

ABSTRACT

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Born and raised in the Kentucky, Angella Foster explores her kinship with the strong women who shaped the land and the character of her home state with their bare hands. Inspired by her grandma's stories of growing up the daughter of sharecroppers, *Women's Work* captures the rhythm of daily labor and explores the emotional landscape of an imagined community of women in rural Kentucky. The piece also features an original sound score composed and performed live by School of Music students.

WOMEN'S WORK & OTHER STORIES

By

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Preface

I am on the Metro moving forward under the city of Washington, D.C. but I am thinking back over this past year, running through my mind so many moments, so many decisions that brought me to this one. This feeling of moving forward while looking back strikes me as a lovely metaphor for the creative process which gave life to my MFA thesis project, *Women's Work & Other Stories*. This time last year the rehearsal process had just begun, and all that has transpired since was just a promise. There was so much that I didn't know then that seems inevitable now. I still can't wrap my mind around the reality of looking back at something I was pressing forward towards for so long.

It is always like this. After every concert comes the sense of loss, the grief, that something miraculous and beautiful was yours for just one moment, and now that moment has passed. It was so real it could almost be touched, and yet it couldn't be grasped. Dances aren't the kind of thing that can be tucked away and saved for later. Existing only in the moment, a dance comes to fullness and passes into memory in almost the same instant. In the days just after my thesis concert, I felt this sense of loss more acutely than ever before, and it was both an aching pain to avoid and an intense joy to savor. From the first time I heard these famous words of Merce Cunningham's, I intensely identified with his sentiment:

You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive. It is not for unsteady souls.
(Cunningham, *Fifty Years* 10)

The Sunday after my thesis concert, the day after, when all my family had left to return to Kentucky, those words hit me harder than they ever have before. After all that work, over a year of researching and choreographing, so many sleepless nights and too many frustrations to count, it was over. It was beautiful, but it was gone. And, I was left to deal with the fact that dancing--well, dance making, in any case--had given me one thing in return besides that poetic "single fleeting moment" of feeling alive; it had left me a small disaster to clean up and a desire to sleep for twenty-four hours straight. My house was wreck, and remnants of the show were everywhere in the mess: dirty costumes in piles on the floor to washed, scraps of left-over fabric and supplies to be sorted and put away, a basket full of ceramic eggs now just a useless oddity, another little addition to the flea-market décor of my apartment. And, what was I going to do with a quilt the size of a room? So many people had asked, but I still didn't have a good answer.

These are the small questions and concerns which cluttered my mind after the adrenaline rush of the production week had passed. By now, it has been weeks, and I've started to move on and focus my energy on new projects, today's pressing concerns. I feel like I have had just barely enough time and distance from the project to start asking real questions about the work, both the creative process and the final performative product. The feedback from everyone--my professors, my dancers, my family, my students, even complete strangers--has been so overwhelmingly positive that I am still hesitant to unravel the mystery, to look at the thing too closely. In the end, I was both the creator of the work and yet, having performed in the work, I was also part of the creation. This role which I like to think of as "choreographer

incarnate” makes objectivity difficult. I experienced the work not as an outside judge but as an insider witness, a role I am quite unfamiliar with and still a bit uneasy about.

Somehow the work was powerful. It seemed to have genuinely impacted not just the audience, but myself and the dancers, in this authentic way that I hoped for but wasn't sure was actually possible to achieve. I don't understand exactly how that happened; it was a surprise to me how it all came together so seamlessly in the performative moment, when it really mattered. Part of me hopes that this analytical exercise of looking back at the creative process which led up to the successful performances of *Women's Work & Other Stories* will help me understand how to make another dance which touches me and the audience as strongly as this one. At the same time, part of me fears that unpacking this creative process will be like peeling an onion, that I will just come up empty at the end with no mystery left and no insight gained. And, then again, it might not change anything at all.

Dedication

I know that this world is built up on strong women,
built up and kept up by them too, kneeling, stooping,
pulling, bending, and rising up when they need to go
and do what needs to get done.

Kaye Gibbons
A Virtuous Woman

This work is dedicated to all the strong women in my life who have
taught me how to love, create and have faith in face of adversity.

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Chapter 1: The Lineage of an Idea

The beginnings of things are notoriously difficult to pinpoint, and this process is no different. In many ways, I feel like I've been working towards this one piece for the past three years of my graduate program. I just couldn't see that until now. When I started graduate school in the fall of 2006, my husband, Ben, was still living and working in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, awaiting his final job placement with an agency here in the D.C. area. His parents had lent us an extra car, so we could drive back and forth to see each other as much as possible. Driving out of the dense urban / suburban sprawl of D.C. into the soft light of the forests in rural North Carolina, I found myself thinking a lot about home, not North Carolina, but Kentucky.

Leaving the city behind, headed into the greener, more sparsely populated towns and countryside of North Carolina, reminded me of how time and space always just seem to open up, expand somehow, when I'm in Kentucky. Whenever I go home, I can suddenly feel myself breathing easier, talking slower, and letting myself gradually decelerate. Of course, I don't live there anymore, so I don't have tightly scheduled days of work or school to attend to when I go home. But, the feeling of time expanded surpasses schedules or lack thereof. When I'm home the past seems more tangible, reminders of the my childhood and my life before my mother died, are everywhere, and this living almost simultaneously in the past and present is a different experience of time than I have anywhere else. At home, I can't help but rest in the moment and take time to look back at where I've come from. Everywhere else

I go in the world, I live so hopelessly in the present racing moment and in the future, constantly working now for what will come later, with very little awareness of the roots or origins of the now. And, every time I thought about these things during those long drives alone to and from North Carolina, I wondered how I could capture that in a dance, that sense of time expanding and the present encompassing the past.

During my second year of graduate school, I made a piece entitled *Parallel Lives at the Point of Intersection*, and it was during the process of crafting that piece that I first started delving into the past as a source of inspiration for my work. I also feel this was the first time I made a piece that attempted to explore that feeling of time expanded that settles over me when I go home to Kentucky. For this work, I cast six dancers, all women, and I asked them to research the life of one of their great grandmothers. I gave them each a list of basic biographical questions to ask their family members, but, mostly, I told them to gather stories, stories which had been passed down through their families about their great grandmothers. All of the dancers were successful in their informal oral history assignment, and we used the biographical information and stories to shape characters for each of the dancers. Then, I imagined how these women, who had never met, might have been felt connected or disconnected had their paths crossed and out of that image flowed the structure of the work. I have tremendous affection for that piece and for the creative process that yielded it even though I consider the actual performative product to be quite flawed. It was emotionally rich and dramatically effective in places, but it remained incomplete, just a sketch. I just never discovered exactly what shape it was supposed to take, and it never succeeded in capturing that sense of the past opening

up and expanding in the present moment that I was so interested in exploring.

However, it was during that process that I started asking my Grandma Sadie lots of questions about her mother and her upbringing in rural Kentucky in the thirties and forties. I've been fascinated by my grandma's stories for a long time. When I was a young girl, I thought she grew up in pioneer days because her stories sounded very *Little House on the Prairie* to me. Hearing these stories again as an adult, I began to appreciate for the first time the historical context of her experience. Listening to her talk about living in a small house with her parents and nine other siblings, with no running water or electricity, was suddenly shocking to me. I couldn't help but think that the Jazz Age and all its excess had already come and gone in New York City while my relatives were still growing their own food, killing their own hogs and reading by candlelight at night.

It seemed unbelievable in a way, so much in contrast with how my Grandma Sadie lives now with her cell phone and AOL email account. My grandma has always told me that I was something special in the family, the way I left home to go to college, traveled to far away places and danced on stage for so many strangers. But, this was the first time I was really proud of my grandma and saw her stories as something really precious, evidence of her ability to grow and adapt to a world that changes so quickly, her ability to savor her rich past without taking any of the joy out of the present and all its newness and possibility. I wondered again: How does one capture such a thing in a dance? Like that sense of time expanding, I wasn't sure such things could be explored in dance, and yet dance making is my primary artistic medium for delving into what puzzles, intrigues, amuses or troubles me most in life.

When the time came to draft the proposal for my thesis project, I wasn't quite confident enough to say that I was going to find a way to flesh out that sense of expanded time or that sense of past and present interwoven. I was still asking the question: How do you translate such ideas into dance? I wasn't entirely sure I was capable of addressing these things in any meaningful way. Instead, I decided to focus on story. I secretly hoped to get at these other less tangible things, but it seemed the most compelling thing I had to offer were the simple stories I had gathered--mine, my mother's, my grandma's and great grandma's stories. These stories were already real, already powerful, and seemed to cry out to be shared outside the boundaries of my family circle. I decided to begin there.

Chapter 2: The Research Process

Stories

This research process began quite informally with me calling up my Grandma Sadie one evening just to check in for the week and catch up. At the time, I was still working on *Parallel Lives*, and I was also in rehearsals for Helen Tamiris' famous work *How Long, Brethren?* (1937) as reconstructed by Diane McIntyre. With the past creeping into my life from all around, I decided rather spontaneously that night to start asking my Grandma Sadie for more detailed, concrete information about her life before she married grandpa and whatever she could tell me about my great-grandma. I grabbed a notebook I happened to have in my backpack and started scribbling out the names, dates and stories as fast I could.

