

CURRICULUM CONNECTION GUIDE



GSU [Theatre and Performance Studies](#) presents

She Kills Monsters

[Thursday, November 2 at 7:30 p.m.](#)

[Friday, November 3 at 7:30 p.m.](#)

[Saturday, November 4 at 7:30 p.m.](#)

[Sunday, November 5 at 2:30 p.m.](#)

Performed in [Sherman Hall](#) - GENERAL ADMISSION

Tickets: \$15

RUNTIME: 120 MINS

Guide compiled by Whitney Minarik, wminarik@govst.edu

CONTENTS

About the Playwright...page 3

Thoughts on the Play...page 4

Characters...page 5

Plot synopsis, Updates and Adaptations...page 6

NY Times Article: [Queer Kids, Nerds and Sword Fights: It's the Hot School Play...](#)pages 7-11

Disciplinary Connections, Discussion Questions...page 12

Media Links and Additional Reading...pages 13-14



Image: 2011 Flea Theater Production (Joan Marcus)

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Qui Nguyen is a screenwriter, director, playwright, and Co-Founder of the OBIE-winning Vampire Cowboys. He and his work, known for its use of pop-culture, stage violence, puppetry, and multimedia, has been called "Culturally Savvy Comedy", "Tour de Force Theatre", and "Infectious Fun" by the NY Times, TimeOut, and Variety.

Qui's currently with Walt Disney Animation Studios where he wrote *Raya and the Last Dragon* and wrote/co-directed *Strange World*. Other TV/Film includes *Dispatches from Elsewhere* (AMC), *The Society* (Netflix), *Incorporated* (SyFy), *Peg+CAT* (PBS), and *Marvel Studios*.

As a playwright, notable plays includes *Vietgone*, *Poor Yella Rednecks*, *Revenge Song*, and the critically acclaimed Vampire Cowboys productions of *She Kills Monsters*, *Soul Samurai*, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, *Alice in Slasherland*, *Fight Girl Battle World*, and *Living Dead in Denmark*.

Notable honors include a 2016 Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in a Preschool Animated Program (*Peg+Cat*), 2016 Steinberg New Play Award (*Vietgone*), 2015 NY Community Trust Helen Merrill Playwriting Award, 2014 Sundance Institute/Time Warner Fellowship; 2013 AATE Distinguished Play Award (*She Kills Monsters*) and 2012 & 2009 GLAAD Media Award nominations for his plays *She Kills Monsters* and *Soul Samurai*.

He is a proud member of the WGA, The Animation Guild, Dramatists Guild of America, Ensemble Studio Theatre, The Ma-Yi Writers Lab, and an alumni of New Dramatists, Youngblood, and the Marvel Studios Writers Program.

Currently, Qui's developing new plays with Manhattan Theater Club/Geffen Playhouse, The Atlantic, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and Center Theatre Group/The Goodman.

His company, Vampire Cowboys, often credited for being the pioneers of "geek theatre", holds the unique distinction of being the first and currently only professional theatre organization to be officially sponsored by NY Comic Con.

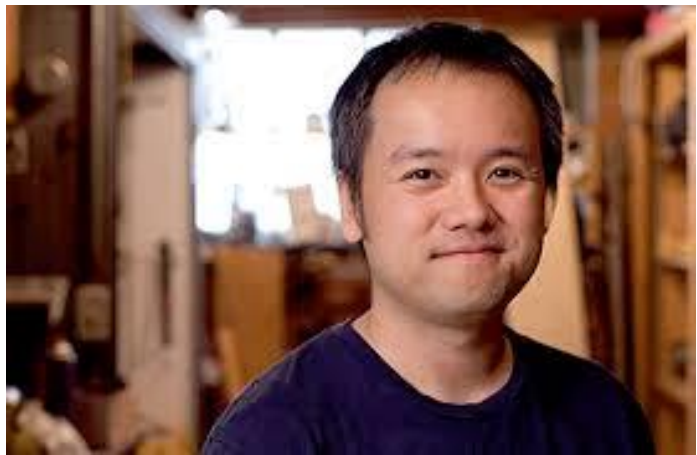
Source: [Qui Nguyen - Playwright, Screenwriter, Geek](#)

