

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

It's 2 right?

What?

2 in the morning?

Now, what time is it? I have no clue.

We're telling you it's 2!

Yes, it's 2am. I'm at a summer camp in central Massachusetts — but it's April, so the weather is still chilly but this group is feeling amped up because they just burned a witch at the stake.

There were some people in the sidelines shouting no, burn her, she has to burn.

Yeah, we didn't even have to add shrill in the audience there were random PCs going, burn her! Burn her!

They wanted to know.

I'm actually at the command central for a massive larp called Ashwick Plantation. Larp of course stands for live action role play.

The larp organizer, Vin Spadafora, had invited me there after he heard my 2017 episode called Winning the Larp. The title of that episode is based on a joke among larpers that there's no real way to win a larp, even though a larp is technically a game. If you haven't heard it, you should check it out because it'll provide a lot of context for what's about to happen because while I looked deeply into what is a larp, I hadn't actually participated in one. And I ended that episode by saying now it was time for me to go larping. So Vin wrote to me and, have I got a larp for you.

His team spent three years developing Ashwick Plantation. In those three years they were play-testing it, buying and making all the props, sets and costumes. Most larps aren't this elaborate but Ashwick is a horror larp and a period piece.

VIN: So we have the mundane horrors of 17th century your basic survival in trying to get through daily life and how awful it was for everyone involved in trying to deal with that at the same time the horrors they believe as well like witchcraft and sorcery, those kinds of things being alive and well like what if the things that we

committed atrocities for actually existed? Or what if there's something else out there?

I could've been a full on player for this larp, but I was too intimidated. This larp goes for almost 24 hours with the player sleeping in cabins. As a newbie, that felt too intense for me. So I told them I'd like to record what happens behind the scenes and dip my toe in the water by playing a few NPCs, which are non-playing characters that interact with the players to shape the plot and give them information.

Going behind the scenes for this larp was like going behind the scenes at a major theatrical production. Earlier in the day, Adria Kine, one of the organizers, showed me the schedule of every scene laid out on giant spreadsheets tacked to the wall.

ANDREA: What this enables you to do as NPC, as the actor helping to make this game come alive is okay, I'm going to be in the dead body scene that is P55, look up in folder, resources, this is your character, your goal, this is the success and failure conditions, these are the characters we hope to get involved, and these are the props you need to have to make scene go off.

The big unknown factor in any larp is player agency. In other words, the scene may go differently than the larp writers expect it to.

Like you heard the big climax was a witch burning. Earlier in the day, the organizers weren't sure if the players would vote to burn the witch. The witch was an NPC played by a staff member, but they had a dummy ready to burn, dressed just like her, tied to a stake.

ANDREA: The special effects will be fun, and we really want to burn a witch at the stake but they may decide they don't want to do it, they may decide they want to be part of a town that's soft on witchcraft which is a terrible idea but sometimes players have terrible idea but that's where the fun is and you don't know what's going to happen next.

Some of the NPC roles I had to play didn't require much effort -- like I played a dead body. I played a a soldier in a rogue Dutch militia that attacked the fort, and a werewolf-type demon who came out after the witch was burned at 2am and attacked the villagers.

But I had two substantial roles that allowed me to interact with players. My first role was a Dutch merchant who came to sell furs. This would allow players to have currency in the game, but it was also a training exercise for me.

I was really nervous to do this, but luckily, I knew one of the larpers: Caroline Murphy. She was in my first larping episode – in fact she pitched me that episode and got me interested in larping. So she was excited I was taking the next step.

CAROLINE: I am hoping that you're going to experience the immersion that people experience at larp in a new way that's going to be interesting and eye opening for you, you've talked about immersive experience you've had with table top games and I think you're really going to like it.

I'm a little intimidated to be honest.

CAROLINE: Aw! Don't be intimidated! Everyone here is super friendly and it's going to be great!

But it's like they've given me low level NPC stuff but the minute I get out there and everyone's going to be in character I'm going to be like – ah! I'm from olden times!

CAROLINE: Yeah, no, I think that's totally natural, my first larp, I was like uh, I don't know how to talk to character but people start doing it, it becomes fluid and easy, it takes doing it the first time and you become comfortable doing it after that.

I think my character will be very quiet

BRENDAN: Hey, maybe you won't!

