, toss high, flip forward, move with a purpose, be sharp, DON'T FORGET TO SMILE. And for God's sake, breathe.

Four Hours
The alarm started blaring at 5 a.m. Get up, it's competition day.

Jenna, Jillian and Rachel take over one of three mirrors in the hotel bathroom, hardly speaking as they apply foundation, smoky eyeshadow, mascara, concealer, blush, highlighter, lipstick — the makeup look for the biggest competition in collegiate cheerleading.

Hair comes next. Jenna begins to braid a section of Jillian's hair, pulling and weaving the strands, one over the other, with the speed of a baker frosting cakes for the millionth time. Every so often, she sweeps a lick of gel through Jillian's brown-haired strands. The stiffer, the better.

At 6:40 a.m., the women leave the trio of mirrors to form a tease train on the bed. Kneeling one behind the other, hairbrush or teasing comb in hand, they begin to brush the roots of the ponytail down until the hair begins to peek just above the top of their heads.

6:45 a.m. Move it, they have to be in the lobby by 7 a.m.

Aisha rushes unannounced into the room. "Does anyone know how to put on false eyelashes?" A pair of synthetic, thick, black lashes is pinched between her fingers.

"No," the women respond collectively.
7:00 a.m. Time to go.

With the entire team now in the lobby, Alicia leads the team outside the hotel to wait for the shuttle bus. The sun barely peeks out over the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, showering the coastline with swaths of Florida-orange light. The women wait impatiently on the sidewalk, with some shielding their eyes from the gusts of coastal wind threatening to tear off their precarious false eyelashes.

It's going to be a long day.

30 Minutes
The roaring will not stop. Filled with more than a dozen cheer teams scattered across sets of blue mats, the peppy, driving mix of cheer tracks blasted at full volume bounces off the slab concrete walls in the warm-up room, transforming it into a dense echo chamber filled with polyester-uniformed, hair-gelled cheerleaders.

The IC cheer team occupies a set of mats on the far side for warm-up. In these 15 minutes, Emma has trouble completing the entire first stunt sequence without falling. Holding her foot in the air, Danielle tries to ignore the pain shooting through her fingers.

The execution isn't perfect, but Alicia isn't concerned. She knows that when the adrenaline kicks in, Emma, Danielle, Taylor and Rachel will do everything in their power to keep the stunt up, no matter what. With warm-ups over,

there's nothing they can do now except quiet the anxiety and the nerves and the mind games in their head.

A man in a crisp black polo shirt directs the team out of the arena and down a series of carpeted hallways until they reach the backstage area. They walk by other cheer teams, exchanging wishes of good luck as they pass.

There's just one team separating the IC cheer team from the performance floor now. Time

seems to be moving quicker. The team gathers into one last huddle, with members shouting last pieces of advice.

Leave it all on the mat. Have fun. We've got this. Believe in yourselves. Give it all you've got.

"And now performing in All-Girl III, from Ithaca, New York, Ithaca College!"

As the women pour onto the floor, wide smiles on their faces, the spotlights from above cast a glaring fluorescent white onto the team, blinding them so they can hardly see into the crowd before them.

The team takes their position. They're ready. The music starts, that all-too-familiar "Let's go, Bombers" ringing in their ears. Right before the back handspring into the first stunt, Rochelle tells herself she's going to hit this. She has to. And as Danielle holds Emma in the air, she's not thinking about anything anymore: not which motion comes after what skill, not how the team is doing, not the counts and not even the sharp spasms in her wrist.

Elevated in the air, the spotlights casting white on her face, Bree loses her bearings when pressed back up to the arabesque, her left leg kicking out and causing her weight to shift too rapidly over her right hip. She falls before she's able to complete the sequence. During the second stunt, Rochelle sticks her butt out on her way to hit the heel stretch, falling just as fast as she got up. Right behind her, Emma Venard faces similar stability issues and tries to salvage the stunt by waving her arms to regain her balance. But she falls right before the front flip, her leg catching on Jillian's shoulder so she turns upside down in her group's arms.

The performance isn't what the team had hoped for: The two falls in the second stunt will cost the team in deductions. Rochelle is silent backstage, attempting to steady her breath. She's happy in spite of the fall — it was a fluke anyway. Everyone has one bad time.

Without even knowing their exact score, everyone knows it's not enough to make it to finals. They had to be flawless to make it to the top seven out of this division of 13 teams, and they weren't. But they still have one last chance to perform in the Bandshell: Challenge Cup, a mini-competition among the bottom six teams in All-Girl III. The team with the highest score moves on to Finals.

30 Minutes
The team returns to the same expansive

BACK SPOT: The spine of the stunt who helps pull the flyer into the air by gripping their ankles and catching their head and upper body.



Members of the Ithaca College club cheerleading team go over their routines at the football game against Hobart College on Sept. 30, 2017, at Butterfield Stadium.

CAITIE IHRIG/THE ITHACAN

arena from this morning, only this time the roaring has subsided. At 5 p.m., the only teams left warming up are those competing in Challenge Cup. Earlier in the day, the women found out they scored 81 points, placing them at the bottom of the pack. The score stings, but that's why there's Challenge Cup. It's a reset button.