THOUGHTS ON THE PLAY

Qui Nguyen and Queering the Coming-of-Age Tale

Qui Nguyen: Self-admitted geek, genre-bender, and the playwright of *She Kills Monsters* knows a thing or two about working beyond the normative narrative. Unable to find his voice writing traditional plays early in his career, Nguyen reworked the contemporary understanding of what theatre can be by coining his own style of show and starting a theatre company called Vampire Cowboys. In an interview with American Theatre Magazine, Nguyen says that his work with Vampire Cowboys was “lovingly dubbed, “geek theatre,” by creating pop-culture-infused action-adventure stories with heroes who were female, people of color, and/or LGBTQ.”

She Kills Monsters premiered in 2011, and while it wasn't a product of Vampire Cowboys, the rules established by conventional theatre for a coming-of-age tale are nowhere to be found. Tilly and Agnes, two sisters, get to know each other through the world of Dungeons & Dragons after Tilly dies in a car crash. In part, the expectation-bending nature of *She Kills Monsters* are a testament to Nguyen's creativity, but it's also born out of necessity—when telling a tale of grief, queer coming of age, sisterhood, and femme-badassary, there's nothing to work with but scratch. The revolutionary content of *She Kills Monsters* had to be reflected in its form and language.



Revolutions are found all throughout *She Kills Monsters*, from a macro-scale, to the revolutions happening within sisters Tilly and Agnes as they learn more about one another (and themselves), all while working their way through a mystical and often treacherous D&D adventure. The layers, diverse range of characters, and dynamic women of the play are what bring *She Kills Monsters* to life. As Nguyen said in his interview with American Theatre Magazine, “Everyone deserves a chance to see themselves onstage.”

– Melory Mirashrafi, Dramaturg

Source: <https://linfieldtheatre.wordpress.com/portfolio/qui-nguyen-and-queering-the-coming-of-age-tale/>

CHARACTERS

Narrator – A mysterious woman who speaks a lot like [Cate Blanchett](#) from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Agnes Evans – Tilly's older sister. Agnes is described as striving to live an absolutely average life. She is of average height, size, and build, and grew up in the average town of Athens, Ohio with average parents. She is an English teacher at her and Tilly's former high school. After Tilly's death, Agnes decides to go on a D&D adventure in order to feel closer to Tilly, as they never had a close relationship.

Tilly Evans / Tillius the Paladin – Agnes's sister who dies in a car crash at the age of fifteen. Tilly loves [Dungeons and Dragons](#) adventures, and anything classified as nerdy or geeky. In the world of D&D, she's a level 20 [Paladin](#), Healer of wounds and protector of lights; aka not to be messed with. Tilly faced challenges with her sexuality and bullying while she was still alive. In the game, her girlfriend is Lilith, which is later learned to be based on one of her friends named Lilly (or Elizabeth).

Chuck – A member of Tilly's friend group and the Dungeon Master for the game. He helps Agnes throughout the module and introduces her to Tilly's other real-life friends. He acts the [Dungeon Master](#) for the game Agnes plays.

Miles – Agnes's boyfriend of five years. He appears in the game as a shapeshifting "gelatinous cube" that Agnes must kill.

Lilith Morningstar / Lily – A Demon Queen that resembles a leather-clad dominatrix and is Tilly's girlfriend in the game. Lilith is based on Tilly's high school friend Lilly, who was Tilly's first kiss but is still in the closet.

Kaliopé Darkwalker / Kelly – Kaliopé is a Dark Elf that is described as looking like a supermodel and is incredibly strong. She is based on Tilly's high school friend Kelly, who is Ronnie's sister. Her D&D Character is a [Dark Elf](#). In real life, Kelly has [cerebral palsy](#) and uses forearm crutches to help her. Ronnie is her older brother.

Orcus / Ronnie – A demon overlord of the underworld that holds onto lost souls or knows where to find them. He is obsessed with watching television. The party travels to him first in order to ask about the Lost Soul of Athens. He later joins the party on their quest. He is based on one of Tilly's high school friends named Ronnie.

Vera – Agnes's best friend, she is the school's counselor. She is supportive of Agnes, but does not approve of Miles.