That's Brendan Butts – Caroline's friend who is going to play her husband in this larp.

BRENDAN: I'm going to find you, and I'm going to engage you in conversation, and ask you questions over and over until you're in it. That's the best way to get into character, just ask people questions. What's your family life like back in...Dutch area?

I actually had a good handle on my character's backstory in "Dutch area" because I gave him my own family history. My ancestors on my mom's side were Dutch Jews who came to Boston in the 19th century. In fact, I was going to base this character off my Uncle Mike, but once I started talking as

this character, weirdly enough I found myself doing Daniel Day Lewis's accent from Gangs of New York. I have no idea where that came from.

By the way, I was never allowed to record the larps. So for this whole episode, you'll just hear me describe what happened.

It was about a ten-minute walk into the woods to the campground where the game was happening. When I saw Caroline, I couldn't believe how much she had transformed into her character. It wasn't just her wig and costume but her eyes were not hers anymore. She looked at me as this deeply private Puritan woman.

Growing up in Massachusetts, the Puritans always felt very present for me. I went to school with their descendants. I knew that look of cold politeness. The characters were happy to trade with me, but they never asked me about my background. Vin, the larp organizer, sent me back two more times so I could have a meaningful interactions with them, but I kept getting the same chilly politeness.

Later that night, he sent me back as a different character, a traveling storyteller who was supposed to unnerve townsfolk with talk of ghosts and demons. I decided to make this character a Puritan, the son of a preacher. But I hadn't thought much about his backstory because no one cared about my last character.

But when I showed up at the dining hall, the reactions I got were wildly different. They were so friendly to me, and asked me so many questions. Remember when Brendan – who played Caroline's husband – warned me he was going to seek me out. He did, and our conversations felt very realistic but afterward, I was kicking myself for all the dumb things I made up on the spot about my backstory because I was so under prepared.

I also had a personal realization. These are the kinds of interaction I missed out on growing in Massachusetts, but not being one of them.

CAROLINE: Wow! That's pretty remarkable.

I called up Caroline after the larp.

CAROLINE: That's a pretty remarkable experience to have had especially for your first time there. And it's also remarkable that you recognized it.

I also told Caroline about what was going on behind the scenes at the command center.

After the burning of the witch, everyone after they were high fiving each other, they were like Caroline was crying and they were like, yeah! It's not a good larp until Caroline cries!

CAROLINE: (Laughs) Oh! I'm glad that's the bar!

And at that point, Vin goes, "Did we win the Larp?"

CAROLINE: (Laughs) That's amazing! I mean if winning means making people feel emotions than I think that's a pretty worthy goal. I'll sign up for winning if that's the win condition.

I can't imagine I would ever actually cry at a larp, but as Caroline kept telling me about what happened with her and her friends, I was jealous of the emotional experience they were going through. Typically players come into a larp with just their own backstory and they leave all the interactions up to chance. But her friends were doing next level stuff. They came in with a huge drama ready to unfold.

Caroline's character Helen seemed like a proper Puritan woman but she had a scandalous backstory. 25 years earlier, she had been married to a Dutch merchant in Amsterdam. Her family never approved of the marriage and when they decided to move to the New World, they gave her an impossible choice: us or them.

In a heart wrenching decision, Helen went with her family to Massachusetts, leaving behind her husband and infant son. And so in this larp, her friend Albert was playing the long lost son from who had spend years looking for her. And that wasn't the only family secret that had planned as a subplot to the main storyline of witches and demons.

So I told her, I'm jealous that sounds amazing. Well, it turns out, this larp was not a one-off. It was actually the first chapter in a long series about a dozen larps that will take place over the next four years with the same characters.

So I asked if I could come back and be part of their storyline.

So we set up a conference call and the group decided that I should play the ex-husband from Holland, the father of the boy she had to give up long ago.

Now the sequel wouldn't be for another six months. In the mean time, I needed to get a lot more experience larping.

In those six months I did five larps and this turned out to be a surprisingly personal journey and went places never expected. We have a long road ahead after the break.

>> BREAK #1

The first larp I did after Ashwick Plantation was the complete opposite. There were no set, no costumes. It was only 2 hours long and it took place in someone's apartment.

