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BRINGING ART TO LIFE

IMMERSIVE PLAY EXPLORES THE LIFE OF A WORLD-RENOWNED ARTIST.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | July 25, 2024*Read time: about 3 min*

As a theatre major, Cora Barr has played many different roles on stage. But her latest acting endeavor has proven to be both the most challenging and rewarding.

Barr, '25 [Theatre](#) and [Psychology](#), portrays world-renowned sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington in "[Anna: A Theatrical Monologue](#)," a one-woman immersive show that is performed in the shadow of the artist's masterpieces on display in the [Torggler Fine Art Center's](#) Anne Noland Edwards Gallery as part of the exhibit, "[A Grand Menagerie: The Sculpture of Anna Hyatt Huntington](#)."

Barr brings Hyatt Huntington to life beautifully, embracing her essence as she gracefully moves about the gallery and interacts with audience members who stand within feet of her. During the 30-minute production, Barr lays out Hyatt Huntington's intriguing life story in a manner both soulful and educational. She not only explains the history of the pieces Hyatt Huntington created, but also talks about "her" life as a female artist ahead of her time.

"It has been a great opportunity for a young artist to portray another young artist," Barr said. "Anna was a very special woman."

It all began with a grant Barr received from the [Office of Research and Creative Activity \(ORCA\)](#) to do independent research on Hyatt Huntington last school year. She delved into the artist's life, learning about her passions, techniques and goals. As an artist in her own right, Barr connected with the energy that powered Hyatt Huntington,

who spent her life sculpting animals as she saw them in their natural habitat. Self taught, Hyatt Huntington dedicated herself to her art, working tirelessly to advance her skills and create the most realistic sculptures possible.

As Barr peeled back the layers of Hyatt Huntington's life, she knew she wanted to take the research further. She became more and more fascinated with the artist.

Barr continued her focus on Hyatt Huntington as a [Summer Scholar](#), a program unique to CNU in that it provides students with the opportunity to get paid to do undergraduate research in collaboration with a faculty member over the summer. As a Summer Scholar, Barr worked with Denise Gillman, Professor of Directing, to meld her love of theater with her interest in psychology. She has focused much of her research on how immersive theatre, such as productions like "Anna," affects people psychologically, especially the elderly.

"It can really impact people. It has lots of benefits," Barr said. "It can help with memory and making connections."



The idea for "Anna" was born when Torggler Executive Director Holly Koons shared Hyatt Huntington's story with Gillman, who then suggested that adding a first-person narrative to the exhibition could bring the artist to life. To make it happen, Koons and Gillman sought the expertise of Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright Kathleen Cahill. Together, they worked on the concept and script.

But, what they needed to make it to reality was the right student to portray Hyatt Huntington.

"I knew immediately who would be perfect," Gillman said.

She approached Barr and the response was an overwhelming "yes."

"I was super excited," Barr said. "I had never done anything like this before. It was a completely new opportunity. I knew it would allow me to build as an actor and a person."

Playing Hyatt Huntington in such an interactive setting was enticing to Barr. It forced her outside her comfort zone and allowed her to expand her acting prowess. She has performed in many shows for TheatreCNU, but this was the first out-of-the-box theatre opportunity she has embraced.

To learn as much as she could about Hyatt Huntington, Barr watched videos to understand her mannerisms, the

way she moved and the way she spoke. She has worked to portray Hyatt Huntington in a fashion that realistically captures the sculptor's being and allows the audience to feel as though they are having an intimate conversation with her.

Each piece of Hyatt Huntington's art comes with a backstory, and Barr pulls the audience in as she describes each one, peppering her delivery with interesting details, humor, and historical references.

"I was an artist, never anything but an artist my whole life," Barr, in character, explains to the audience. "All of this work is a collection of moments and years, energy and emotion. I have a connection to every piece."

Hyatt Huntington created sculptures big and small, and sold them to people all over the world. She has a strong connection to Newport News in that she crafted the well-known majestic lions that watch over the Lions Bridge and a nearby sculpture titled "Conquering the Wild," both of which grace Mariners' Park near campus.

Barr and Gillman collaborated to develop the script and make the performance as interactive as possible. Armed with lots of research, Barr delved into the psychological aspects of the performance and the impact it could have on an audience.

"I have learned so much about research and creating projects," Barr said. "Working in research has really boosted my intellectual confidence."

Performing without walls and barriers has changed her perspective and tested her skills.

"I have learned so much about myself," she said. "I have had to trust myself as an actor."

Watching Barr play Hyatt Huntington has been extraordinary, Gillman said.

"There's such a beautiful collaboration between Cora and the text," she said. "It's a beautiful marriage. Cora has incredible storytelling skills."

Walking in Hyatt Huntington's shoes and being able to share her story has been a phenomenal opportunity, Barr said. It has proven to be a life-changing experience, personally and professionally. Hyatt Huntington, who died in 1973 at the age of 97, may have lived in a different time, but her energy, determination and artistic skill still inspire awe. And Barr could not be happier to be the person who keeps her legacy alive.

"She has an awesome story," she said. "I hope I live half as interesting a life as she did."

Visit the Torggler's [website](#) for times and dates for "Anna: A Theatrical Monologue." The show has been extended into September and October.