According to the big, black family Bible my Grandma Sadie usually keeps tucked away, my great-grandmother, Mary Hobbs, was born Mary Bell Shanks in Fayette County, Kentucky near Jack's Creek Pike on January 16, 1907. At the age of nineteen, she married my great grandpa, William Hobbs, on October 16, 1926 in the Fayette County Court House. They met during a corn shucking, fell in love, and married soon after. At first, they settled in Fayette County near where Mary had grown up, and, at the time, she was also caring for some of her siblings since her own mother had died when she was about twelve years old. Their first child, George William, was born in 1927. They had ten children in all with the last child, Roger

Gene, being born in 1949. My grandma was born Sadie Laverne Hobbs in 1939. As long as my grandma could remember, her parents had loved each other and worked together as virtually equal partners in all they did to provide for their family.

According to my Grandma Sadie's recollections, my great grandma and pa raised tobacco as tenant farmers, or sharecroppers, in the early years of their marriage, up through the birth of their last child. Tending the tobacco fields was grandpa Hobbs' primary occupation, and tending to the house, food cultivation and preservation, the children and just about everything else was Grandma Hobbs' responsibility. However, bringing an intensive cash crop like tobacco from field to market really required the whole family to labor in whatever ways they could. I was surprised to hear that my Grandma Hobbs frequently worked out in the fields to help bring in the tobacco harvest, and all of the children worked picking, suckering, worming and hanging the tobacco according to their abilities. Clearly, there was a division of labor based upon ideas of what constituted "women's work" and "men's work," but these roles were also more practical and more fluid than I had once imagined.

My Grandma Sadie takes great joy in recounting all that her own mother did to provide a home and a life for her children while my Grandpa Hobbs labored in the fields. Grandma Hobbs supervised all of the family's food production, preparation and preservation. She tended a garden which was close to the house and supplied much of the family's food--fresh picked in season and canned for the winter. They grew their own corn and barley, and she ground into meal to make bread. My Grandma Sadie fondly recalls that her mother made fresh bread every day. She also

raised hogs which were used to make homemade sausage, bacon and such. As was common practice in the rural South, their family kept chickens which were occasionally fried for special occasions, but, mostly, they supplied eggs that could be sold or exchanged for the few luxury items, like sugar or coffee, which they couldn't produce themselves. Most days, Grandma Hobbs cooked enough at lunch to get the family through the evening meal as well. My Grandma Sadie particularly loves to recall picking wild blackberries in the summer, so her mother would make her favorite dessert, blackberry cobbler.

Besides all the daily chores and minding the children, my Grandma Sadie says her mother made and mended all their clothes, except her father's overalls which they purchased. She was also an excellent quilter and was particularly known among friends and family for her traditional "wedding ring" pattern quilts. She made quilts for pleasure as well as utility. If they didn't need a quilt that she had made, she gave it away; she never sold them for any profit. Grandma Sadie remembers quilting as her mother's primary "leisure" activity.

This is how my Grandma Sadie grew up. Even after her family moved from that first farm in Fayette County to Jessamine County, they were still living in such a way that their family was mostly self-sufficient, depending very little on people or infrastructure outside the family's immediate resources. In Jessamine County, my Grandma Sadie says the land they farmed was owned by a man named Dr. Barrett whom her father seemed to trust. They were significantly more isolated from friends and extended family there, but the house they lived in was larger and the farming somehow more lucrative. After some time, they moved once more from that original,

more isolated house to a home which was closer to Dr. Barrett's own residence as well a house occupied by her brother, William, and his family. Dr. Barrett eventually sold all of that land to a new owner whom my Grandpa Hobbs seemed unwilling to work under. They lived in Jessamine County until the year my grandma turned thirteen (1952), and then they moved to southern Indiana where her parents managed a dairy farm. Grandma Sadie remembers that her father got the position by answering an ad in the local newspaper.

I was very surprised to discover that my grandma had ever lived outside of Kentucky; she had never spoken of it before. Granted, they were only there for two years, and it wasn't very far from central Kentucky in our contemporary view of time and space. But, it seemed a tremendous risk to take with such a large family to a place where none of them had ever lived, where they knew no one. My grandma has good memories of their time running the dairy. She likes to talk about the small, "pee-wee" cow that her and her sisters were responsible for feeding four times a day and milking twice a day. They thought of her like a pet although she was clearly part of the milk daily production of the dairy. My grandma also remembers her parents as sharing the day-to-day responsibilities of running the farm fairly equally.

By the time the family moved back to Kentucky, my grandma was fifteen and had completed eighth grade. She didn't continue her schooling when they returned to Kentucky even though they were now living in town for the first time in her life. Her older sister, Pat, had already married, and their parents rented a store from her in-laws in Jessamine County. My great grandparents ran that store, living in a house right behind it, for five years. My grandma actually met her husband, Henry Huddleston,

in that store. He was playing a pin ball game and my grandma's sister, Pat, stole the baseball cap off his head to get his attention. My grandma was sixteen, and they married within the year of meeting. Her parents then moved to manage a different corner store in the city of Lexington in Fayette County. They worked together in that capacity for fifteen years before retiring and buying a small house on the north side of Lexington, Kentucky.

Sadie and Henry, my grandparents, settled in a house in another neighborhood on the north side where they raised their three boys, including my dad. They still live in that same small, three bedroom ranch today. None of my family on my father's side work in farming these days, though some of them have moved out of town and back into the country. Most of them work blue collar jobs but live comfortable middle class lives. I am my grandma's oldest grandchild, and the first person on that side of my family to earn a college degree although several of my younger cousins have completed college since I graduated in 2000. My grandma is clearly proud that all of her family has worked their way up out of poverty and the hard life of farming. She isn't really nostalgic for the past, and yet she does speak with great admiration for her parents and the life that they provided for her growing up.

Historical Context

Although I started the research process by focusing on my own family stories, I wanted to get a fuller picture of the Kentucky I'd never known, where my grandma and her family lived a life I could hardly imagine. I wanted to investigate the lives of other women who grew up like my grandma and her mother. I also knew that I needed to place my grandma's stories in the greater context of the history and culture

of the surrounding area and in relationship to the story of life in the rural South at the time. I needed to do these for two very different reasons. First, I felt that I would be able to delve more deeply into my grandma's stories if I could more completely grasp the nature of the larger world in which they existed. Secondly, I needed a better picture of life in that time and place so that the biographical "facts" of my own family stories wouldn't stifle me and prevent me from creating a fictional world that was more universally resonant.

My main objective in this more formal research process was to immerse myself in the time and place, sights and sounds of Kentucky, particularly in the Central and Eastern parts of the state, during the Depression and the War Years. I focused the majority of my research on the history, art and culture of women in Kentucky during the time period between 1933 and 1945. Although I took notes on much of the reading, watching and listening that comprised my research, I was not so interested in analyzing the information and stories in an academic way. I read oral histories and scholarly essays obsessively like I was reading a page turner of a novel, and I really tried to just soak in the texture, the sensory experience, the real life in the wealth of pages, sound recordings and video footage that I consumed during those three months leading up to the beginning of the rehearsal process. I have included a complete bibliography which gives an idea of the scope of my research; however, I will focus here on the handful of sources which ultimately helped shape the final work conceptually. Other sources will be addressed later in relationship to the design and / or production decisions which they informed.

I began my research by exploring the resources available to me through the University of Maryland library system, and I was pleasantly surprised to come across several books which really influenced the direction of the project. The first book which kept me up late at night reading was *Country Women Cope with Hard Times: A Collection of Oral Histories*, edited by Melissa Walker. I positively devoured each and every oral history in this relatively slim volume, and I've read most of them multiple times. Although the women who tell their stories in this collection are not from Kentucky, but rather from Tennessee and South Carolina, the arch of their narratives and their intense admiration for the women who came before them reminded me of listening to my grandma talk about her childhood and all her momma did. One woman, Wilma Cope Williamson, summed up her mother's abilities by saying, "If you needed it, she either raised it or made it" (35). There are sixteen oral histories in this book, and this sentiment is found in virtually all of them. These women remember their mothers and grandmothers as women who shaped their lives with their bare hands, women who had acquired the fine skills and practical knowledge needed to survive from the women before them. Such skills and knowledge sustained their families through difficult times and propelled many of their children out of poverty. Placing my grandma's stories of her momma in the context of all these other remarkable, "ordinary" women didn't make telling my family stories seem less important but rather even more essential. All these women--my grandma and great grandma included--deserve to have their stories not just told, but honored, and each of these women inspired me to persevere through the difficult parts of this creative process to tell this story.

Beyond the individual oral histories themselves, the ideas explored in the introduction and afterward of *Country Women Cope with Hard Times: A Collection of Oral Histories* caused me to really reflect upon the power of story in my own life and nature of memory as it is crystallized over time through story. In the introduction, the editor, Melissa Walker, starts by telling a bit of her own story of growing up on dairy farm in Tennessee, and she reflects on how the stories her family told and retold “molded” her “consciousness” over time. She goes on to say that, “Stories are powerful tools for understanding the ways ordinary people interpret the larger events shaping their lives. People tell stories to make sense of the world around them...People tell stories as a means of sustaining their personal identities” (xv, xvi). These words made me really think about the stories of my life and those of my mother’s life which I feel compelled to tell and retell to others and to myself. I began to consider how those stories grow and change over time though the events are in the past and unchangeable. For example, I like to tell this story about the time my mother was so determined to take my brothers and me to see the new Care Bears movie that she sold part of her coin collection to pay for the tickets since we didn’t have any other disposable income for such a frivolous expenditure. I used to tell that story in a way that stressed how ridiculous and irrational her whims could be, but now I think I tell the story in a way that sort of marvels at how spontaneous and exciting her erratic behavior could be sometimes. The way I choose to tell this story helps define and redefine my relationship to my mother even in her absence. When I made the decision to enter into *Women’s Work* as a sort of narrator / witness presence in the

work, this idea of storytelling as an exercise in identity creating and sustaining really challenged me. How would I tell these stories? How would they reflect not on the events themselves but on me as the storyteller? Where was that thin line between memory and fiction? Did it matter if I crossed it?