The larp was a space adventure called Strange Gravity that very Star Trek-like. I played an android, similar to Data. It was fun, and I thought I made very clever suggestions -- but in the end, being really clever felt kind of hollow. I didn't feel anything emotional about it.

Afterward, I asked the larp organizer how I could improve. He suggested the next time I do a larp, find one other person in the group and decide that person's character is deeply important to me. Use that relationship as my anchor.

The next larp I did was called Honor Bound. Weirdly enough, it took place at Google headquarters in New York because one of the larpers is an employee there, and he had access to the building after hours.

Obviously there was no set, or costumes --- other than hipster nerds walking around. And it was only 2 hours long. But this one was surprisingly intense.

The larp took place in a society consumed by toxic masculinity. It was actually based on a real town in Italy where hundreds of years ago, the number one cause of death was dueling. I was assigned a central role. That

scared me. I'm such a newbie. I didn't want to make beginner mistakes and screw it up for everyone else. But I decided to accept the challenge.

My character was called Mr. Steele. He was a small time politician and his honor had been besmirched by called Mr. Golding because I had been caught embezzling funds. I denied the accusation, and challenged him a duel. Then our characters separated to different hallways while the other characters tried to talk us out of this duel.

Now I was raised on Free To Be You and Me, not toxic macho pride -- but as I got into this character's mind, I really started see how the loss of his honor and dignity would be worse than making a widow out of his wife and family. It sounds insane but I felt it in my gut.

ME/ACTOR OVERLAP: In fact, I began to hear this character's voice in my head -- the voice of an older weary man.

MR. STEELE: I didn't feel angry or pig-headed. I felt caught up in a no-win situation. I knew if I withdrew my challenge, the shame and humiliation would be like an emotional death I wouldn't be able to handle.

And I was surprised how earnestly the other characters tried to talk me out of this duel. But at the same time, I could see they were resigned to the fact that the duel was probably going to happen. In fact, I could feel them start to mourn my inevitable death, even though I was standing right there in front of them.

ME/ACTOR OVERLAP: In the end, a part of me must have come through because at the last minute, my character decided to de-escalate the duel and live with my shame.

That surprised everyone, which made me wonder, did I do something wrong? Did the character decide to de-escalate the situation, or did I do that? Does it matter? That beside the point. The larp is meant to give you an understanding of men like that and it worked. I still would excuse their actions, but I don't belittle or dismiss guys like that like I used to.

That felt like a step forward for me. So I decided to move on to the stage: DexCon, a gaming convention in New Jersey. It was a two-day convention where I stayed overnight.

The first larp I chose was called Voyage of the Damned. It based on the writings of HP Lovecraft. I was given the role of a Texas oil baron who was going into arms dealership on the eve of World War II. I was looking forward to this game because I thought we were all going to go insane, but I never went insane. I couldn't hear the character's voice in my head. I couldn't find another character to connect with. When it was over, I wondered if I made a mistake coming this convention.

But then when I came back the next day – everything changed for me.

This next larp I did was called Tomb Priestesses of the Nameless Dead. It based on the Earthsea novels by Ursula K. LeGuin. The characters were all female but you didn't have to be female to play them. Our characters were basically nuns on a remote island. Our job was to honor the dead who had no one to mourn them. But the dead were very much with us. In fact, if we weren't in a scene, we had to play the dead, which involved draping a black shawl over us and whispering doubt and fear into the player's ears. They couldn't respond to us, but they felt cold and reacted to our temptations.

Once again, the characters were distributed randomly. I was given the role of Yobatei, a 10-year old girl. I had the option of swapping out for another character, but I decided I might as well take up the challenge.

I'm very glad I did. I'm not sure if I was tapping into my inner-child or every kid I've ever observed, but the moment that larp started, I instinctively took on the body language of a kid. I understood the way she kept fidgeting and shifting her weight -- how she plopped herself down on the floor cross-legged during a meeting. When she wanted to speak, her hand shot up like in a classroom. And the moment I was about to speak, the other players looked at me in the way that a group of adults look at a child...

VOICE OVERLAP: I heard her voice in my head instantly.