Steve – Character Class: [Mage](#). Adventurer supreme. He is dorky both in D&D and the real world. In real life he is one of Tilly's classmates.

Farrah – A little forest [faerie](#) and one of the bosses Agnes and her party must face before they can reach the final boss. She's adorable, but she's actually an angry savage in a small package.

Evil Gabbi and Evil Tina – Cheerleader [succubus](#) that torment Tilly, in particular about her sexuality, both in the game and when she was alive. They are based on Tilly's high school bullies.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Time and Place – 1995, Athens, Ohio, and the imaginary land of New Landia.

Agnes Evans is a completely average woman who strives to be nothing but average until the day she wishes her life was a little less boring. Her wish unfortunately comes true when her family, including her younger sister Tilly, dies in a car crash. Agnes was never close to Tilly due to the fact they were interested in completely different things; Agnes loved mainstream pop culture, while Tilly had a passion for everything classified as nerdy or geeky, with a special love for Dungeons and Dragons. As Agnes is cleaning and packing Tilly's room in order to move everything to her place, she finds a module Tilly had written for D&D. To get closer to the sister she never really knew, Agnes embarks on her own adventure with the help of Dungeon Master Chuck to play the game as Tilly designed. As she delves deeper into her quest, the fantasy world and reality begin to collide and mix as Agnes searches to connect with Tilly and realizes how much of her sister she never knew.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/She_Kills_Monsters

UPDATES AND ADAPTATIONS

Along with the original version, Nguyen later created a "[Young Adventurers Edition](#)" for high school students and *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* in 2020 for video conferencing-based productions.

The [Virtual Realms](#) edition (which came out in 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic) sets the story in 2019 rather than the original 1995 setting, with updates to the pop culture references.

The "[Young Adventurers Edition](#)" changes the older characters from 20-somethings into high schoolers and omits the harsher profanity and sexual references.

Adaptational Alternate Endings: While all three versions end with Agnes defeating Tiamat before moving on and continuing to play D&D with Tilly's friends, there are some major differences between the original ending and the "Young Adventurers" and "Virtual Realms" endings:

- Original: Agnes marries Miles, they have kids, and move away from Athens.
- Young Adventurers: High-school aged Agnes and Miles break up and become friends, and he joins her to play D&D. Agnes eventually goes to college and moves away from Athens.
- Virtual Realms: Like "Young Adventurers," except Agnes grows up and "always remembered fondly the day she killed monsters."

Source: <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/8807/she-kills-monsters>
<https://www.atthemac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/She-Kills-Monsters-study-guide-2021.pdf>

Queer Kids, Nerds and Sword Fights: It's the Hot School Play

"She Kills Monsters" is hugely popular in high schools and colleges. Even in lockdown, performers have found novel ways to make the battles come alive.



By **Elisabeth Vincentelli**

Published July 2, 2020 Updated July 3, 2020

This is a story about kids who make up stories. This is a story in which girls wield swords, queer kids are cool and nerds rule the earth.

This is a story about "She Kills Monsters," and those who love it.

Qui Nguyen's spirited play about finding your real and metaphorical families, as well as yourself, through Dungeons & Dragons did well enough when it premiered at the Flea Theater in 2011 — Eric Grode called it a "deceptively breezy and rather ingenious comedy" in The New York Times. The play ran, closed, and Nguyen moved on, most notably to his acclaimed semi-autobiographical breakthrough "Vietgone," and writing gigs for Disney.

"She Kills Monsters," meanwhile, had just gotten started. In the intervening years, it has blossomed into one of America's most popular shows, with 797 productions (performed and planned) between 2013 and next year. Of those, one was a professional revival, 144 were by amateur companies and a whopping 652 were done on school and college campuses.

"We're dealing with themes that every high schooler, every college student confronts at some point, whether it be this idea of the underdog or familial struggle or sexuality or gender," said Kelly Trumbull, who is co-directing an online production slated for July 12 at the University of Pittsburgh, where she is a teaching artist.

In the show, the teenage Tilly dies early on in a car crash and her older sister, Agnes, must deal not just with grief but with how little she knew about her sibling: reading a notebook left behind, she learns that Tilly was a role-playing aficionado, for instance, and that she had a girlfriend in her game world. (The presence of strong female characters is another big factor for the show's popularity on campuses, as girls tend to be overrepresented in drama departments.)