On the blue mats, many groups are having trouble with the stunts. In the first half of the pyramid, Bree loses balance and slips off the top, causing the whole formation to crumble in on itself. Emma also doesn't hit the first stunt sequence. They're getting nervous.

"Re-lax," Alicia advises. "Focus on what you're doing. This is what we came here to do. Don't freak yourself out."

After 15 minutes, the team exits the warm-up room to the backstage area they were in just nine hours ago. The team huddles just before they take the stage, reminding one another of the same advice from this morning: Leave it all on the mat. Have fun. We've got this. Believe in yourselves. Give it all you've got.

"Now performing in All-Girl III, Ithaca College!"

The team takes the mat once more under the burning lights.

"Who are we?" Jillian yells.
"IC!"

Music's on. The team moves through the routine for probably the hundredth time, their tired muscles taking over to perform every jump, flip, roll, toss and stunt. On the first stunt sequence, Emma V. begins to lose balance as she rotates in the air, and she topples into her group's arms before she finishes the turn. Rochelle also falters on this first stunt and makes a safety call to not twist at the end. During the pyramid, Alicia can't quite center herself as she's pressed back up to shoulder level, and she plunges down, making it so Bree can't perform her handstand trick.

The two minutes and 15 seconds are up. The women exit behind the curtain, their shoulders slumped. That wasn't the performance they wanted.

Twenty minutes later, the team finds themselves on the blue mats for the awards ceremony, knowing deep down that their dream of finals on the Bandshell is thinning into the air.

"In sixth place," a sharp announcer's voice begins.

The women stare down at the floor, eyes closed, breaths holding, hands tightly clasped together.

"Ithaca College."
They finally release their breath, and one member receives the square plaque with their name and placement engraved into the dark wood. Sixth place in Challenge Cup. Thirteenth in the division. Last place.

Backstage after awards, the women can't help but feel tinges of jealousy toward the Endicott College cheerleaders celebrating their first-place win and a spot in Finals tomorrow.

Alicia gathers the team together. "Remember this feeling," she tells them, her voice steady as she looks at the disappointed eyes staring at her. "And use it to motivate you for next year."

The Next Day
Friday finds the team at the Bandshell, laying on beach towels on the open-air floor as they watch other teams perform. They're only spectators now, but it's not all bad. They still made it to Daytona.

"We're more there for us," Rochelle said. "We're there to experience what other cheerleaders experience. We're there to fight our hardest, just like everyone else."

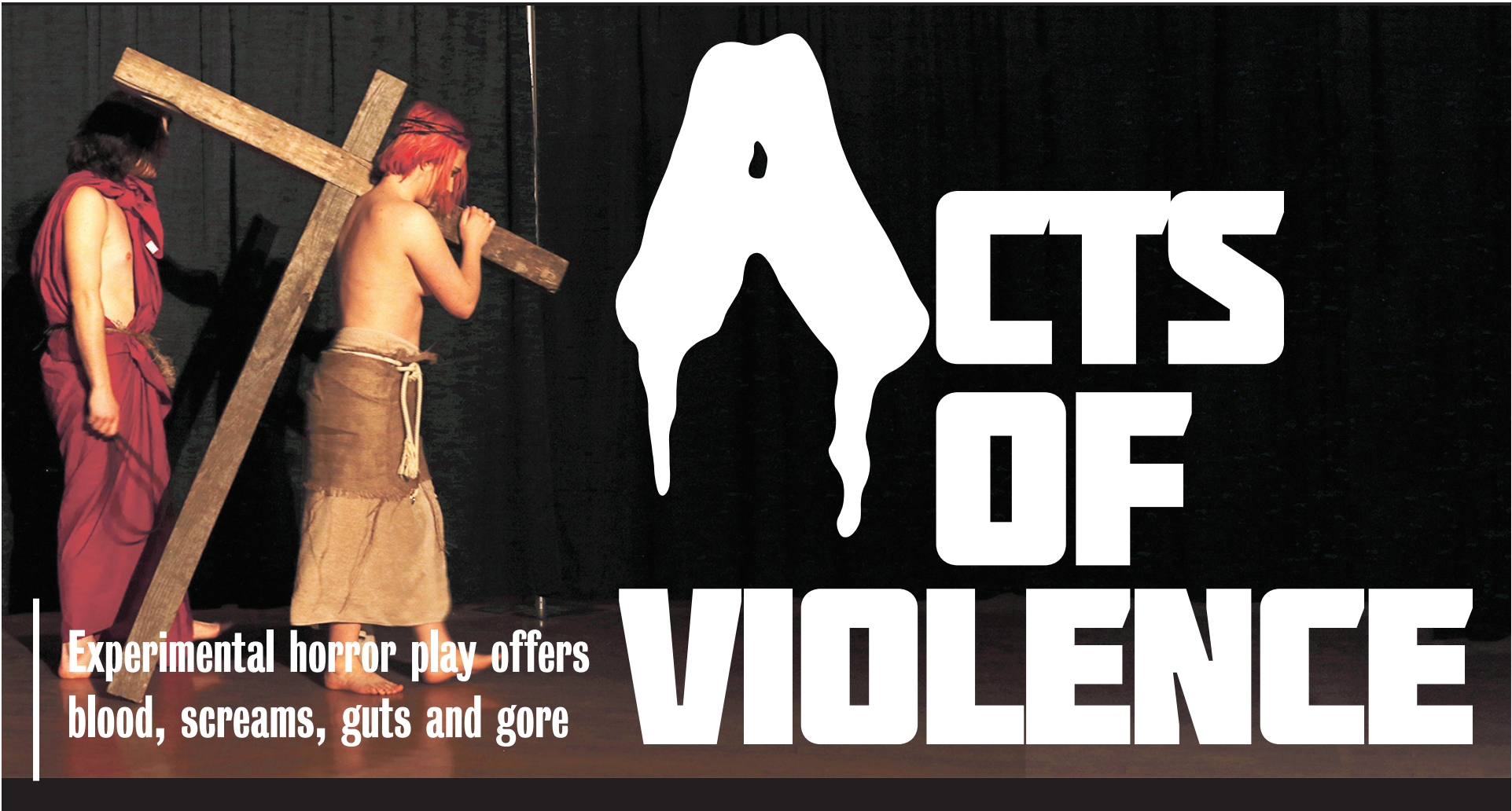
They knew they wouldn't win or place in the top tier of teams coming in, but that didn't really matter. They still got to learn new skills and compete and become part of this new family. And despite all the injuries and the rough practices and the mental blocks along the way, they still got to do what they love.