YOBATEI'S VOICE: I knew a few things about Yobatei. She was very sick when she was little. Her parents spent all their money curing her, and then afterward, they had no money to feed her. So they sent her to this island to spend her life as a priestess. So she could have been bitter or angry. She could have been a brat. But I decided it would be more interesting if she felt isolated. As the only kid on the island, she would always try to make a

good impression with the grown-ups, and not get in trouble – even though she still got into trouble. And the dead really scared her, but she wouldn't let anyone know that.

And when I raised my hand to speak for the first, time, there was one particular priestess named Gimegi who looked at me with so much warmth and caring, I decided she meant the most to me. I had sort of adopted her as like my mom, or like an older sister. I wanted to be like her when I grew up.

But as the story continued, I could feel my character's confusion because the adults were not setting a good example. They told me what was right and wrong, but none of them was actually my parent or my teacher. And they didn't follow their own advice. They all had secrets. They were all doing bad stuff and getting caught by the high priestess.

In the end, I learned that Gimegi was sending love letters – forbidden love letters -- to another priestess. Her punishment was to spend a night in The Tomb of The Dead – which was actually a dark corner of the conference room blocked by chairs. Gimegi tried to tell me it was going to be okay, but I could tell she was scared. As she was being pulled away I actually blurted out, "I love you!" She started to cry, or the woman playing her did, I wasn't sure.

I waited outside the tombs for Gimegi to come out. Finally the high priestess told me that Gimegi had decided to join the dead. "She died?" I asked. The High Priestess nodded. I ran -- no actually, I scampered to the other end of the room and I buried my head in my hands.

I knew that was the day Yobatei lost her innocence. That was the day she grew up.

For the next few days, whenever I thought back on that larp, just remembering how the other players looked at me with such concern, I felt a deep memory of feeling safe and cared for as a child. This is what larpers called "bleed," when the feelings of a game bleed beyond the larp and stay with you. It was exhilarating, and I signed up for more.

The larp was called Escape from Marseilles. It was based on a true story of people in 1940 – mostly American ex-pats - who worked in secret to get

refugees out of Nazi-occupied Europe. When I scanned the list of who they saved in real life, there were all these famous artists like Marc Chagall and Marcel Duchamp owed their lives to this group.

Once again, I was assigned a female character, Miriam Davenport. She was a real person, an artist from Boston. I didn't go full costume. I wore a blousy white shirt, my wife's hat and scarf. But I did a deep dive into her biography. I read old interviews with her. I even found out which character at the larp was her best friend in real life, so I made sure to establish a connection with that player.

The larp was held at the Airmen's Club in Manhattan -- a social club for enlisted soldiers or veterans. The building is a hundred years old, and it's barely been updated, so the setting was perfect. And the props were really convincing with old photos, passports, dossiers in envelopes and stacks of fake deutchmarks.

Our task was to choose which refugees got to escape, and whether to give them safe or risky escape routes. The larp was designed so that each of us came to the table with competing values. There was a Communist who wanted to get his comrades out. Someone else was advocating on behalf of Jews and gypsies. Another character only cared only about saving children. My character wanted to save the artists.

In the mean time, there were air raids where we had to keep doing our work in the dark. We also had to go around the corner in the stifling August heat, to drop off passports and money into a cardboard box at a real restaurant. But it's New York, so no one bats an eye at weird stuff like that. Meanwhile one of the larp organizers was playing a spy, trying to entrap us outside the building.

I wasn't sure how I was going to play Miriam but:

OVERLAP VOICE: The moment it started, my body language changed, and I heard Miriam's voice instantly.

MIRIAM'S VOICE: I thought of all the Boston ladies I knew from my grandmother's generation -- the way they talked, the way they held their cigarettes, but I tried to imagine how they would sound if they were young.

I even picked up a physical tick of tapping the dossiers of people I wanted to save. This one. (TAP, TAP, TAP) I like her. (TAP, TAP, TAP)

Our decision-making was clunky at first. We argued a lot. Two of the players decided their cause was so great; they bypassed our voting process, grabbed the visas of the people they wanted to save, and ran out of the building without a group consensus.

We were only 10 minutes into the game but emotions were running so high, I found myself giving a fiery speech in defense of democracy. Sure, it's messy and ugly, but it's the only way we can go about this process! When we decide that we know better than our fellow citizens and we make unilateral decisions without consulting everyone else, we are no better than the fascists!