The second book which really captured my imagination was *Work, Family & Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker. The title of my thesis project, *Women's Work & Other Stories*, first occurred to me when I was reading the chapter entitled "Pretty Near Every Woman Done a Man's Work: Women & Field Work in the Rural South." This chapter focuses on the stigma of field work as "men's work" versus domestic tasks revolving around home and garden as "women's work." However, in reality, these narrowly defined categories of work are revealed to be more fluid than I would once have thought. Although it is true that working in the field to produce cash crops monopolized the energies of most of the men in the poor rural South, it not true that women's work was confined to the home and garden. Etta Carroll, who lived on a Texas cotton farm most of her life, is quoted as saying, "Well, if it hadn't been for the women, the men couldn't have gotten to work. They did housework and helped with the farm work, too. They did both" (42). This sentiment is echoed by West Virginian, Lessie Shiveley, "Pretty near every woman...done a man's work. I've done everything but plowing. I've worked in hay, I've binded oats, I've shucked corn. Done everything in the world that a man could do but plow" (57). My own grandma's stories also support this assertion that "women's work" was rather broadly defined during the time period as necessity required. Women worked in the home, in

the garden, *and* in the fields. Reviewing this source made me consider the nature of “women’s work” and to define it simply as “whatever a women does because it needs doing.” I was attracted to this notion of “women’s work” as implying all the living and doing and striving required to take care of a home and to love and provide for the people living under that roof. Under the economic and social conditions of the time, women’s work could also be described as the art of making the best out of practically nothing. And, yet “looking back on their lives, few southern farm women lamented the opportunities that were never available to them. Instead, they described how they had fashioned a life around the available options” (63).

Work, Family & Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century also contained a beautiful oral history titled “Work Was My Pleasure: An Oral History of Nellie Stancil Langley” which reminded me so much of my grandma’s stories. Although Nellie Stancil Langley was from North Carolina, much of her turn of phrase, just her ways of putting words together, reminded me of how my own Grandma Sadie talks. The transcription doesn’t attempt to mimic her dialect on the page, but somehow it comes through and the voice is clear and compelling. She talks about her family’s struggles, the constant toil of raising tobacco, and she speaks with real pride about growing or raising most everything they ate. Most of her stories--with the exception of the ones about hurricanes--resonated with me as connecting in substance and spirit to the stories of my own grandma’s upbringing. When I started working with my dancers, I told them lots of stories about my own family, but I also gave them each copies of this oral history to read. I really felt a lot of kinship with this woman, Nellie Stancil Langley, even beyond the similarities with my grandma’s

stories. Her statement “work was my pleasure” really resonated with me personally (40). I am passionate, to the point of obsessive, about my work as a choreographer, and I feel I have to justify this to a lot of people. Other people, my husband included, seem to desire a quantity of leisure time that would drive me mad. To do the work I do, I sometimes have to work all day and all night to get the job done well, just in time so that it actually matters, and, most of the time, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Throughout the long hours of work that this project demanded, Ms. Langley’s words echoed in my head and encouraged me keep looking for the pleasure contained the pressing task at hand.

Reading another volume of oral histories, *Hillbilly Women*, I gained new appreciation for the struggles and injustices that many women faced in rural South throughout the 20th century. The only hint of mistreatment in my grandma’s stories is the undefined conflict between my great grandpa Hobbs and his new landlord which causes him to pick up and move the whole family to Indiana in search of a better opportunity. I’m sure I will never understand the fullness of those circumstances, but my grandma’s stories don’t even hint at anything on the level of tragedy which touched the lives of all the women whose stories are in these pages. These are the stories of women who lived in the mountains in substandard living conditions, doing low paying manual labor under brutal conditions, who fought back against the people and systems that profited at their expense. Although my family in Kentucky are not mountain people, my Grandma Sadie self-identifies herself as a “hillbilly” which she defines loosely as “country-type people.” Even though she has lived in the city of Lexington in a small but comfortable house for most of her adult

life, she still aligns herself with rural life and country people. I grew up despising the term hillbilly, and it used to get me a little angry to hear my grandma apply this term to herself; it made me feel guilty by association. After all, the term hillbilly, as used in mainstream American culture, conjures up images of an uneducated, vulgar, barefoot hick who speaks poorly and has bad teeth. Not exactly the image I wanted to be connected with growing up, eager to escape the confines of Jessamine County, Kentucky to achieve my dream of dancing professionally. Yet, reading the stories of these women made me proud to be connected through my family to those kind of roots. These women were courageous, protesting against mining operations and textile companies that were careless with the lives of their workers and reckless with the precious land, the fragile environment, in which these people had lived their lives for generations. Even though my mother was a “Yankee,” a northerner with a harsh accent to Kentucky ears, the fighting spirit of these “hillbilly” women reminded me of her, and how admirably she fought her own losing battle with mental illness. Like many of these women, she was never sure she would escape with her life, but she was determined not to go easily.

Finally, I also read a little known novel called *Weeds*, which was written by Edith Summers Kelly and originally published in 1923. Kelly was born in Canada in 1884 but moved to Greenwich Village in New York City after she graduated from college. While in New York, she worked as a secretary to the more famous writer, Upton Sinclair, and participated in the rich intellectual and social scene in the Village during the time. She eventually married a sculptor named C. Fred Kelley. In 1914, they moved to Scott County, Kentucky to try their hand at growing tobacco on a

rented seven-hundred acre farm. Kelly would later draw upon this experience to write the heart-breaking story of Judith Pippinger, a young woman who is born with an intensity and curiosity which makes her tragically ill-suited to finding contentment within the confines of her small, poor community. Although the book is written by an outsider, someone who lived in Kentucky for only a brief period of time, there is a raw honesty to the way the story is told which I appreciate. It reminds me how my mother alternately loved and hated her adopted home state; an outsider, like Kelly, my mother made a home for her children in Kentucky but never felt at ease there herself.

In *Weeds*, Kelly's descriptions of Judith's struggles with pregnancy, childbirth and caring for a sick child are particularly moving. In the story, Judith becomes depressed when she realizes she is pregnant with another child, another mouth to feed, and she makes some crude attempts to end the pregnancy herself. She doesn't succeed; the child, Annie, is born unharmed. However, when Annie is still quite young, she becomes very ill, and Judith must face the terror of losing this little girl she can't help but love, even though she still wonders if it wouldn't have been better if the child had never lived at all: "Of what use after all that this baby should live? She would live only to endure, to be patient, to work, to suffer; and at last, when she had gone through all these things, to die without ever knowing she had never lived" (321). Honestly, these sentiments are quite inconsistent with the sense of contentment, the attitude of making the best of what they had, communicated by my grandma's stories and many of the oral histories I read. However, such thoughts seem so justified in the face of such trying circumstances. Reading these words made

me wonder if my great-grandma had ever experienced such despair. I knew she had lost her second child, Edna, to a brain tumor at the age of two, and another boy, Virgil, died at fifteen from an accident with a tractor. I wondered if she ever agonized over how they would provide for another child one moment, and then yet passionately grieved the loss of child with her next breath.

Although the resources available to me through the University of Maryland library system were rich and useful, I wanted a chance to explore the kind of primary sources which could only be found in the archives at Berea College. During the 2008 spring semester, the Easter holiday fell over conveniently over the university's spring break, so my husband and I had made plans to spend the entire week in Kentucky. While we were there, I spent three days listening, watching and reading as much as I could absorb in the Berea Archives Special Collections. There were many recordings of oral histories describing handcrafts like weaving, dyeing, and quilting as told by women from all over the central and eastern Kentucky area. I also listened to lots of field recordings of traditional ballads and tunes as sung by people who had learned them from their mothers and fathers, and many volumes of scratchy recordings of fiddlers native to both Jessamine and Fayette County. In addition, I watched two documentaries that examined traditional country dancing peculiar to Kentucky and the Southern Appalachian region, including the "Kentucky running set" and old-time clogging. I was also able make an appointment to watch the Berea College Country Dancers rehearse for their upcoming performance and speak with the director of the group, Susan Spalding. I particularly enjoyed watching them dance a version of the Kentucky running set because I had read about this form and seen it on film, but

watching it unfold live made it easier for me to understand the texture of the movement and observe the subtle physical communication between the dancers it required. Finally, I hadn't been home to Kentucky in the spring in a long time, and just being there at that time when the land was coming alive inspired the color scheme I later chose for the costumes and the quilt—blues, greens, and browns with splashes of yellow like the daffodils and buttercups that were just blooming.

Chapter 3: The Creation Process

Character Work

Casting

On March 26, 2008, I held an audition to cast dancers for my thesis project. Naturally, my conception of the project at the time bore only a slight resemblance to the work which those dancers would actually perform exactly a year to day later. Of course, this is always the way. In any case, before the night of the audition, I had actually already committed to casting one dancer, a history major named Magdalen Sangiolo. In fact, I wasn't sure I could do the piece without her even though she wasn't a dance major or the most skilled dancer who would be at that audition. I had worked with her before, in my piece *Parallel Lives*, and I knew that I needed her for this project. I needed someone I could trust to commit fully, without regret or complaining, to a role that was primarily dramatic, involving very little showing off excellent technique or amazing physicality. Magdalen had her weaknesses as a dancer, which she was aware of, but, in terms of emotional vulnerability, I knew she was capable of allowing herself to feel deeply and honestly in the performative moment, and this would be essential to the role of the grieving young mother who she would portray.