"We're lucky enough to be here," Danielle said. "Doesn't matter if we got last."



The cheerleading team poses with Ithaca College President Shirley M. Collado at the women's basketball game against St. Lawrence University Feb. 10 in Ben Light Gymnasium.

CAITIE IHRIG/THE ITHACAN



Experimental horror play offers blood, screams, guts and gore

ACTS OF VIOLENCE

Sophomore Shoshi Fleury, followed by Zach Randall, carries a wooden cross across the stage during a final rehearsal of the horror play “Celebration!” The play, produced by Ithaca College’s Macabre Theatre Ensemble, was an experimental theater performance. Fleury portrays Jesus in the third act, “Easter,” which tells a warped version of the Crucifixion.

MAXINE HANSFORD/THE ITHACAN

BY KATE NALEPINSKI
SENIOR WRITER

It is the sound of nails against a chalkboard. The taste of curdled milk and the sour feeling in the pit of your stomach before entering a funeral home. Except this is your funeral, and everyone you’ve ever met is inside, smiling.

Tragedy is alive in the room. It thrives in the room, in the form of the FREAKOUT, and it begins with a scream. It is yellow, blue, white lights flashing rapidly in 360 degrees. It is sexual moans, groans, grunts. It is maniacal laughter.

Of all things sarcastic and sardonic, of all things reckless and radical, of all things macabre — this is the celebration.

Sunday, April 22 | 4:48 p.m. | Circle Apartments.

Baking cocoa, light corn syrup, Nesquik, tempera poster paint (red), tempera poster paint (black), cornstarch powder and red food dye.

A blue painting tarp is sprawled across the living room carpet in Circle 131-03. A Twiddle album is playing on the turntable, and the kitchen (!) ingredients are scattered in the center of the tarp.

A crimson bowl with a Guy Fieri-brand whisk sits in front of a cross-legged Matt Porter. He’s gazing down into the center of the bowl as he watches the clear corn syrup sway.

He’s preparing edible blood for “Celebration!” the theater production he pitched, wrote and directed as part of the Macabre Theatre Ensemble. It’s set to run in five days, and the show’s rehearsals have been lacking one of the main elements: Blood.

He jumps up from the tarp and runs to the kitchen to get more cornstarch. On the other side of the room, one of his flatmates, Alistair Bennie-Underwood, sits on the Couchboat, a combination of the three uncomfortable, cum-stained Ithaca College sofas with raggedy threads. His chin points up, and he looks over the edge of the couch at the bowl of blood on the floor. He nods once and

resumes using his phone.

“How about that color?” In one swift motion, Matt shoves his index finger into the bowl and slides the red hue across his tongue — “mMMMh,” he groans. It tastes of liquefied cocoa, but then he makes a sour face as the aftertaste of corn syrup slides down his throat. He nods approvingly, and although he was following directions from a third-party website via his Macbook, he shuts it, snags the cornstarch powder and recklessly pours more in to thicken the syrup.

“I’m gonna make three types of blood,” he explains. “We’re gonna decorate props with vampire blood” — he gestures to the plastic red bottle with the same name — “We’re gonna use watered-down red liquid for when we need a lot of blood in scenes, like when people are coated in it” — he looks at the Hawaiian Punch — “And then, this is for like, more ... intimate areas?” He snickers, stirring the extra cornstarch powder. “Like, for areas around the mouth or on the face, so just in case they swallow it, it’s, you know, fine.”