I felt a real palpable fear that this ugly, messy, unpopular thing called democracy was going to be cast aside and people didn't realize how terrible the alternative was. And when the players returned who had gone rogue, I banned them from any more decision-making. One of them actually quit and left the game. The other sat there looking glum until we let him back into the group. We needed all hands on deck.

I didn't realize how relentless this process would be. More and more dossiers kept arriving, and we were working against the clock. Our contacts on the outside had limited windows of time to help us. In our haste, we got sloppy. We split up couples and families. We accidentally sent people into the arms of the SS.

And I could feel Miriam being so passionate in her convictions, that she easily convinced the others to let the artists go – at least in the beginning. But eventually, the group turned against me. When famous names like Vladimir Nobakov showed up in our dossiers, I got even more passionate. We had to get them out! "Why?" they asked. I knew he would eventually write Lolita but it was 1940. All I could say was that he had a lot of promise. By the time we got to Marc Chagall, I was quickly out-voted. Enough with the artists. Let others live. I couldn't believe it. In our world, does Marc Chagall live to see his paintings on posters and calendars around the world? Maybe not. He may ended up in a death camp.

Privately, the other players and I would talk about the fact that we were playing God. But if we didn't intervene, someone worse would. I could feel Miriam becoming darker, and more cynical. At one point, I got a secret telegram from Peggy Guggenheim praising me for doing such heroic work. But my passion for artists started to feel frivolous. I was choosing to save them based on how good their work was or would be. Isn't that cruel and shallow? A life is a life! But I knew what the art world wanted – what they'd say. Life is fleeting. Wars come and go. Art is eternal.

The game ended when the SS burst through the door. As an American citizen at a time when my country was still a neutral power, I was just sent back to Boston, safe and sound. That's when I realized how little danger I had been in compared to the French who were helping us, let alone the refugees who were trying to get out. I could've taken even more risks. But it was too late. Game over.

The bleed I felt after the larp wasn't warm and fuzzy like the last one. I got a glimpse into an experience I could never truly understand, but I could see if I continued playing Miriam – or at least my version of Miriam – I would have to lock away those painful feelings so I could keep on living.

It was a very sobering experience, but again I really felt like I learned something. I also felt like I was ready to return to Massachusetts to jump into something much more ambitious.

If you remember, the first Puritan larp took place at a summer camp in Massachusetts. This time we were going to be at a reconstruction of original Salem village near the original location of the witch trial. This was going to be perfect! And I say "it was going to be perfect" because a few days beforehand, the larp organizer Vin Spadafora lost access to the location.

They were scrambling to find new options. Eventually they got a very different location for us: an Odd Fellows lodge – which is an early 20th century social club -- in a suburb outside Boston. When I arrived, Vin and his team were putting up a makeshift inn and a fake forest in the basement auditorium. I asked how much the new location was compromising what they planned.

VIN: We have been writing since the last even which ended in May, so you're looking at about 5 months worth of pretty continuous writing we have about 50-60 scenes that 3 days before you can't rewrite, so we're on the fly figuring out how to make scenes that were supposed to be developed in 3 acres worth of land into 300 feet of land. It's going to be difficult but the fact that everyone came together and to see this kind of a change that quickly and to fix it within 24 hours is pretty amazing from the people we have with us.

Now to recap, I was going to play Lars der Veen, the ex-husband of Helen Allerton – who was played by Caroline Murphy, who we heard from earlier.

Helen had been the love of my character's life. We met in Amsterdam, but our Puritan-Calvinist/Dutch-English marriage was too scandalous for her family. They forced her come to the New World and leave behind our infant son Markus and me. The big drama in the last larp was that Markus – now an adult – found Helen and her new husband, who was a widower with a daughter of his own.

Markus and I were not on good terms. I had lied to him and told him that his mother had died in childbirth. It was a decision made by the entire community to spare this child from scandal. When Markus was an adult, I told him the truth and he was furious that I had lied to him. That's why he went searching for his mother.

By the way, I wasn't coming from Holland. I had since relocated to New Amsterdam, which was now New York.

Since I knew as a player that we were going to clash with demons in this game, I decided that he was uncertain whether his marriage to Helen was part of God's plan or the Devil's. And to maximize conflict, I decided he hadn't remarried because he never got over the heartbreak. He poured his energy his work, making him a wealthy man and a very eligible bachelor. He recently gave into social pressure and agreed to marry a young woman of good standing in New York, but his heart wasn't into it. He was hoping that seeing Helen might give him closure – although he would never use that word.