These subjects don't fly everywhere, but obstacles have only energized fans of the play. DeAnna Tart, who runs the theater department at Trinidad High School in rural Texas, had to overcome many hurdles

before she could enter her production of “She Kills Monsters” in the 2017-18 edition of her state’s University Interscholastic League contest.

“It is very comedic, but it’s also very tragic,” she said by telephone. “It dives into sexuality, which some people deem controversial even for high school-age students, unfortunately.”

Once her principal gave her the greenlight, Tart had to follow the contest’s parameters, trimming for length and editing out some curse words, while preserving the show’s integrity. “And we won the state championship,” she said. “It was quite awesome.”

Nguyen, 43, is delighted by the attention the script has received, even while sounding a little nonplused.



[Image: Qui Nguyen has been surprised by how fervently high school and college students have embraced “She Kills Monsters.”
Credit...Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times]

“I’ve never had a play or anything I’ve ever written take this weird life of its own,” he said on the phone from his Los Angeles home.

[\[Qui Nguyen is proud to say he’s “not the model minority.”\]](#)

Ariana Starkman, a 22-year-old who played Tilly at the University of Pittsburgh in 2018 is back for the virtual version. “I definitely love being a badass warrior.” she said.

Annmarie Duggan, the chairman of Pitt’s theater arts department, agreed that the chance for women to learn fight choreography is part of the appeal: “They don’t just watch the men fight for them. And there is a love interest, but that’s not what the play is about.”

For Emma Lynch, 18, the gateway was Dungeons & Dragons, which she played at Minarets High School and Charter School in O’Neals, Calif. The show’s humor did the rest.

“The first few pages, I was laughing so hard,” Lynch said via Zoom. She ended up co-directing a production in May, before graduating.

A play toggling between reality and fantasy, and featuring elaborate battles, should be daunting to stage. But Nguyen, who created the show with his troupe, Vampire Cowboys, purposefully left directors a lot of leeway. And that started with casting.

“I made sure none of the roles were based on race at all,” he said. “We wanted to see the diversity you would find on the New York subway onstage.”

The result is more than just matter-of-fact colorblind casting, as “She Kills Monsters” directly addresses what it means to be an outsider.



[Image: Cast members rehearsing for the University of Maryland's Zoom version of "She Kills Monsters," which made use of digital backgrounds. Credit...David Andrews]

"I brought my experiences sometimes being the only Black person in the class to Agnes," said Jasmine Mitchell, 22, who was in a virtual production at the University of Maryland in May. "The person playing Agnes's boyfriend was white, and I was using this information to figure out her psychology. Agnes's community at the end is with people from different races, and I think that's important to acknowledge."

Role-playing scenes also allow the designer and technical teams to go wild and be resourceful. Kayla West, a teacher and Lynch's co-director at Minarets, mailed costumes and props to cast members stuck at home by the coronavirus, along with tablecloths for the virtual backgrounds on Zoom. Proper green screens were too expensive.

"I love them all because it's so pure, right?," Nguyen said of the choices he's seen, or heard about, over the years. For its new production, Pitt's theater department — which wanted students who had lost summer-stock jobs to still gain experience on a show — decided to fully embrace a comic-book aesthetic that makes the most of the 2-D platform.

"Everything the audience will see in the imaginary world is something you would see in Tilly's book, like her drawings and her writing," Trumbull, the co-director, said. Some costumes and props are recycled from the university's 2018 staging, like a horned head piece and cheerleader outfits.

"Hopefully they will fit, or at least close enough," said Ricardo Vila-Roger, the other co-director. "This is uncharted territory for all of us and now we problem-solve together."



[Image: From left: Megha Nabe, Satomi Blair, Margret Odette, Allison Buck, Raul Sigmund Julia and Jack Corcoran in the original New York production of Nguyen’s play. Credit...Joan Marcus]

Openness, tolerance and resilience are more than the show’s subjects: They are baked into its DNA.