Matt pours the wine-tinted liquid into a half-gallon milk container, scrawling “EDIBLE blüd” on the front panel.

“Remember,” he offers, “to whisk vigorously for 15 seconds.”

Wednesday, November 15, 2017 | 7 p.m. | Friends Hall, Room 207

“So I’ve experienced this a lot, at Ithaca College specifically, but the amount of times I had to hear somebody say, ‘I know art is supposed to make you uncomfortable, but...’ is really irritating,” Matt said, standing in front of the six Ithaca College students that made up the Macabre Theater Ensemble e-board. About 20 other members and first-timers sat in surrounding chairs.

“So I decided to write a play where the goal was to make the audience uncomfortable. It’s an experimental theater piece that references my last performance art piece with Macabre.”

Two years ago, Macabre performed a wacky, violent Thanksgiving dinner scene at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. Matt wrote it. This was the beginning of a series of vignettes that would later evolve into the four acts of “Celebration!”

Each act, he explained, would signify a celebratory event with some sick, violent twist. Some characters would overlap, but

the FREAKOUT — a moment of chaos, flashing lights and disorienting noises, where all the characters would appear — would provide some transitions between each act, as would a narrator. And the show, he said, would be performed around the audience, so they’re surrounded by the action.

That evening, each potential director for the spring semester was expected to present their show proposal to the Ensemble. Once all presentations concluded, the group voted on the shows for the Spring 2018 season.

But there were only four shows pitched: the total number needed for a full semester. Voting didn’t happen. Coincidentally, the e-board was in favor of Matt’s idea.

The script was finished in mid-February:

- Act I: *Birthday*
- Act II: *Valentine’s Day*
- Act III: *Easter*
- Act IV: *Commencement*

Monday, March 5 | 7:00 p.m. | Iger Lecture Hall, James J. Whalen Center for Music

The tension in the towering music classroom is broken by bright smiles and familiar faces. Alex Smith, the production manager of “Celebration!” sits silently in their seat, watching actors stream into the room.

Matt taps his foot — a tick that helps him appear cool and collected. He’s anticipating more people to show up, they will, they’re probably just late, but then he counts the total 21 individuals, sees it’s 10 past, and figures it’s time to begin regardless of the size. Judging by the small group, he’s already decided that all of these people have to be cast and most of them will have multiple roles.

Kara Bowen and her friend, Julia Hurlburt, find seats in the center of the seating area.

This is nothing new for either of them: Julia worked backstage in the “Rocky Horror Picture Show” last October. Kara’s been participating in IC Second Stage since she came to college. She’s been theatrical since she popped out of the womb.

Still, Julia didn’t want to audition alone, so Kara saw it as an opportunity. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Hey, guys, thanks for coming out,” Matt says. He passes around a consent form so the actors have a better understanding of the show.



Sophomore Alexander Bird acts as The Doctor, preparing to deliver a deformed child with rubber gloves and power tools.

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Celebration! contains material that viewers may find and some may find triggering. These include but are not limited to:

- Flashing Lights/Loud, Disorienting Noises
- Child Abuse
- Full and Partial Nudity
- Spousal Abuse/Representation of Abusive Relationships
- Vile, Sexual Perversions
- Bullying
- Bodily Mutilation
- Cannibalism
- Filicide
- Suicide
- References to Minnesota
- Drugs
- Misrepresentation of Institutional Racism
- Extremely Sacrilegious Material
- Staged Depictions of Torture
- Extreme Violence
- Staged Depictions of Masturbation
- Bestiality
- Horrifying Truths
- A Pessimistic View of the Future
- War
- The Forced Infantilization of Adults
- The Use of a Prop Gun



Cast members rehearse the first act of “Celebration!” which is titled “Birthday,” and opens the show with flashing lights, backstage screaming and deafening sound effects. When the lights come up, the act goes on to depict a mother giving birth, covered in fake blood.

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Kara’s eyes scan the list quickly, pausing at *Minnesota and Infantilization of Adults*. She laughs to herself.

“Cool. Once you read and sign these, I’m going to read each role, and if you’re interested in auditioning, you can come up,” Matt says. “Whoever wants to read for this role can, regardless of who you are.”

He begins by reading Deborah’s bio. “Married to PAUL, must be comfortable being partially nude on stage, a whore, likes to slap lunch meats.”

Snorts and awkward laughter are heard from the audience. Kara rises from her seat, a smile on her face. She takes a scene sheet with some of Deborah’s dialogue from Alex Smith and tries to resist the urge to look down immediately, but when she does, one line jumps out at her:

DEB: Oh, Paul! Plow mysticky moist-spot with your bologna!

She stands in front of the crowd. The others who joined her have already read their lines as Deborah. It was her turn. All eyes are on her.

It was then that something shifted. A change. An acceptance. A shot at something new, something weird. A disregard for future consequences.

Without any sense of concern, Kara begins with her most raunchy voice possible, gesturing to her crotch when she reads, “I feel like we never get to get down and get filthy.” She’s knocking laughter out of audience members, most of whom will

be actors three weeks later. Matt’s grinning the whole time. She’s ready for a wild ride.