Before the audition, Magdalen committed to the project, and we rehearsed a few times in preparation for the audition. During this time, I set on her the first version of the phrase work which I later developed into the mothers' grief trio. Magdalen helped me teach this phrase to the rest of the dancers who came to the audition. In addition, I asked each dancer to tell a memorable childhood story, and they worked in

groups to arrange their stories and accompanying movement into little duets and trios. At the end of the evening, I had cast seven dancers: Sarah Kramer, Michelle Cardoso, Krystel Mazzeo, Heather Cameron, Emily Schwarz, Monica Warren Schaeffer, and, of course, Magdalen Sangiolo. All were undergraduates who had danced for me before, except Monica, so I was fairly optimistic that it would be a strong, reliable group. Beyond Magdalen's role, I wasn't sure at this point what shape each of their "distinct characters" would take, so I was prepared to shape the movement and quality of their characters around their natural qualities and technical skills. Mostly, I was hopeful that each dancer had the capacity to perform with the "emotional truth and clarity" and "technical accuracy" which I had laid out as my goal in my project proposal. It seemed that they all had the potential if they were willing to supply the prerequisite sincere effort and desire required to achieve such an end.

Community Building

Although I had a confirmed cast for *Women's Work* by early April 2008, I did not plan to start building movement material in earnest until the beginning of the upcoming fall semester because it seemed unrealistic to expect the dancers to stay invested in any phrase work learned before the long summer break. Even so, I was eager to get the dancers together and start building a sense of community and trust among the cast. I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to bring this group of young dancers to the point where they trusted me, the work and each other enough to give the kind of honest, vulnerable performances I was hoping for, but, as with any group, a sense of community begins with shared experience. I also felt that the dancers needed a more concrete grasp of the subject matter--all things Kentucky, the real and

created place that is “home,” the sense of connectedness between generations of women—than could be attained through discussion only. To this end, I planned a variety of “experiential research” activities for all of us to engage in together.

In my research process, I had read about a Doug Varone’s piece about Kentucky called *The Bottomlands*, and I was curious to see how he as an outsider to my home state entered into that place and recreated that world on-stage. I was fortunate enough to be able to borrow from a former Varone dancer her copy of the piece as recorded in concert at the Joyce Theater in New York City. During one of our first cast meetings, we watched this work and spent time discussing what was and was not effective about the piece. Beyond whether we “liked” it or not, I wanted us to consider whether the piece moved us emotionally and whether it felt truthful. This piece depended heavily upon filmed footage of the cast actually dancing underground in Mammoth Cave; the on screen image projected the landscape of Kentucky—above and below ground—and some of the same choreography being seen on stage was echoed in the film. As a group, we talked about the strengths and weaknesses of trusting in the projected image to provide a sense of place. Out this discussion, we talked about the places in our lives which we considered home and what those places meant to us and to our families. Heather Cameron shared that she couldn’t identify any one place as home because her father was a career military man, so her family moved constantly. However, the rest of the dancers identified strongly with the idea of missing a place they called home, even when that place no longer really existed in the way that it once did.

During another one of our cast meetings, I taught all the dancers to hand-stitch together a small nine patch quilt block. While they worked, I listened and took their costume measurements one by one. Their hands busy with the task at hand, they all talked easily and comfortably, even though some of them had only just met. Monica Warren was the least well-known to most of the group, but soon she was answering all their many questions about when she got married and how she met her husband. It was this really beautiful moment of women not just working alongside each other but really being together in the moment. Later that evening, I wrote in my rehearsal journal that I hoped we could somehow recapture the sweetness of that time within the world of the final piece we would make together. I didn't read that journal entry again until a few days ago, and it thrilled me to be able to say that I think we really did rediscover that moment within the performance. And, without me forcing it at all.

Finally, right before the semester ended, I took all dancers contra dancing. Contra dancing actually originated in the Northeast, not Kentucky or even the rural South, but it was the most accessible approximation to the Kentucky running set the dancers could experience in this area. Half of the dancers went with me to the a large contra dancing event at Glen Echo Park near D.C., and the other half of the group attended a similar but much smaller, more informal gathering in Baltimore. On each night, I called ahead to make sure there would be a beginners' workshop to help introduce the dancers to the basic patterns and etiquette of contra dancing. I had been contra dancing before in Michigan during my undergraduate studies and knew that these things were rich, dynamic community-fostering events. There is something incredible about moving in rhythm with such a large group of people, and the

structure of contra dancing insures that after a night of dancing each participant has danced with lots of different partners and made meaningful eye contact with most, if not all, of the people present.

It was an overwhelming experience for some of the dancers. Making an immediate physical and social connection with strangers was a foreign experience for many of them from northern, urban areas whereas in the little town I'm from even strangers tend to treat each other with a certain friendly familiarity. However, everyone seemed to mostly enjoy themselves over the course of the evening, and I really enjoyed listening to them talk about how they felt about the experience as we drove back to campus. I chuckle now to remember how much Magdalen hated being touched considering all the times in the final version of *Women's Work* that she is touched or completely supported by the other dancers. In any case, I think this experience did give them a first-hand taste of the way dance was once used to create and sustain a sense of community among ordinary people--even if it was only because they clearly felt more connected to each other after sharing this foreign experience together. For me, this was one of my favorite parts of the process. I loved seeing so many people take joy in dancing and in meeting and interacting with others. There was a temporary feeling of like-mindedness among that disparate group of individuals as we shared those rhythms and pathways. It was really sweet to see the dancers enjoy being together in a way that exceeded the sense of obligation that marks the average scheduled rehearsal. I hoped that their sincere enjoyment of each other would help get us through the inevitably exhausting months of rehearsal that lay ahead.

Costume Design & Character Development

As usual, I would be designing and building the costumes myself, and so it was up to me to reflect each dancer's character in the manner of their dress. Conventionally, costumes are designed for characters who have already been created; however, playing the roles of choreographer and designer simultaneously, I made decisions about what kind of woman each dancer would portray as I was involved in the research and development of their costume concepts. In my research, I searched the internet for images of photographs taken in Kentucky during the thirties and forties. The most helpful online source was the digital collections of the Library of Congress Archives. In addition, I relied heavily upon the images I found in the book *A Kentucky Album: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935-1943* for ideas about how rural women of different ages and stations in life dressed in Kentucky during that time period. I finalized the designs, purchased the fabrics, and worked on constructing the costume over the fall 08 semester and then finished them over the January break. Since I knew from the beginning of the process that I wanted each dancer to portray a distinct character, I decided to move up the costume design and construction process timeline significantly so that the dancers could rehearse in costume for the last few months leading up to the show. This was the first time that I've had dancers work in costume for such a long period time, and, for the purposes of the character work this piece demanded, I think it made a huge difference in the quality of the dancers' work in rehearsal on a day-to-day basis.

The dancers were more enthusiastic about wearing their costumes in rehearsal than I expected, and, as a general rule, we used them for all rehearsals, except for when I was focusing on setting new phrase work for the very first time. Just wearing their costumes seemed to make the dancers more focused in rehearsal perhaps because it made the distant date of the performance seem more real, more present in the moment. I was a bit concerned that as a sense of comfort in their costumes set in that they might take the transformation into their characters less seriously, but I actually feel that the opposite was true. The more the comfortable they became in their costume and seeing the other dancers in the personas that their costumes created, the more natural and relaxed they were which was exactly what the piece needed. In terms of character, I was never interested in teaching any of them to “act” but rather I hoped that they would somehow feel at home moving, acting and just being their persona in the piece in as unforced a way as possible. In addition, seeing the movement in costume for so long before production week enabled me to make a variety of choreographic choices with full knowledge of how the dress of each character influenced how they would be viewed performing that movement.

Rehearsal on Facebook

At the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, I purchased a digital camcorder and set up a Facebook group page for my thesis concert. All the dancers and musicians joined the group, and once a week I posted rehearsal footage online for the dancers and the composer to review. The main objective of this system was to keep Rob, the composer, as up to date as possible on the progress of the various sections of

the piece as he worked on the music for the different scenes. However, this process unexpectedly changed the whole dynamic of rehearsals, and I was completely unprepared for this shift. I was surprised at how faithfully the dancers watched the footage as soon as it was posted. Even though they initially complained when I would videotape material I'd just set, that they barely knew, they were always eager to watch themselves online. If I didn't post footage quickly enough, they'd ask me when I'd be uploading their solo or duet section, so they could see it and review. It was amazing actually because they had almost immediate ownership of the material as we created it. Almost as soon as they learned a phrase, they could see their performance of it and judge for themselves the quality of the material and their own delivery of it.

Initially, I was a bit intimidated by the idea that the dancers themselves were in a position to be constantly evaluating the choreographic material as I was building and shaping it. However, as soon as I recovered from my initial bout with control freak paranoia, I saw the whole thing for the gift it really was. We could only rehearse for six hours a week which usually broke down into two three-hour rehearsals a week. Every moment they spent online watching themselves and their fellow dancers performing the material meant that they walked into rehearsal more prepared to move on to the next task. I didn't stop to think about this until recently, but, over the course of the seven months or so of rehearsal for this piece, I very rarely had to spend a significant amount of rehearsal time reviewing material. In those rare instances, it was usually a result of me forgetting to film and therefore not being able to post the material online. Although the constant maintenance of the site required a

good deal of my time, it was well worth to conserve precious rehearsal hours with the cast. And, even now, I have this fascinating archive of the process by which we built the movement material for this piece. All the little chunks of movement are still there including a large amount of material which we developed but did not use in the final piece. Even phrases which ultimately ended up playing a role in the final work can be seen in their many pre-performance variations. Perhaps most clear of all from the rehearsal footage is the amazing transformation that occurred during production week; the dancing certainly lived in a new way beyond rehearsal.