So that's a lot of backstory, and this was going to be the longest larp I had ever done. We were going to be in character for over 9 hours.

When the game began, I waited outside the inn as the other players got into character. I had borrowed a full 17th century costume. I wasn't sure what voice I was going to hear in my head when I stepped through that door. Eventually I took a deep breath and made my entrance.

I immediately locked eyes with my son Markus. He looked very displeased to see me – which I was surprised by. He took his time coming over to meet me and said he didn't think I was going to come. He also called me Lars instead of father. "It's Lars now?" I said with amusement — but it was my voice that I heard in my head. It wasn't an older man or a man with a Dutch accent. It was me, but not me, and the emotional stakes still felt real.

Markus brought me over to see Helen. She was sitting and her husband William and their daughter. They were so shocked to see me, I felt like they had seen a ghost. I apologized for making such an entrance. I thought Markus knew I was coming – and I certainly assumed he would've told them that he sent me a letter to come. I didn't want to cause any trouble. I stepped away, and Markus followed.

In the woods, Markus and I had it out. He told me, I had to talk with Helen. I told him, I don't know what to say. I could see that my arrival was traumatic enough for her. But he said Helen's family was welcoming of him, but she still felt tremendous guilt about abandoning him as a child. She needed forgiveness.

Finally he sat me down with Helen. We could barely make eye contact. Caroline – who played Helen – again was so convincing. I didn't see any traces of the person I knew in Helen's eyes.

After a long painful silence, I told her that Markus and I were not on good terms. She asked what the quarrel was about. I could barely get the words out. I said, I hadn't told him the truth about his mother. I couldn't admit the lie my family had concocted – that she died in childbirth. I felt so much shame I started to choke up. Her eyes were red with tears as well. She said neither one of us had a choice in this matter. I wasn't sure if it was true but I agreed, and I felt like a tremendous weight lift from my shoulders.

I also told her that I had been under pressure to remarry. In fact, I was engaged to a young woman. Everyone says it's "a good marriage." She was pleased to hear it.

Finally I told Helen that I didn't know what God wants from me. This was something I had written into my backstory that was the furthest thing from my own personal experience – but it was the most honest thing that Lars could've said to her at that moment. It was the most personal confession he could make. My chin quivered, and I actually began to cry. Things were so intense with our storyline that I missed many of the clues that the main storyline was happening all around us – until a preacher was found with his throat slit outside the inn.

To my surprise, Helen immediately suspected a militiaman that I had spoken with earlier – a man that Lars really liked. Helen was certain this man and a female accomplice were engaged in witchcraft. I told Markus that I didn't want to doubt his mother, but I was concerned she was rushing to put an innocent man to death.

A makeshift trial quickly came together. I was asked to serve on the jury. I asked Helen if the punishment would be imprisonment or stockade. She was mortified I would even ask. Witches should be put to death. I regretted saying yes to this jury because now I had the lives of two people on my conscience. At the same time, if I decided there wasn't enough evidence to convict them, Helen would be so disgusted with me, the peace of mind I had achieved in the last few hours would be destroyed. Markus reassured me that I would be the best possible juror because I was an outsider -- one of the few people who hadn't made up my mind.

But once the trial finally got underway, the volunteer prosecutor ditched the list of jurors and started assigning people himself. Markus pointed at me to volunteer but I said nothing, and let the jurors take their places. Markus was so disappointed -- he stormed out of the inn. Meanwhile, Helen was leading the crowd in yelling "witch!" at the defendants. To my surprise, her husband William, who I thought was even a tempted man, joined her in taunting the defendants. The rush to judgment, the pressure on the jurors and the mob mentality was disturbing -- and I saw a side of Helen that shocked me. I didn't think the evidence was strong enough to convict. At the same time, the defendants were strangely blasé about the accusations -- even defiant. If I had been on the jury and admitted that I had reasonable doubt, the other jurors would've outvoted me anyway, and I would've turned myself into a pariah. I felt like I had made the right choice -- if it was a cowardly one.