Saturday, April 14 | 3:54 p.m. | Job Hall, Room 220

Twelve chairs with puke-green backing are lined against one side of the classroom. Four students stare blankly at Alex Smith, who is too uncomfortable to speak. Their short, brown, hair curls against the sides of their cheeks.

Alex Bird, a large man who’s rarely spotted in anything other than striped shirts, anxiously walks into the room, sitting in the back row of seats. He runs his fingers through his blue-tinged hair. Only a month ago, Alex Bird found out he was going to be playing the Doctor, who, to his pleasure, is punching babies by the end of the first page of the script.

But Alex Bird doesn’t know anyone in the ensemble. He has a vague grasp on acting techniques, from classes he’s taken at Ithaca. But this is the first time he’s done anything with Macabre. It’s his first step — in his Italian black leather shoes — onto the acting scene.

As more actors stream into the classroom, the chairs fill, saturating the space with a dull murmur. Matt takes attendance, announcing that Jake Sullivan (Paul, the crackhead, one of the most verbally abusive characters in the show) will not be coming in until 5 p.m.

“Let’s all share what’s some bullshit today.” His eyes instantly link with Zach Randall’s.

“I’ve just kind of had a shitty week,” Zach says. “I think life is some bullshit. Fifty shades of this shitty week.” He’s actually never attended the college, but he somehow made his way into the Macabre Theater Ensemble after he graduated from Tompkins Cortland Community College. His eyes are crusty, tired, and his eyebrow hairs are tangled in one another. He wears an oversized black hoodie.

“You don’t even go here,” Matt retorts. “Shhhh.”

The actors form a circle on the floor and begin stretching. Alex Bird is perched next to Shoshi Fleury, who has bright pink hair, who sits next to Ariella Ranz, who has tangerine hair. The

clock strikes 4:20 p.m., and no joke is made. A doleful loss.

Five minutes later, everyone pushes the chairs against the back wall in the room so they have space to rehearse. “We have two weeks till the show,” Matt announces. “No scripts on Sunday.”

Shoshi’s eyes widen. “Oh, shit.”

“Y’all can still call ‘line,’ though.”

She falls silent, and her eyes land on the floor. She plays it cool, but her stomach feels like it has a goiter.

Shoshi knows the ropes at this point: She jumped into Macabre at the beginning of last semester when she nailed her audition for Riff Raff in “Rocky Horror.” She’s tight with this crew. She doesn’t fear getting completely naked in front of them, or anyone, for that matter. She’s not afraid of being power-tooled to the cross, nor getting splattered head to toe with blüid. But forgetting her lines? Terrifying.

Ariella and Shoshi exchange a concerned glance.

The group starts rehearsing the final act: A graduation scene where each graduate is either mutilated or attacked.

Matt is direct and slightly aggressive but coats his words with a “layer of chill.” He’s describing how the characters should feel violated by the end of the show.

Alex Smith rolls their eyes as they watch all the characters join hands in a circle, sway back and forth and sing an off-key version of “Kumbaya.”

Sunday, April 15, 2018 | 2:10 p.m. | Friends Hall, Room 308

Matt says they’re doing rehearsals for the first scream of the show. It’s the sound that triggers it all: The first FREAKOUT, the first act. The actors line up against the wall, taking turns frantically screaming at the top of their lungs.

While Shoshi belts out a jaw-clenching scream, a tour group from Ithaca Today walks through Friends Hall. Arianne Joson slowly waltzes to the door in her black robes, popping her head outside to greet the families.



From left, freshman Dariene Seifert and sophomore Shoshi Fleury, in the roles of Jeremy and Ricky, argue about whether or not to kill their child.

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Four cast members sit in chairs during the fourth and final act, “Graduation Day.” The play ends with five students walking to accept diplomas on the day of their college graduation, before a FREAKOUT is triggered and the flashing lights, screaming and chaos returns to the stage.

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Zach screams next, and Alex Smith follows behind Arianne. They apologize to incoming students and parents, who are whispering with concerned looks. “It’s just ... we’re rehearsing?” The families quickly walk away.

The first full run-through begins. Alex Smith and Matt take notes. Most of the actors grab their scripts even though they know they shouldn’t.

Alex Bird has already memorized his lines as the Doctor. But his lines, noises and actions as a masturbating Easter bunny? Not so much.

Sunday, April 22 | 9:54 p.m. | Beeler Rehearsal Hall, Center for Music

It’s the first day of tech week. To theater kids, it’s hell week: the build-up before a show. It usually consists of excessive rehearsing until everything looks, sounds and smells perfect.

The only available space in Beeler Hall is from 10 p.m. to midnight, so the cast and crew are suffering in unity as they all exhaustedly stumble into Beeler Hall just before the time hits.

The fluorescent lights in the room reflect off the wooden floor. Heads are dizzy. Bodies are aching. Exhaustion is heavy, and when Eliza Wildes, the lighting coordinator, pulls out a long rolling box of metal pipe and drape to set up the stage, there’s an audible silence in the air.