Dance Making

In October 2008, I participated in a choreographic process workshop directed by Tere O'Connor. At the time, I had already been working on this project for months, but I had only been setting material on the dancers since late August, and the rehearsal process seemed to be going smoothly. I had been generating a wealth of material with the dancers, and much of it seemed promising at the time. I wasn't yet struggling in the process--though I knew that time would come--so it was somewhat challenging to focus on all that Tere O'Connor had to say to us that week.

Fortunately, I took good notes that week, and I returned to them at the end of the semester when I suddenly found myself at a place of loathing everything I had made up until that point.

One of the first things, Tere said that week that resonated with me was this, "Making dances is boring sometimes. It can be tedious." From past experience, I knew immediately what he was talking about. Every time I start working on a new

project, and, this was particularly true of this process, I am terrified to begin, not sure where to start, but I am excited to work, thrilled at the prospect of seeing how my initial idea will develop into something altogether unknown. Tere likened the process of dance making to “putting back together something that exploded but you never saw the original image.” This is so true, but not as exciting as it first sounds. Trying to get to that “original image” is a little like trying to put together a 5000 piece puzzle without the picture on the box; fitting all those little pieces together is bound to be tedious and mind-numbing at times.

During that choreographic process week with Tere, I was still in the “honeymoon” stage of choreographing. Over the summer, I had thought about the project obsessively while I was working on the quilt, and so I started the semester with so many ideas that I bounced easily from one image to another all the way up to the Thanksgiving break. Much of that early phrase work--the foot phrase behind the quilt, the mother’s grief trio, Sarah’s solo and the church scene material--survived my merciless final editing process, but there were other sections that I worked to death during that last month of classes which make me cringe now. Making movement material is easy, but making a dance--a complete thing--is ridiculously hard work and feeling my way through the mess to that completed thing can be both tedious and nerve-wracking.

Tere O’Connor made another very simple but very true statement that week that seemed alive with meaning to me when I reached the end of the fall semester and desperately hated the state of the dance I had made. It went something like this: “Choreography is the result of your actions, not your thoughts.” I needed to hear this,

and I needed to mediate on this simple truth throughout the creative process for this project. I am self-aware enough to know that I am frequently the victim of my own obsessive over-thinking. Throughout the entire time that I was struggling to find the dance I loved inside the one I had made and hated, I was very thoughtful. I carefully and obsessively considered every scene, every movement, every aspect of the characters, and it was all futile. I needed to spend more time in the studio not thinking at all, just moving and feeling the characters and texture of the thing from the inside. I needed to act more decisively and think less; I needed to just move and accept what came. When I finally did this, in those final weeks of the fall semester, I suddenly had a whole new beginning--the “opening montage” where the dancers enter one by one and their characters are established--as well as an ending that I didn’t recognize for months. I walked into the studio one day, put on some music and made a small phrase which I had no plans for. It just felt important to me somehow, so I taught it to the dancers. They loved it, and much later in the process, I realized that this phrase was the ending I didn’t think I had found yet. And, then there it was. I had that phrase when I needed it because I stopped thinking long to act clearly.

A Sense of Place

Part of the challenge of creating this work was crafting the world in which the dancing and action would live. I wanted the audience to walk into a space which evoked both the Kentucky where I grew up and the Kentucky which I could only experience through the stories I encountered in my own family and in the research process. In regional literature, particularly twentieth century Southern fiction, there is

a strong attention to a “sense of place,” a sense that the land, the environment acts within the story as almost a distinct character in the drama. William Faulkner, for instance, set the vast majority of his novels near Oxford, Mississippi, and the stories he tells live only within the landscape of that specific place as he reveals it to his readers. Similarly, I felt that the environment in which this dance unfolded was just as important as the movement, action and characters designed to live within the space. Throughout the research process, I consciously looked for the tangible things that were part of the texture of the memories of most of the women whose stories I read and listened to so closely. When I found in myself a resonant connection to those things, I knew I had discovered an essential element of the world I wanted to create, recreate, imagine and manifest for the dancers, for the audience and for myself.

The Grass

The area of Kentucky where I grew up, where my grandma and great grandma lived most of their lives, is called the “Bluegrass” area. It is named for the thick, brilliant grass that covers the countryside and blankets the pastures where the thoroughbred horses graze and wherever else the land remains unscathed by development. When it is allowed to grow wild to the height of two to three feet, the seed head is blue. A field of overgrown bluegrass is a simple but dazzling thing, glistening an unmistakable blue-green in the summer sun. Funny thing to be proud of, I know, but this grass which characterizes my birthplace is a big part of the quiet beauty of Kentucky that I find myself missing when I am elsewhere. The Kentucky I love is soft and lush in the spring and summer with rolling hills covered in a dense carpet of green, and yet it is constantly disappearing as the farm land and pastures are

sold and developed into housing subdivisions and shopping centers.

Even before I completed the research process for this piece, I was completely attached to the idea of using small “tiles” of grass which would begin as fixed points in the landscape of the stage space and yet be able to be shifted over time by the dancers. This grass needed to be real, a living thing--not plastic, manufactured, glossy, dead. The idea was to evoke some of the texture, color and life of my home state and reflect the reality that whatever land we call home is always changing just as we are changing. Once the change occurs--a tornado levels a subdivision or a horse farm is sold to be turned in a big box retail center--there is no going back...for better and for worse, what is done can never be completely undone. I resist this change every time I return home, but I can't escape it. Over the course of this work, I envisioned moving the grass tiles into different formations so that the landscape, or architecture, of these choices would shape how both the dancers and the audience experienced the stage space.

Like many things, I expected that achieving this part of the set would be difficult to manage, and I was not disappointed in this regard. The original plan was to have twelve one foot by one foot grass tiles. I did some research online, and it seemed that wheat grass seed was cheap and relatively easy to grow quickly in a contained area. After discussing the issue with Tim Jones in the Clarice Smith Center prop shop, he devised the solution of growing the wheat grass in a shallow layer of dirt molded on top of carpet squares. This sounded like a reasonable idea, but it never succeeded. The grass needed to be dense and resilient enough for the dancers to sink their feet into it yet contained enough for them to easily move the squares over the

course of the piece. Ultimately, the wheat grass was neither dense nor resilient enough to be useable.

The very first trial run of growing the wheat grass squares convinced me to cut down on the size and number of the grass tiles to make the effect more achievable. The one foot by one foot sample which the scene shop grew was too bulky and too heavy for the dancers to move with the ease required to make elegant, seamless transitions throughout the work. For this reason, I determined it would be best to cut down to nine eight by eight inch tiles; I chose the number nine because the quilt I was working on for the piece was constructed using the traditional nine patch quilt pattern. The eight by eight inch size also seemed more proportional since the individual squares in the quilt were also roughly those same dimensions. Once this was decided, the prop shop cut us some astroturf squares in the proper dimensions for use in rehearsal. We would still be using those rehearsal squares up until dress rehearsal.

Due to some frustrating confusion in the prop shop, the final versions of the wheat grass squares were not seeded in time to be ready for the week of my show. They were a week behind in the growing process. With just two days before my concert, we had no grass squares, just astroturf, and virtually all of the choreography in the entire work was influenced by or dictated by the landscape created by these grass tiles. Despite the circumstances, I was still stubbornly unwilling to settle for artificial grass tiles even though I was aware that the department already owned a large piece of high quality synthetic grass. Since my concert was in late March, at the beginning of spring, many area nurseries were already carrying sod in small quantities for retail sale. The prop shop purchased a roll of sod and dusted it with

layer of green spray paint to offset the brown, dormant spots in the grass. They cut the sod into the eight by eight inch squares and sewed the dirt base to a layer of burlap to add stability to the soil and roots. To make it more manageable for the dancers to both pick up and slide the squares across the wood floor, we trimmed down the astroturf squares and placed the sod squares on top.

The result of this improvisational solution was actually quite effective. The grass was easily moved when the choreography required the dancers to mark the shifting of a scene from one landscape to the next. Very near the end of the dance, Magdalen collapses into the arms of the other dancers, and they carry her to the nine-patch, solid square of grass where they wash her hands and feet clean of the dirt from the burial place. In that particular moment, the difference between using real grass and artificial grass was sparkling clear. This little patch of real grass, covering just a few feet of the expanse of the bare wood stage, struck me as an impossible little miracle so appropriate for this moment of washing, this gesture of redemption that plays out upon it. During dress rehearsal, when I watched that moment unfold, as I speaking the words I was scripted to speak, the thought flashed through my mind that I was thankful that I was as stubborn as my mother. I was thankful I hadn't given into the lure of easy, fake grass when the real thing was so much better.

The Wood

Underneath the black marley dance floor that usually covers the stage space in the Dance Theater lays a beautiful, blonde wood floor. I have seen the wood floor used in performances at the Dance Theater before, and, at the risk of seeming unoriginal, I knew that the world I wanted to create for my audience would only work

with the more raw, natural look of the wood as the backdrop for all the other choreographic and production elements. Early on in the process, I wasn't sure that *Women's Work* would be a full-length work, and I was trying to figure out how I could pull off a first act of repertory on black marley followed by a second act featuring my new work played out on the wood. Fortunately for everyone, especially the tech crew, *Women's Work* revealed itself as evening length work, and the problem of the changeover from marley to wood was solved.

