

Statement of Purpose and Plan

I am requesting one semester of professional development leave to research and write a new theatre piece based on the lives of a group of real people, largely forgotten, who lived and worked in Chicago between the Great Fire of 1871 and the Great Depression. According to the Newberry Library archives, this gathering of artists, social activists, architects, and writers chose the name, The Little Room, from a short story about a “mysterious room where a visitor with the right frame of mind would find companionship and happiness.” Every Friday afternoon from 1898 to 1931 the members met in an artist’s studio in the former Studebaker factory in Chicago.

When I stumbled upon the name, The Little Room, I thought it was a mistake. I was researching the feminist playwright, Alice Gerstenberg, and came across the mention of The Little Room in a footnote. Gerstenberg was a leader in the Little Theatre movement and I thought the word was an error. This little footnote led me to some initial investigating in the archives at the Newberry Library. The list of members of The Little Room was remarkable. In a memoir, Pulitzer prize-winning political cartoonist, John T. McCutcheon described The Little Room as “an institution in the cultural life of Chicago – informal, stimulating, and gayly friendly.”

Mentions and activities of this club are hidden away in letters, records, and memoirs. I would like to look at the records and papers of the organization and its members. I am particularly interested in Anna Morgan, a woman whose early work in elocution and public speaking led her to establish a dramatic arts school in 1898. She interacted with pivotal performers such as Bert Williams, whose career on the Vaudeville circuit laid a framework for African-American performers to follow. An abbreviated sampling of members I would like to research include: **Jane Addams** (Co-founder of Hull House, social reformer, co-founder of the ACLU, first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize), **Ralph Elmer Clarkson** (Painter whose studio held the meetings of The Little Room until 1931), **Henry Blake Fuller** (Novelist and playwright. His short play *At Saint Judas’s* is the first American play to address a gay relationship), **Hamlin Garland** (Pulitzer Prize winning writer), **Alice Gerstenberg** (Feminist playwright and activist), **John T. McCutcheon** (Political cartoonist. Won the Pulitzer Prize in 1931), **Harriet Monroe** (Editor, critic, and founder of *Poetry Magazine* in 1912), **Anna Morgan** (Theatre director and teacher, opened a school for dramatic arts in 1898. Directed the first American productions of Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* in 1896 and George Bernard Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* in 1902. Brought the plays of Carlos Goldoni and Maurice Maeterlinck to America. Known for staging *Hamlet* with an all women cast), **Allen B. and Irving K. Pond** (Architects known as Pond and Pond, considered the earliest modernists in architecture after the Chicago fire), **Lorado Taft** (Wrote the *History of American Sculpture* in 1903, the first survey sculpture book. Credited with advancing the careers of women as sculptors), and **Nellie V. Walker** (Sculptor, known for her statue of James Harlan, which was displayed in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol. She was small in stature and was often called, “the lady who lived on ladders”).

While most of us have heard of Jane Addams and maybe Alice Gerstenberg, most members of The Little Room are now just a list of names that no longer ring a bell – lives that have been lost and forgotten. To look back at their impact and their influence is a worthy project. They quietly promoted ideas, took chances on new forms and techniques, and used their commitment to social justice to influence both Chicago and the United States. I imagine the group as early supporters of diversity, equity and inclusion nearly one hundred years before contemporary definitions were

applied. This gathering of men and women, many of whom were unmarried, met at a time when women did not have the right to vote, when settlement houses and education were erasing some lines of privilege, and freedom to love without fear of being arrested was decades away.

History often only remembers cultural shifts when events are “firsts”, popular, or worst-case scenarios, forgetting that progress is often slow, steady, and not newsworthy. I want this performance piece to remind us that worthy can stand alone . . . without the “news” in front of it. I imagine that I will write this piece in the midst of anger, conflict, and gratitude when I dig into the world of these people. Many pushed boundaries . . . published a pamphlet . . . questioned society’s rules . . . loved without fear. I would like to tell their stories and pay attention to the big impact of The Little Room.

Outcome #1 Research

- Research the records, papers, manuscripts, and photographs of The Little Room and its members at the following organizations in Chicago: the Newberry Library, the Chicago Historical Society, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Harold Washington Public Library.
- Observe the artistic works left behind by members of The Little Room, including paintings, sculptures, buildings, and writings.

Outcome #2 Writing

- Create character sketches. Focus on their intimate and personal lives, especially in terms of status and their public versus private selves. What was hidden or not addressed in the early part of the 20th century? How did they change? How did they react to world events?
- Develop a story structure that can be a jumping off point for a performance piece or play. Consider how theatrical elements from the time period might be used to combine 19th and 21st century aesthetics. Let the research lead the process.
- Write a rough draft of a theatre piece with the working title, *The Little Room*.

Outcome #3 Play Development and Readings

- Organize a table read of a rough draft of *The Little Room*.
- Based on the outcome of the table read, rewrites will be scheduled.
- After another round of rewrites, a staged reading will be planned. Actors will be given simple blocking and will perform with book in hand.

Outcome #4 Article

- If the research proves substantial, I will write an article detailing the mission and activities of The Little Room for a publication suitable to the purpose.

I love writing performance pieces that are based on forgotten people. The opera *Give Me Room*, that I wrote with composer Tim Hinck, was based on two women in Chattanooga who worked for suffrage. One was a middle-aged woman from Ohio who found herself in Chattanooga when her husband moved here to sell stoves. The other was a young socialite who used her privilege to speak at public gatherings about the rights of women. The journeys of forgotten folks are often a key to help us understand the past. It’s the little things – the specifics of life that touch us and remind us that we are all just human and need to breathe. That may sound trite but struggling is at least action and the act of inhaling and exhaling is worthy. The beauty of creating from history is that we know the result, freeing us to enjoy and examine the journey in wonderful detail.