The cast and crew dredge over to the box, unloading metal pipes and black curtains. The fabric flies up to the top of the metal banners, where they’re draped across the metal beams. They create a circle, and the audience is expected to sit in the center.

Jake’s practicing his lines behind the curtain. His script is sitting on the piano in the corner of the room. He’s finally nailed down his entire monologue as the graduation speaker (with split personalities):

SPEAKER: (sinister, ominous face) The world is a fucked-up place, ya know. ... You don’t know what is waiting just around the corner. ... Every day is just something else you couldn’t have guessed.

(snapping back to chipper speaker) But you’re prepared to tackle them head-on and

face the adversity that is thrown your way, thanks to our wonderful six-step program of complementary liberal arts that enrich your experience with new perspectives and a wonderfully branded marketing campaign!

It’s 11 p.m. on the dot. It’s time. Matt calls blackout, and Eliza shuts all the lights off.

The rehearsal begins with the second scene of the play, between Jake and Kara. There’s an established comfort and understanding between them that wasn’t present before. They both deliver their memorized lines with sarcasm and playfulness. Her tighty-whities are stained with dirt from the wooden floor. She works them with pride.

Arianne, who has completed every rehearsal with a white sheet over her face to symbolize her “Blank” character, knew every line since her first rehearsal. She stands beside her fellow Blank companion, Ariella, who is still calling “line” in a robotic tone.

Shoshi is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. She monologues in front of a wooden cross, which Dan Pichette built for the show. His ruby toga drags when he grabs a power tool off the ground. He turns it on, the metal rapidly rotating directly in front of her. She screams with reckless abandon. Dan bursts a container full of blüid, dripping it against her wrists. Matt laughs maniacally at the success of the scene.

Wednesday, April 25 | 8:37 p.m. | Outside Beeler Hall

Alex Bird enters in a pastel pink shirt. No stripes for Bird today.

The crew knows the drill: pipe and drape, circular shape. They get the curtains up twice as fast as they did on Sunday.

Matt calls the Alexes over to the corner of Beeler, near Eliza’s lighting setup. “So Ariella dropped out.” Ariella, a Blank character and a graduating student, explained that she had too much going on. She didn’t know the lines. It’s lame to drop out two days before the show... but Ariella’s been flaky the whole time. Matt had a back-up plan for a while.

“Would you be able to play the fourth gradu-

ate? Do you have a suit?” The questions are tied together. No is not an answer.

“Uh, yeah,” Bird replies.

“Where do you live?”

“Emerson.”

“OK. Maybe run back there and get a suit, if you have one. Also, um, do you have a button-down shirt?” He nods. “Also grab that. Thanks.”

Alex Bird disappears. Matt turns to Alex Smith. They open their laptop and quickly type something.

“I got it.”

Just like that, there’s no threat to the show. It must go on, after all.

Behind the curtain, everyone is snacking on Arianne’s banana bread. But the petite actress sits completely still. Blank. But she’s a little concerned. No Ariella. No other Blank. Just her. And a mirror, which holds no significance to someone whose face is fully covered.

She pops out of the curtain and nails all of her lines and Ariella’s, turning 180 degrees with each comment.

“I. Do. Love. Our. Child. ... I. Do. Too.”

As the vague ominous music plays, she is an enigma, a monster, a demon, a robot.

Jake improvises when he’s on stage during the Valentine’s Day dinner scene. “You’re god-damn right I’m angry!” He spits in Zach’s face, and he giggles, to which Jake responds with, “What do you have back there? A Mexican clinic? An abortion?!”

PAUL: Yeah, you bet your ass I’m fucking angry. What are you hiding in that kitchen? An abortion clinic? Mexicans?!

Eliza reads the script very intently, preparing for the cue line that will change the lighting. They hold a flashlight with a strobe in their mouth as the next FREAKOUT occurs.

This is the first time they run through the show with

blüid. Shoshi is splashed with sugary, syrupy Hawaiian punch. As she desperately jogs behind the curtain to rub off the liquid after the scene, the cross begins to fall down. Arianne’s eyes widen, and Jackie, a visiting e-board member, jumps up, grabs the cross, attempting to hide her body behind the plank.

“Nailed it,” someone says.

Friday, April 27 | 5:30 p.m. | Beeler Hall, Center for Music

Doors open in half an hour. For the most part, things are calm. No one is panicking, except for Alex Smith, who found someone’s water bottle had leaked onto the props.

College students approach the table outside of Beeler, where Liz and Jackie are tabling and taking audience member’s phones.