When “She Kills Monsters” started taking off in schools, Nguyen would receive requests to tone down the profanity and sexual references — what was fine in colleges raised red flags when younger students were involved.

So he retooled the script, tweaking some expressions and altering key elements. For example, Agnes is a teacher in her 20s in the original version and a high school cheerleader in “She Kills Monsters: Young Adventurers Edition,” which now has totaled 434 productions (performed or licensed through 2021).

“The regular play is often done on the coasts and in the middle it’s the YA edition,” Nguyen said, laughing. “Oh, I get what’s happening here!”



[Image: University of Pittsburgh students rehearsing in late June for a virtual production of the play, which was scheduled after summer-stock opportunities for aspiring actors dried up. Credit...via University of Pittsburgh]

There was more fine-tuning to come as the show, like a shape-shifter with a high constitution score, has kept on changing.

When stay-at-home orders went up in the spring, directors with planned productions had to scramble. David Marconi of Cranford High School, in New Jersey, started working on an audio version for a podcast.

As Marconi was editing the sound files, Nguyen came up with “She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms,” a version for streaming platforms that the teacher, changing tack again, ended up doing instead.

“Virtual Realms” retrofits the script and stage directions to maximize online formats in clever ways. At the end, for example, Agnes’s battle with a dragon isn’t represented physically anymore, but by her rolling D&D dice as the beast’s multiple heads appear in different Zoom windows. (Connoisseurs will wince in empathy as the game-master character repeatedly calls “no damage.”)

Lisa Nathans, who co-directed the recent University of Maryland virtual production, was taken with Nguyen’s flexibility. “Our students were very attached to the original,” she said, “and when ‘Virtual Realms’ became available, Qui very generously allowed the cast to be part of a devising process to blend elements of both stories together.”

The Maryland show, done on Zoom, made particularly impressive use of filters, with characters suddenly sporting digital horns or elf ears. Its audience also testified to the play’s popularity: The livestream had twice as many viewers as a simultaneous YouTube reading of the David Mamet political comedy “November” starring John Malkovich and Patti LuPone.

In “She Kills Monsters,” role-playing helps the sisters finally bond with each other. For many of those staging it, the play serves a similar purpose, especially in a time of social distancing.

“At the end of the show, Tilly asks Agnes ‘Did you have fun?’” Nathans said. “We used this as guideposts at the end of each rehearsal: ‘Yeah, we’re using this technology, we’re doing this during Covid-19, this is a show about grief, but did you have fun? Were you able to find joy and artistry?’ ”

Such enthusiasm means as much to the playwright as it does to the students. “With professional productions, I remember things, but they didn’t change my life the way the shows I did in high school and college did,” Nguyen said. “So I’m glad to be part of these people’s artistic journey.”

[A version of this article appears in print on July 5, 2020, Section AR, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: This Play Became a Shape-Shifter.]

DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Theatre and Performance Studies

English Literature

Psychology

Anthropology and Sociology

Identity Studies

Gender and Sexuality Studies

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The author of *Queer Kids, Nerds and Sword Fights: It's the Hot School Play* writes, "Openness, tolerance and resilience are more than the shows subjects: They are baked into its DNA." What does she mean by that? After watching or reading the play, look for evidence which supports that statement.
- How would you describe the main characters in the play? Do you identify with any of them and why?
- How is the passage of time and reality vs. fantasy conveyed in lighting, sound, use of the set/props, costume pieces and in character action? Was it conveyed effectively, why, or why not?
- How do we "meet" each character? Does their circumstance affect how we empathize with them?
- Notice how "the real life" stories get integrated into the "D&D adventure" of the story. Describe something this is like and why the playwright might have utilized this structure.
- Nguyen said he had made sure "none of the roles were based on race at all." Why do you think that was important to him? What was the result and how does it impact the message of the play?
- What do you notice about this play? What stands out to you about the language, characters, setting, and conflict? Does it remind you of anything else you have seen or read before?
- Explore the reasons that "She Kills Monsters" has been so popular among high school and college performers and audiences? Do any of these reasons resonate with you? What lessons or messages have you taken away experiencing this play?
- And what is the significance of the play's title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for his work?
- Describe the experience of the gay and queer characters of the play. Considering the play is set in 1995, is the portrayal of these characters still relevant today, why, or why not?

