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Building Strong and Compassionate Leadership by Facing Avoidance

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Building Strong and Compassionate Leadership by Facing Avoidance

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

by

Lillian Fitzsimmons

Committee in charge:

Professor Lisa Porter, Co-Chair  
Professor Lora Powell, Co-Chair  
Professor Aysan Celik  
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2025

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The Thesis of Lillian Fitzsimmons is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2025

## DEDICATION

For art, for the stars, for learning, for love. For all the people who encouraged me to keep walking this uncertain path, knowing that the steps would appear as I became courageous enough to take them. It is you that keeps me steady.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE ..... iii  
DEDICATION ..... iv  
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....v  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... vi  
VITA ..... vii  
LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS ..... viii  
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS ..... ix  
REFERENCES ..... 1

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## VITA

- 2020 Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, Theatre and Dance, Grinnell College
- 2025 Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management), University of California San Diego



## LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

File 1. Fitzsimmons *Gone Missing* Calling Script Selected Pages,  
FitzsimmonsGoneMissingCallingScriptSelectedPages.pdf

File 2. Fitzsimmons *Gone Missing* Production Calendar,  
FitzsimmonsGoneMissingProductionCalendar.pdf

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Building Strong and Compassionate Leadership by Facing Avoidance  
by

Lillian Fitzsimmons

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

University of California San Diego, 2025

Professor Lisa Porter, Co-Chair  
Professor Lora Powell, Co-Chair

*Gone Missing* is a documentary theater musical that weaves interviews with people about items they have lost with a collection of breakup songs. Together, these pieces create a narrative about humanity in the face of loss. The show culminates in a message spoken by Dr. Alexander Palinarus, a fictionalized philosopher of nostalgia: “...this world is made of little things. What is important... is to see them largely.” As the show’s Production Stage Manager, I took this adage to heart, realizing that small, intentional changes to my leadership could have a significant impact.

I have always valued the connection that theatre enables me to make with my collaborators. Historically, I've overcompensated, prioritizing likeability over the leadership needs of a production. I have struggled with avoidant tendencies, which manifest in qualifying my language and sidestepping conflict rather than addressing it. However, this time, I practiced self-authorizing and facing potential challenges.

Two major challenges arose: assembling a band and managing an injury in the cast. For weeks, we struggled to find musicians available to commit to the show until the week before tech. Meanwhile, an actor notified me that he might need to have surgery to repair a pre-existing knee injury. Though he insisted that he keep rehearsing until his doctor confirmed the surgery, his pain was visible, and I immediately notified the director.

In both cases, where I previously would have kept my worry to myself, allowing the mess to grow as it went unaddressed, I proactively shared my concerns. Along with the director and music director, we planned for multiple outcomes. The music director prepared to play drums instead of piano. I made multiple versions of the tech schedule based on different musicians' availability. As for the actor, we began focusing on his understudy, offering notes and inviting him to choreography and accent rehearsals in case he needed to step in. In the end, both contingency plans became our reality.

By proactively accepting the given circumstances and sharing concerns, our team could handle these challenges flexibly. We nurtured community and artistic exploration with transparent expectations while staying on schedule. I maintained my authenticity and became a more effective leader by counterbalancing my avoidance with small shifts and fully embracing my authority.

## REFERENCES

Cosson, Steve. *Gone Missing*, music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, interviews by Damian Balder, Trey Lyford, Jennifer Morris, Brian Sgambati, Allison Weller, and Colleen Werthmann. "Interview with Dr. Palinarus" by Peter Morris, Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2009.