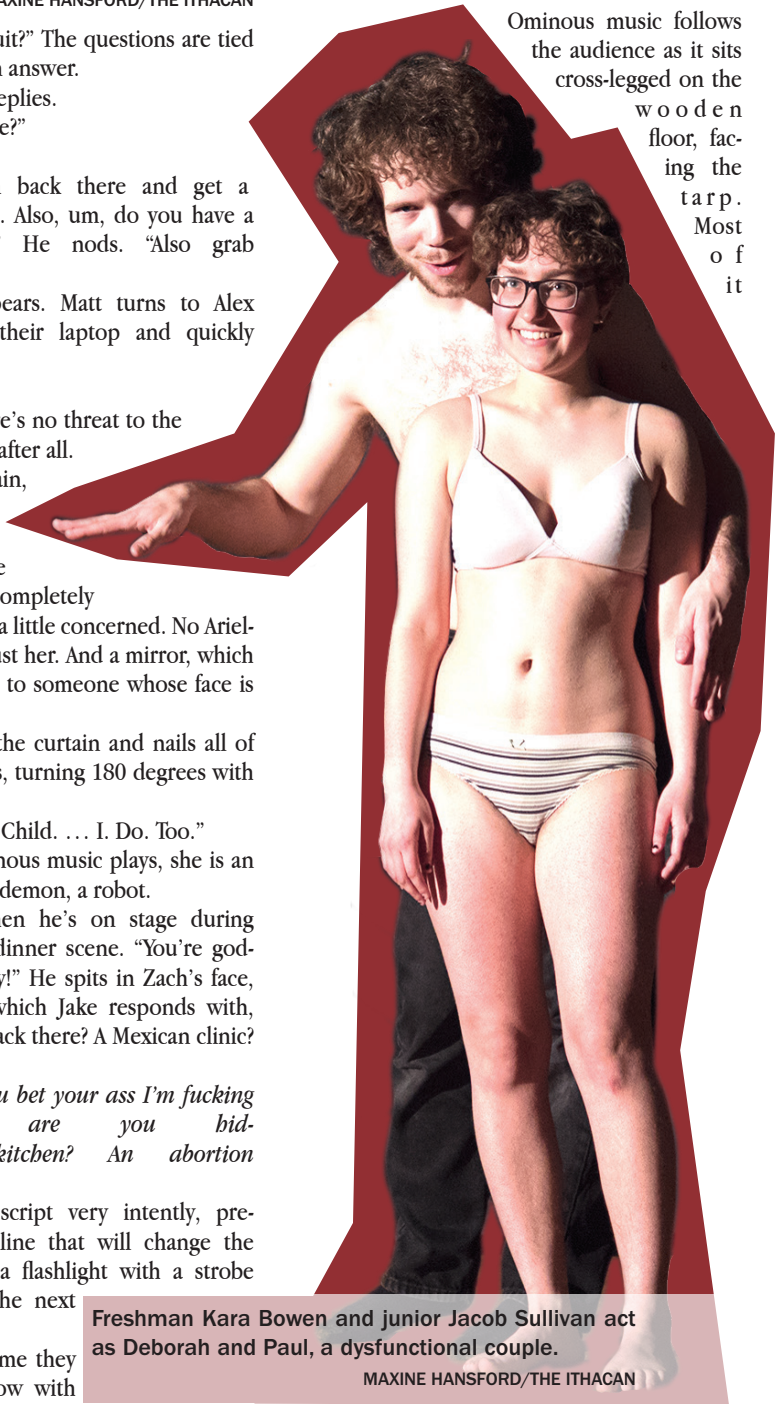
Each viewer is asked to sign a consent form — it’s the same list of warnings that Kara read during auditions. An old couple who holds hands on their way to a formal instrumental rehearsal in the Hockett Recital Hall makes sour faces after noticing the plastic skull sitting in front of Liz.

“Come see the show!” She yells, watching them enter Hockett.

At around 7 p.m., the “bodyguards” (Alex Smith in damp attire, and Zach) begin patting down each audience member before they can enter.

A single red light shines on a familiar tarp. The doors slam shut behind them.

Ominous music follows the audience as it sits cross-legged on the wooden floor, facing the tarp. Most of it



Freshman Kara Bowen and junior Jacob Sullivan act as Deborah and Paul, a dysfunctional couple.

MAXINE HANSFORD/THE ITHACAN



“Celebration!” ends with the fourth act, “Graduation Day.” Junior Jake Sullivan screams on the floor during the final FREAKOUT, during which the actors cause chaos by screaming, dancing and running around the audience. Freshman Kara Bowen curls up on the floor behind him after acting as Student 5, a graduating student who refuses to receive her diploma.

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is college students.

The floor is full. Perspiring bodies and adrenaline. Students share whispers. An energetic fear hangs in the space, like on a cold October night before entering a haunted house.

The lights go dark. The room is silent until Shoshi’s first monumental scream:

The first FREAKOUT is mild. Everyone in the cast and crew screams and bangs on chairs from behind and in front of the curtain. Lights flash red, yellow and blue.

Alex Bird appears center stage in nurse’s robes, bright yellow gloves and a cough mask.

DOCTOR: *Awake, children! Look around!*

On every side of the audience, butt-naked actors playing babies sob hysterically. Their genitals are uncomfortably close to the audience members. Some students laugh. Some of them turn to friends with wide eyes. The babies don’t stop crying.