But it turned out Helen was right. Sometimes accused witches are actually witches and not long after they were lead away -- demons attacked the fort.

In the last larp, I had been on the other end of the battle, wearing a demon costume. Back then I found this kind of gameplay kind of unsatisfying compared to the emotional stakes of a role-play. But now, I could feel my character's adrenaline rush. He was thrilled that he finally had a battle to fight with no moral ambiguity. And he no longer felt like a burden. He was protecting the community, and Helen's family.

But these battles were supposed to happen out doors in a replica of Salem Village, not in the basement of a social lodge while we were trying to avoid knocking over plastic trees. I found myself looking at the clock wondering how much longer this would go on, and then we heard Vin's voice announcing that the game was over. Lights up.

I caught up with Vin afterward, and asked if things had gone according to plan. Not really, he said. The larp was supposed to start with these family picnic style games to set a lighter mood, but the players were so deep into the Puritan mindset, they rejected these games as pagan rituals. And Vin did not expect the players who were secretly witches to kill the pastor.

VIN: So instead of playing festival games we had to scrap all of that because you can't be throwing hula hoops around or bobbing for apples when the pastor is being buried. Luckily we were already an hour and half behind, I find out pastor dies well we can't do, what's a happy thing? X that off, X that off, X that off.

Do you feel that the combat worked for you in such a small space over and over again?

VIN: No.

Laughs

In the previous larps that I had done, the characters were assigned to me. Lars was assigned to me as well, but there were a lot of blank spaces in his backstory that I filled in with details about my own life, or the lives of people that I knew. So there was less of a boundary between me and him, and his emotional angst was hanging over me more than after the other larps I had done.

I really had to talk about it with Caroline, who played my ex-wife Helen.

Okay so

CAROLINE: So

That's quite a day we had.

CAROLINE: Yeah!

So I was recently listen back to the tape we did like 6 months ago.

CAROLINE: Oh yeah?

I was talking about the fact you cried during the witch burning, and I thought that was incredible. Something made Caroline cry during this larp?

CAROLINE: Yeah! I mean I do cry a lot.

But I freaking cried!

CAROLINE: You did!

I cried during our conversation.

CAROLINE: You cried during our conversation and it was sooo goooood and it was amazing! So. How did it feel?

It was like an out of body experience I couldn't believe it

CAROLINE: Really?

Because I was really incredibly sad but you were not you, you were Helen and I was Lars.

CAROLINE: Yeah!

Even though, it's funny in the other larps I've done I heard another person's voice, I didn't have a voice I put on, like a fake affect, it was me but not me.

CAROLINE: Totally, and that's the first time you've experienced that level of immersion before?

Yeah, is that the next level after you do a character?

CAROLINE: Yeah, totally, that's why this format is so great. It's so cathartic! It's so good! Did you feel a sense of therapeutic release?

I think so, yeah, it's like after you cry about something and you feel relieved about it. Is that for you?

CAROLINE: Exactly. Exactly! I think that is why this format is so format.

Why what would you say about this format?

CAROLINE: I think this format helps people find their own therapeutic release with whatever it is they're interested in exploring. And sometimes you can make a character that can really be what you need in that moment and really help you through something and I think that this particular format because of its immersive nature and because it's person and it's inner-personal provides a better format than anything else I've ever encountered.

You were asking me about therapeutic, this was a big emotional day for you, how was it therapeutic for you?

CAROLINE: Oh man, I had no idea how angry my character was at witches!

Neither did I!

CAROLINE: I didn't know that Helen had it in her. But she knew! She knew they were evil and that they were going to hurt her family and she mama-bear-ed out and so for me that was interesting from parental perspective, I don't have kids yet but I would like and you like to find that thing inside yourself if something was ever going to threaten your family, I wouldn't let it. I wouldn't stand for.

So this is the end of my larp episode. Uh, you contacted me and emailed me and said you should get into larps and I see almost like a teacher at this point, how would you evaluate your student?

CAROLINE: Uh you cried, you know. You cried, you felt really genuine emotion and you found something there and that's what I hoped for.

I won the larp.

CAROLINE: You won the larp. (laughs)

Nice!

Well that's it for this week, but that's not it for me and larping. I have no idea what larp I'll do next or who I'll play – but I've discovered that jumping into the unknown is the best part.

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