Some questions sourced from: <https://www.atthemac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/She-Kills-Monsters-study-guide-2021.pdf>

MEDIA LINKS AND ADDITIONAL READING

Video Links:

Original production sneak peek: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biG2RF03M4Q>

Chicago 2013 production: [Buzz22 Chicago Presents: She Kills Monsters](#)

How to play Dungeons and Dragons: <https://youtu.be/fJMnmwOAC3M>

Qui Nguyen talks about *She Kills Monsters*: [Qui Nguyen on the Origins of She Kills Monsters and the Show's Tenth Anniversary - YouTube](#)

Reading:

- 1) NCAC and Dramatist Guide Object to cancellation of school play with gay character in Hillsboro, Ohio: <https://ncac.org/news/lgbtq-she-kills-monsters-cancelled-hillsboro-ohio>
- 2) “State of the Gay”: Gay culture in the 90’s

From *She Kills Monsters* Dramaturgy by: Bianchi, Brien, Faith Tenney, and Will Inman
University of Houston’s 2016 production, Directed by Adam Noble

2016 is a wonderful time to be gay. Same-sex marriage has been legalized, there are gay celebrities everywhere you look, and there are informative, safe gay youth programs all over the country. If it feels like acceptance of homosexuality is skyrocketing, the 90's was when it was beginning to crest.

Before understanding being a gay, early 90's teen on a personal level, we'll look at the facts. There was quite a lot of political progress going on in this period. In 1990: the Federal Hate Crimes Statistics Act is passed- the first federal recognition of homosexuals. In this year Dale McCormick also became the first openly lesbian senator. In 1991: the first Pride celebration happened in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It was called the Unity Festival. 1993 gave us our first Dyke March in Washington, D.C.

That same year, Bill Clinton instituted “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”. Although by current standards this measure is draconic and discriminatory, by the standards of 1993 it was progressive and divisive. Before the policy was enacted, homosexuals were sniffed out and dishonorably discharged from service. Bill Clinton announced that sex was none of the government’s business, which was a ballsy move and important to the LGBT movement.

1994 also had the American Medical Association opposing the “treatment” of homosexuality. Conversion therapy, as it was called, was a method of exposing same-sex oriented people (often teenagers) to members of the opposite sex until their homosexuality was “cured”. A flat denial from the AMA of homosexuality as a disease was a huge win for the gay community.

As we edge closer to Tilly’s experience, we move into the world of popular culture. The first lesbian kiss on television was between Amanda Donohoe and Michele Greene on L.A. Law in 1991. It was undoubtedly a publicity stunt, but that fact hardly registered with the lesbian teens across the country who were exposed to it.

Grammy-winner Melissa Etheridge came out in 1993 at the Triangle Ball, which was also the first inaugural ball held in honor of gays and lesbians.

Perhaps most importantly was Pedro Zamora of The Real World San Francisco. The first positively portrayed AIDS-positive man on television, he continued to do educational works for gay teens until his death in 1995.

This leads us to the individual experience of the gay teenager. Today, when we think of gay issues, we think of marriage equality. In the early 90’s, homosexuality was immediately associated with violence and AIDS. In 2016, gay youth worry about bullying while their families worry about them not fitting in. In the 90’s, gay youth worried about beatings while their families worried about a terminal illness. Perhaps the hardest idea for modern teenagers to understand is the fear gay youth experienced in that time period. Sure, there is a little anxiety about coming out nowadays, but with all of the programs and online assistance available, it is hardly a life-threatening concern. While all of the things listed above make the 90’s seem like a gay paradise, it’s important to keep in mind that those things were only happening at the top, while the normal towns in the flyover states were still being faced with a rock-solid wall of opposition. A 1992 Newsweek poll found that 45% of those asked considered gay rights “a threat to the American family and its values”. The average American still needed quite a bit of convincing.

While Bill Clinton, Ellen DeGeneres, and Will & Grace might have been a source of courage, coming out in high school was still nigh unthinkable. Escaping to a fantasy world of acceptance might have been the only thing that made sense.

Source: <https://www.scribd.com/document/505874373/SKM-Dramaturgy-for-Program>