Since the show ended, many people have asked me if I will ever remount the work to be performed again. Honestly, it is too soon for me to really say, but, in my mind, one of the biggest obstacles to staging the piece again in a different space is the issue of the wood floor. Many of the other elements in the piece, particularly the grass tiles, would seem so jarringly out-of-place, foolish even, against a conventional dance floor. In theater productions, the floors are usually an integral part of the designed and constructed environment, and the texture, color and rake of the floor are chosen to support the action of the play in the most meaningful way possible. In dance, the flooring is usually treated as a non-entity, something the audience should not consider because it designed to be unremarkable, disregarded. In my piece "A Body Divided," four dancers taped and untaped various lines and boxes on the conventional marley floor. This was my way of playing with the floor as a real factor in the visual picture, and this attention really changes the way the audience perceives the dancing which plays out in the space. I feel like the warmth and simplicity of the opening stage picture--the grass tiles spread out like a field, the quilt suspended and hovering over the space, the dirt accumulated in the pine coffin structure--would have

been almost completely overwhelmed if it wasn't supported by every inch of that beautiful floor. I can't imagine it any other way.

The Dirt

In keeping with my quest to bring to the stage some of the elemental, sensory experience of being home in Kentucky, I ordered up a considerable amount of dirt and a custom-made plexiglass and cedar board structure modeled after the pine coffins in common usage in early twentieth century America. All of this was crafted in an effort to create a symbolic action which would stand in for the continual labor of raising Southern cash crops like tobacco and cotton. Although my great grandparents, were able to work themselves out of that lifestyle, many families toiled under the promise and disappointment of raising these crops which required so much labor on behalf of the whole family, and yet could not feed a family if the price they fetched at market didn't deliver a living wage in the end. When I was searching for a way to depict the continual labor which called daily no matter what else was happening in life, I saw this image in my mind of the dancers continually pouring dirt into a clear vessel, almost like sand coursing through an hour glass. It was a beautiful image which captivated me, and so I put into motion all the production concerns required to make it happen.

However, the first manifestation of this image in the piece was woefully lacking any of the magic that I had imagined; it was awkward, repetitive and meaningless. For a while, I considered cutting the idea all together, but I couldn't let go of it. In the end, the solution was not less but more. Instead of confining that image to one

corner of the stage in two small sections of the piece, I conceived of a thirty minute pre-show process which was carefully choreographed to fill the coffin structure almost entirely full with dirt in a continual, circular process. I even committed to casting three more dancers in order to have more people available in the piece to participate in the ritual of this metaphorical work activity.

In the performative moment, it marked for me for the passing of time and yet it also somehow stretched time out, almost as though this process was taking us back in time. The continual, imperceptible changing of it made time seem to stand still and then race forward the moment I started my solo that marked the proper beginning of the piece. The pouring action was carried through in the piece to suggest that it was ongoing, but then it is abandoned as other concerns finally take precedent over the work task. However, by that point in the piece, the dirt and the structure that contains it are already strong landmarks in the theatrical space. And, the piece uses this focal point first as the site of Krystel's solo, where she dances in the dirt and finds an egg, and then later as a burial place for Magdalen's child, and by transference, my mother. I feel that the pre-show was effective because it lent a sense of inevitability to the moment when the climax of the work takes place there in the dirt, when something as large and elemental as death takes place there. Everything seems to have been leading us to that place from the beginning, from before the beginning. Dealing with the clean-up of such a large amount of soil was a huge task for every rehearsal and performance for which it was used, but I feel I was justified in insisting upon it, even when part of me wanted to give up on the idea. In the end, I feel the image was as

powerful as I had hoped, and I am thankful that I didn't give up on the image just because I failed to translate it correctly on my first try.

The Quilt

During my time in the Berea College archives, I came across the transcript for a slide presentation entitled "Quilting in the Southern Appalachians" which provided a brief summary of the history of quilting in region but primarily focuses on describing the process by which traditional hand-pieced, hand-quilted quilts are made. Although my great-grandma did not live in Southern Appalachia, I imagine the process by which she constructed her quilts was not very different. Given my great-grandma's love for and demonstrated skill in quilting, I really wanted to explore the quilting process as a source of movement material, and these detailed descriptions of the actions involved in the construction process were very inspiring. One woman named Mrs. Hunsucker describes her use of the simple running stitch this way, "Well, I just work my needle to push it in and then I push it back up and then push it a little more and back down I go and then back up. It's just up and down all the way around" (7). The words are simple and direct, but there is a rhythm and feeling to them that reminds my hands of the many times I have sewn a running stitch, and her way of putting words together reminds me of how my grandma talks.

Although I am not by any means a master quilter like my great-grandma or the women interviewed for this presentation at Berea, I did come into this process with some first hand knowledge of the practice of quilting. Under my mother's guidance, I made several small lap quilts when I was in middle school, and I took pleasure in

piecing together the disparate colors and patterns into one lovely whole. When my mother died, I couldn't bring myself to throw out or give away all of her clothes, especially her favorite clothes, the ones she wore a lot or saved for special occasions. It seemed oddly natural that upon her death I would be cutting tidy little squares out of her blouses, skirts and dresses and piecing them together into a quilt. I worked on the quilt for years, piecing it only by hand, refusing to use a machine as I had for all the smaller quilts I had made. I never finished the quilt, and I doubt I ever will. But, I still have pieced together blocks sitting in storage forever waiting to be joined.

Given the significance of quilting as a practical skill and artistic outlet for generations of women, I began to see the quilt as the most powerful, quintessential symbol of the domestic sphere of rural women. Crafted from scraps through hours of patient, repetitive labor, they are almost miraculous--something out of lots of little nothings and beauty out of waste. With these thoughts in mind, I decided to make a large quilt which would have openings in it, like windows, through which the dancers could be seen and/or move through. This one decision profoundly impacted the entire creative process for me personally and shaped a good deal of the final performance piece. As is so often the case with my ambitious projects, the process of making the quilt took on a life of its own, threatening at times to undermine the entire project, and yet, in the end, the process of constructing the quilt impacted me personally in way that enriched the work as a whole.

During the summer of 2008, I worked on designing the pattern, choosing the fabrics and piecing the quilt top. Initially, I planned to use a traditional quilt pattern, and I was leaning towards using a pattern I was already familiar with called "broken

dishes,” which is comprised of triangles. I even sketched out a rather detailed template for how I would manipulate that basic pattern using a variety of colors. However, before I made a final decision, I wanted to look at a variety of vintage American quilts from the thirties , so I went online and found two excellent sites for viewing a wide range of quilts during that time period: the website of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum (www.quiltstudy.org/discover/quilt_explorer.html) and The Quilt Index (<http://www.quiltindex.org>). I literally spent hours looking at countless quilts of various designs and colors catalogued in the databases of the two sites, and what I found there changed the design direction of the quilt entirely. I found myself particularly attracted to the look of one rather simple quilt. Set in a nine patch pattern, the quilt is a sort of haphazard looking amalgamation of different colors and shades, but it plays with the relationship between dark and light in a way that drew me into it. Much of the quilt is rather dull and dark with splashes of random color here and there--seemingly undesigned--except that the quilt is cut in half diagonally by a vein of predominantly yellow nine patch blocks. The effect is simple but alluring and gave me the feeling of taking life as it comes and never giving up hope. Inspired by this unique treatment of the basic nine patch, I designed my own peculiar variation on this most traditional of patterns.

I had already chosen a color palette for the dancers’ costumes--greens, blues, and browns with touches of yellow--which were all colors I associated with Kentucky. Using this same color scheme for the quilt, I made most of the nine patch blocks out of green and brown or blue and brown fabric with a vein of yellow running

through every other block which connected eight nine patch blocks entirely made out of different yellow fabrics. The majority of the fabrics I used were reproductions of vintage thirties and forties feedsack cloth. It took me a couple months to finalize the design of the quilt and choose all the necessary fabric. Over the course of the summer of 2008, I worked for a few hours a day cutting the eight by eight inch blocks and then piecing them together by machine into the larger nine patch blocks. Once all the nine patch blocks were constructed according to the design plan, I started sewing together them together to form the pieced quilt top which measured about nine and a half feet wide by fifteen and a half feet long when it was completed. I pieced the quilt top solid even though I planned from the beginning to have multiple openings in the quilt. This decision enabled me to take the time to work with a mock-up of the openings before having to commit to them in the real thing.

For the entire fall 2008 semester, the quilt top sat folded up and tucked away in my office at the university. With so many other aspects of the production, and life in general, stealing my focus, I didn't start working on the quilt again until mid-January 2009. At this point, I was certain where the openings needed to be located, and the prop shop had devised the solution of using thin plastic waffle sheets to stabilize the openings. In order to complete the quilt and make it useable for the production, I had to pin baste the quilt top, felt "batting" layer and the muslin backing layer together, cut and stabilize the openings, and hand-quilt the entire thing. I estimate that I spent about 200 hours just on the hand-quilting alone. Only two other people worked on the quilt with me for somewhere around twenty hours each, but, mostly, it was me alone in a room sewing for four to eight hours at a time, most often in the middle of

the night. At one point, I was getting two or three hours of sleep a night just to be able to stay up and work on the quilt. It had to be finished; by this point, so much of the choreography depended on this one element being in place. In the end, it was done, and it was exactly what I imagined it would be.