DOCTOR: *SHUT UP! FUCKING CHRIST! ACCEPT GOD’S GIFT, YOU UNGRATEFUL SHITS!*

The Doctor slaps the babies off the stage. A moment later, Zach screeches from the audience:

“Doctor! I need a doctor!” He’s pulled out of the audience. The next five minutes are full of swanky jazz music while Zach gives birth to a baby doll oversaturated with dried blüd.

Blackout.

Alistair crouches down next to someone in the audience, and when the lights flash back on, he whispers, “It all started in the oceans. You know that?” The student literally jumps, and laughter ensues over Alistair’s first monologue:

“I mean, how can a world exist without a God? It’s like toast without jam or sex without the herpes.”

Paul appears with Deborah, center stage. Their well-practiced sex scene begins. A few students flinch at Paul’s repulsive language toward Deborah. Most laugh, as does Jake.

Stage left, Dariene Seifert and Shoshi sit side by side, their intentionally boring dialogue

adding a sense of security to the performance.

The security is quickly snapped when the duo prepares to murder its own child.

Stage left goes dark. Stage right is lit with dark blue. Arianne sits in a single chair, a white mask coating her face. The audience is tense. One student is leaning into her friend, fearful of what’s next.

The perspective switches back to Paul and Deborah center stage after gnarly sex. The characters get into an argument. It’s unclear whether the audience is laughing to break the tension or if Jake’s exuberance is hilarious.

“You’re sick of me? I’m sick of you!”

Jake snags a sugar glass bottle from the music stand, which was being used as a prop table. “God!” he yells, tossing the bottle against the tarp.

Except, it doesn’t shatter. The Crackhead picks it up again, aggressively hurling it at the ground.

It bounces once. Jake stares in complete frustration.

“God!” Finally, the sugar shatters, and despite a prepared audience, they recoil as the shards hit them.

No trigger warning for this.

One shard slices the back of Kara’s hand open, but she doesn’t feel it. Yet.

The stage goes dark and flashes to a restaurant interior, where both couples sit on either side of the room. It’s Valentine’s Day. Everything is lovely.

And then, murder.

Screaming. Fake blüd everywhere. Splattered across the first two rows of the audience. Most cower as they’re splashed, but others laugh pleasantly.

More yelling. More screaming. Miraculously, by the time Shoshi appears in a tweed skirt and nothing else, no one has found an escape route

out of Beeler.

The lights are dark. Dan and Zach, dressed as Romans, tightly grip whips behind the curtain. The leather fabric strikes the floor, and Shoshi screams again. The Romans follow Jesus in a circular path around the audience, creating a dizzying effect. A holy choir begins to sing as Shoshi carries the weight of the cross on her back.

CHRIST: *Ob, Father, bear my prayer! Who is it that hides in cowardice under the shade of the sacred cross? But when challenged like Job, do they outright deny you?*

Crew members behind the curtain boo Jesus Christ, while Alex Bird, stripped down to greyboxers and a bunny mask reminiscent of the one from “Donnie Darko,” stares at Jesus. His hand is tightly gripping a pink dildo between his legs. He’s masturbating at the site of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Black-robed priests enter, their ruby candles creating an ominous glow. Jesus continues to sob.

The holy choir music mixes with scripture passages read in reverse, creating an amalgamation of suffering.

Christ screams as a bucket of blüd comes pouring down his head. He falls to the ground. The Romans carry him to the area behind the audience, where the Masturbator continues going at it. When he finishes, everyone shouts “Hallelujah!”

The last FREAKOUT makes the audience cringe, but they know what they’ve gotten into by now. It is “The Passion of the Christ,” “The Exorcist,” “Silence of the Lambs” and a million other things tied into one. It’s the best worst acid trip of all time.

The Commencement scene is the most realistic form of horror. As Jake calls out students to shake his hand and take a diploma, a different sense of tension strikes the audience. This isn’t just oversaturated violent terror — it’s simple, and it’s real.

SPEAKER: *And lastly, student number 5.*

5: *No.*

SPEAKER: *(clears throat) Student number 5!*

5: *(more agitated) NO!*

SPEAKER: *Last chance, student number five....*

Dan and Zach, bodyguards in black attire, run over to Kara and toss her on the ground. She’s screaming when Dan pulls an illuminating metal object from his pocket. As soon as she leans her head downward, the audience begins to realize what’s happening.

He runs a razor from the nape of her neck to the tip of her hairline. A chunk of brown hair falls to the ground, landing on the tarp.

5: *Is this it? Are the clocks ticking to my heartbeat out of time? Each tick pounds deep against my skull.*

The razor falls to the ground, leaving Kara missing three small patches of hair. All of the characters from previous acts drift out of the shadows. Their expressions are motionless. As the student screams for her life, agonizing, down on her knees, the characters wander around the audience, singing “Kumbaya,” touching the heads of audience members. With every lyric, their voices get louder, grittier.

Blackout.

After far too long, Alistair appears from the back curtain. A single blue light is on him.

NARRATOR: *(waits) All this for a little bit of fun. ... Is it worth it? It’s time to pull the shades back and let the sun in. Take your Christmas lights down and get back to work. Nobody asked for your help anyway.*

Kara Bowen is the Life & Culture Editor of The Ithacan.