Beyond the joy of the finished product of the quilt was the reality of how much the construction process of the quilt became an integral part of my creative process for me. Even over the summer, when I was working on piecing together the quilt top, so many months before the show, the time I spent quietly working on the quilt was really fruitful. I listened to a lot of music that I loved, some of which I ended up using in the pre-show set for the final performances. Most importantly, I spent a lot of time remembering my mother and dwelling on the stories of her life, of my life and all the places they met, even after her death. I thought a lot about the relationships between the women in my family and began the difficult process of discovering how I could shape characters based on their stories, struggles and qualities without coming up hollow. Then, in the tense weeks leading up to the show, when I was sewing through most of the night and struggling to function through the next day, I thought about how many times my mother worked all night and attended classes all day when she was juggling being a full-time college student and a single mom of three kids.

When I made the decision to put myself in the piece, I “wrote” most of the monologues by cycling the stories through my mind over and over again as I was quilting. Once the monologues were set out on paper in a polished form, I committed them to memory, learned them by heart, by telling those stories over and over again as sewed. By the time I needed to speak those words and tell those stories onstage, I

had experienced those stories through the vehicle of that particular language more times than I could count over the course of hours and hours of quilting. At one point, I felt that the overwhelming task of completing the quilt threatened to overwhelm me and drain my physical resources before I needed to perform. Looking back, I feel like the enormity of the task forced me to do to very healthy things: to admit that I had come to the end of what I could accomplish by myself and ask for help from those who loved me. I can't help but think that those were two very valuable assets when I walked out onto the stage on Thursday, March 26th and Saturday, March 28th to share this story, my story, with both friends and strangers alike.

Hand-Held Truth: Props

Buckets, Baskets & Baby Clothes

Wanting the texture and feeling of this world, this theatricalized Kentucky of my imagination and memory, to be as authentic as possible, I strived to make each component of this material world as close to the “real thing” as possible. To this end, the basket which Krystel uses to gather eggs at the beginning of the piece is a traditional egg basket hand-crafted in Berea, Kentucky. The buckets I purchased online because they looked virtually identical in shape to the utility buckets pictured in my research photos from *A Kentucky Album: Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1935-1943*. With a little distressing elbow grease from the prop shop, they were not just the right size and shape but appeared sufficiently old, rusted and well-used. Some of the details of regarding my choices regarding the props were made more for the dancers than for the audience. Of course, it was important for the

objects to appear authentic, believable to the audience, but it was even more crucial that the dancers behaved as though they were experiencing the weight, texture and reality of a true thing. This was particularly true in the case of the baby clothes which symbolized the children of the mother characters throughout the dance.

In rehearsal, the dancers had been using rehearsal baby clothes for months. They were just plain white knit cotton onesies that I picked up for a dollar each at the thrift store. Using these rehearsal props was helpful in generating the mother's movement material with the infant clothes, but the dancers were not able to consistently maintain a sense of engagement with the prop which communicated the full weight and meaning of what they represented. I thought I would be able to find and purchase very plain cotton baby dresses to use for this purpose in the piece, but this proved more difficult than I first imagined. Instead, I found a reproduction of a late 40's / early 50's pattern for infant layette clothes, and I made the tiny little dresses myself complete with all the adorable details--pin tucks, lace edged collars and sleeves, tiny buttons. When I brought these little dresses into rehearsal, the whole cast was immediately enamored with them. Although building those little dresses was a lot of work, it was worth it to see the way it changed how dancers invested in the movement which depended upon meaningful interaction with the prop. The little details of the object the dancer holds in her hands may not be evident to the audience, but the details of intention and emotion with which the dancer relates to a prop is completely clear to the audience. It is the truth of that performance that renders the object real in the performative moment in which it impacts the audience.

The Eggs

In the process of my research, I read a lot of oral histories of women who talked about the importance of “egg money.” Women usually managed the production and sale of eggs for their families, and this was usually the only source of family income over which they had any direct say in the manner in which it was spent. Many women in my great-grandma’s time saved up their egg money to buy books for their children for school or to pay their way through secondary school or college. The accumulative effect of my research just impressed upon me this idea of the egg as not only as a symbol of life but also of power. The small but powerful resource of a mother’s “egg money” could literally change her children’s lives. It seemed so remarkable that in real life something so small and mundane had the capacity to make such a difference. I’d had the burial scene in the piece in my mind for months already when one day I just wrote down the idea that Magdalen crushed an egg when she buried the infant dress. It was a heartbreaking but poignant image--the kind of thing that will be powerful just as long as you don’t do anything to ruin it. From this one crystalline image came the necessity for the eggs to become an integral part of the piece from the beginning, but, ultimately, it was all in service of setting up this one delicate moment. And, the first time the image came to life in performance, even I was surprised at how much it impacted me. It was even quietly tragic and poetic than I had imagined, and I feel as though I can’t take any credit for it. It was one of those free, mysterious gifts that come every so often in the creative process.

Tangible Memories: PreShow Photography Projections

Rather late in the process of making *Women's Work & Other Stories*, I realized that many, maybe most, of the people in the audience would have no idea what the Kentucky of my childhood looked like. Maybe a few people would have driven through the state on their way to somewhere else, but not many people visit Kentucky unless they're from there. While I am clearly biased, I really think the Kentucky countryside is beautiful all year around, as the seasons change the landscape changes completely. With every season, there is new beauty to be discovered--the brilliant colors of the fall leaves give way to bare trees encrusted in ice, glistening like diamonds. In the spring, the land awakens from winter with color and soft sunshine while the summer nights are marked by the most thrilling display of lightening and thunder. Thinking about this made me wonder what I could do give the audience a glimpse of this Kentucky without overwhelming the simplicity of the stage space as I had originally envisioned it.

Eventually, I settled upon the solution of a pre-show that featured a carefully paced slide show of landscape photos of Kentucky which were "choreographed" to appear in relationship to a playlist of contemporary and traditional folk/ country music. Except for a few shots which I purchased from a photographer I met online, the majority of the photos were taken by my husband and his brother, Daniel, in and around the county where I grew up. These images were projected on the back scrim centered above the "coffin" structure which contained the dirt. The size of the projections was contained to achieve the effect of flipping through photos; I didn't want the projections to be so large that they dwarfed the more concrete elements of

the stage picture like the grass and the quilt. Over the course of the thirty minute pre-show, one image after another was imprinted on the space for a minute or so before fading slowly away and revealing the next image. The effect of the cross-fading images was quite remarkable to me; it was almost as though I was watching the seasons change in fast forward.

The final image of the slideshow was of a large tree planted near a horse farm on the edge of Harrodsburg Road. When I was in high school, this road was a narrow, winding two lane road which connected my small town to the larger city of Lexington. It was also a treacherous drive, especially on electric summer nights when the sky exploded with rain and flashes of light; this road claimed a few lives every year--usually high school students driving too fast, too drunk. When they widened the road a couple years ago, most of the large, mature trees that covered the road in a thick canopy were chopped down to make room for the wider, safer road to come, but this tree was a survivor. My husband had taken this photo because it was his family's favorite tree. Every time we came home to visit, the construction of the road and destruction of the trees had progressed closer to "our" tree. Surprisingly, this one tree, this one precious thing which we readied ourselves to mourn, was spared. Miraculously, the new road now wraps just around that old tree, leaving it on a small island of green bordered on both sides by the two parallel roads, the new and the old. This tree seemed the perfect symbol of the kind of lives I was celebrating and honoring through this piece. The stories I was telling were all about ordinary people who somehow managed to flourish even though their lives were rooted and grounded in difficult places. And, the image of this tree reminded me of how the land

where I grew up continues to change and be molded into a place that I don't exactly know anymore; it reminds me of the home I miss, but it isn't exactly that place. The tree is still there, but the life coursing around it has changed. I feel this way when I go home--me in the same places I used to go in high school but all the characters and scripts have changed. My opening solo is all about me trying to recapture the texture of something that now only exists as my memory projects it. The image of the tree as the audience and I experience in the performance isn't even a two dimensional tangible thing like a photograph; it is a projection of light and color only slightly more concrete than the way the image exists in my own mind. When I am dancing that solo, or rather what feels like a duet with the image of that tree, I am enacting my own longing to step into the image for a moment, to be able to be in the reality of the home I have missed, where my mother, my brothers and I drove down that road and raced past that tree so many times, on our way back to our small house in our little town. For me, that solo is an act of longing, longing to be in a world of my own creation, in my memory where the characters and scripts I used to know play out over and over again. And, in a small way, my longing is fulfilled by the rest of the piece takes shape around me, almost conjured out of that one symbolic image.

Chapter 4: The Collaborative Process

Music & Sound Design

From the beginning, I knew that I wanted this piece to be performed to live, original music, but, of course, I had no idea who was going to be willing and qualified to supply the necessary brilliance. Not really knowing where to start to spark up a collaborative relationship with any musicians or composers, I posted fliers all over the School of Music bulletin boards. I was incredibly fortunate to get a response from a musician named Matt Taylor who had recently founded a music ensemble called TEMPO. TEMPO is comprised of UM School of Music graduate students who came together to initiate projects that featured new and contemporary music. Being from Alabama, Matt was also immediately enthusiastic about the “southerners” of the project, and, more quickly than I could believe, he promised that TEMPO would be part of the project. This guaranteed that some of the best musicians in the program would be willing to play in the ensemble for my concert which just meant I still really needed to find a composer.

Amazingly, I was contacted shortly thereafter by a doctoral student in composition, Rob Collier, who was interested in the project because he wanted to try composing for dance, and, coincidentally, he had also lived in Kentucky for some time and felt a connection to the project in that way. With a composer on board for the project, I scheduled a meeting for Matt, Rob and I to chat in detail about the production and what exactly the musical needs of the piece would be. For starters, I had really no idea what the musical needs of the piece would be at that first meeting

in May 2008 because I wouldn't start setting choreography until the fall semester. However, from my research, I did know that I didn't want to try to imitate traditional Kentucky music, but I did hope to evoke the feeling of that music in some way. In my discussions with Rob and Matt, it became clear that the physical appearance of the instruments played by the musicians mattered greatly because they would be on stage the whole time. This translated to no brass, conventional percussion or piano. We decided upon using guitar, cello, violin, viola, oboe, and possibly some percussion using "found" objects of sorts. Rob would compose the music, and Matt would act as a musical director finding musicians, coordinating rehearsals and conducting the ensemble during performances.

In order to work with the composer, I realized that I needed to be able to provide him with a pretty clear idea of the mood of the various sections of the piece. The difficulty being that Rob needed to be composing at the same time that I was choreographing, so I did something I've never done before: I sketched out the project in great detail, scene by scene, before I had even begun rehearsals with the dancers. I assumed that much of what I laid out would change over the course of the choreographic process, but it was still agonizing to sit down and dream it all out ahead of time so specifically. Looking back, the structure of the piece remained remarkably the same even as many of the details changed drastically. Although I'm not sure I'd be comfortable committing to the structure of a future project in this way, it did prove to be a fairly effective blueprint for both the composer and me in the end. However, it was still a bit dangerous for me as a choreographer because I could feel the pull of that pre-conceived, artificial structure working against me as I tried to

shape the work as it revealed itself. I knew it was adaptable and open to change, but Rob treated the scene by scene sketch as more “gospel truth” than I did which caused problems. I felt compelled to stay close to the “script” in order to make working with him easier, but, eventually, this proved impossible, and I was forced to just honestly say to him that lots of things were going to change. I needed him to be more flexible in the way he conceived the project developing.

Since Rob and I were engaged in the composition process simultaneously, the dancers and I worked without any musical accompaniment in rehearsal until mid-November 2008. By that point, Rob had written some musical sketches for various sections, and he gave us a recording of the sketches to work with in rehearsal. However, these recordings were MIDI tracks which meant that everything sounds a little like an orchestral video game circa early 1990’s; the “violin” in the MIDI program sounds as much like a real violin as banana-flavored things taste like real bananas. Having played the trumpet in high school, I was actually really familiar with listening to MIDI tracks, reading the actual sheet music and imagining what the real music would sound like, but this proved more of a challenge for the dancers. I think they had a hard time believing I could really make decisions about the music based on these thin, electronic shadows of the real score. I must admit it was a challenge, especially when I had to trust that a two minute melodic sketch would eventually be a nine minute completed work. Running rehearsals with these incomplete versions of the music could also be very frustrating. I’d try to run a section “with music” to get an idea of how it might work, or to figure out what I needed to discuss with Rob, and I’d have to keep juggling starting and re-starting the

musical track with watching the dancers, analyzing the choreography, and / or videotaping the section to put online for everyone. Sometimes this impossible juggling act just made me irritable and frustrated which was not great for the dancers or for my creative process. At a few crucial points, I actually brought my husband into rehearsal to run sound for me just so I could focus on the more important task of making very significant choreographic decisions.

The decision to step into the piece myself also impacted the music and sound score needs of the piece significantly. I added several new sections, and some of them I conceived of in connection to already existing recorded music. All of the recorded music I used within the piece was recorded by Jean Ritchie, one of Kentucky's most famous singers. When I presented the idea of using the recorded tracks to Rob, he seemed very relieved that he would not have to compose more music. Beyond the fact that the recordings solved practical problems, I loved the sound of them. There was something so appropriate about the sound of Jean Ritchie's timeless voice filling up the space, echoes of a voice from the past. In addition, the transitional moment between Krystel's solo and Magdalen burying the "baby," where Krystel gives each woman an egg, needed some sound support but not music. In a stroke of genius, the musical director, Matt Taylor, suggested the sounds of birds chirping and singing, an eerie sound he associated with burials back home in Alabama. I loved the idea, and, although I needed help to get the sound of that section right, it really completed the moment when it finally worked. It was haunting in just the right way.

Originally, I had thought that the musicians would be able to come to rehearsal at least twice before production week, but this never happened. Then, I asked that the musicians make a recording of the music that we could use in rehearsal; this also never happened. Ultimately, the music and the dancing came together for the first time on Tuesday, March 24th during production week, but again this did not go smoothly. Two of the musicians arrived extremely late, and Matt, the director, had to leave for a half-hour to make an appearance in a class he had hoped to skip altogether. Of all the struggles of this process, this night was the most profoundly frustrating. The only thing that got me through that night was the capable assistance and constant comfort of my best friend, Katherine Gant, who had flown in earlier that day. She is also a choreographer and runs her own small dance company in Atlanta, and she had come to help manage all the backstage business so I could concentrate on performing. If she hadn't been there to keep me as calm as possible, I'm pretty sure I would have said or done something I would have profoundly regretted later because I was really angry with the whole situation.

After all the work the dancers and I had poured into this process, the situation with the musicians really tested my patience. Not only were some of them late, but some of the sections had clearly not yet been adequately rehearsed. I just couldn't bear the thought that the success of the whole project now rested on them, a group of musicians who I had no influence over. Meanwhile, I was trying, quite unsuccessfully, to switch back and forth between my roles as a dancer, choreographer and director; I wanted to scream, but, thankfully, I didn't. By the end of the evening, I was mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted, but we had just enough time

left to run the opening section of the piece again. We needed to do this because we'd run it the first time with only three of the six musicians present. Amazingly, the dancers performed their parts with full physical and emotional commitment--though it was late and they were tired, and the musicians actually played beautifully, with skill and feeling. Seeing it all come together like that, so unexpectedly, I started to cry; I was just so happy and relieved. Just minutes before I had felt doomed, and then suddenly I could see the whole thing coming together just as I had hoped.

Working with a composer, a musical director and five other musicians definitely added a whole other layer of stress to the creative process, but I would do it all over again because it was what the work really needed. Although I was very pleased with the few recorded tracks we used, the live music was an essential, irreplaceable part of the performance for me. My Grandma Sadie has told me stories about the gatherings of friends and families that used to happen at her house, when all the musicians in the group would bring their instruments and everyone would sing and dance and talk late into the night. I so admired how even their art and entertainment was created from within their little world, totally complete in itself. I wanted to capture some part of this feeling of a small, creative community coming together for an evening, and I knew that the live dancing and storytelling needed to be supported by the dynamic sound of live music to achieve this feeling. And, it was encouraging to see how the work impacted the musician themselves over the course of the week. By the end, they were thanking me for giving them the chance to be part of the project, and I knew that their attitude change didn't spring from any loyalty to

me personally but rather from their own sincere connection to the work which was bigger than any of us individually.

Action Sketch & Production Outline

This action sketch & production outline is the original document used to guide the simultaneous musical composition and choreographic processes. It does not accurately reflect the changes that were made to arrive at the final structure of the work.

Cast

Dancers: Matriarch– Monica Warren Schaeffer

Mother-Michelle Cardoso

Young Mother-- Magdalen Sangiolo

Maidens – Sarah Kramer & Emily Schwarz

Girl – Heather Cameron (Monica’s daughter)

Young Girl – Krystal Mazzeo (Michelle’s daughter)

Musicians: Matt Taylor— Musician Rehearsal Director / Percussionist

Allyson Clark – Violin

Rob Collier – Upright Bass / Guitar / Composer

Emily Madsen – Oboe

Nathan Bontrager – Cello / Guitar

* Still trying to find a viola player

Costumes

Dancers: All dancers will be in simple, country dresses in styles circa late 1930’s & early 1940’s made out of cotton traditional / feedsack prints in primarily browns, blues, greens, yellows & whites. All or most of the women will also have aprons.

Musicians: Any female musicians will be clothed similar to the dancers. Male musicians will wear white button down shirts with trousers & suspenders and other traditional work clothes for men consistent with the time period.

*All costumes will be distressed to show wear, fading and staining over time.

Staging / Set / Props

The stage picture at the top of the show includes the following:

Patchwork Quilt Front: 10-12 feet wide & 16-18 feet long
Suspended 1.5 feet above the floor in upstage right corner, centered at quarter
Colors: Greens, Blues, Browns, & Yellows
Two large 2 x 2 feet opening in the quilt as well several other smaller opening created by gaps in the pattern

Dance "Coffin": 6 feet long / 2 feet wide / 2.5 – 3 feet tall
Usually located stage left, even with second wing
Constructed of plexiglass walls with wood base; on wheels which can be locked & unlocked but are obscured from audience view by wood base

Grass Tiles: 9 1 ft x 1 ft grass "tiles"
Tiles cover the bottom of the garden plot box at top of show but are used in various ways throughout the piece

Musician's Set: Music stands, etc. needed for musicians will be located downstage left; however, musicians will begin piece either other on-stage or in-house positions and will be incorporated into the visual picture of the piece at different moments in the work

Various Props: Although not on-stage at the top of the piece, the following props will used: baby clothes, 16 Galvanized steel buckets Soil (enough to fill "garden box 2/3 full), small basket, eggs (most fake; one real with the inside drained out) and wet rags

Quick Action Sketch

Quilting: Women behind, moving through and under the suspended quilt eventually spilling out into the space & back again; finally three women stay out in the performance space while the other four continue a small foot dance (clogging-like maybe) behind the quilt.

Mothers Trio: Three women fully visible on-stage take infant clothes out of their pockets, this is a short dance based on the mothers folding and unfolding the infant clothes tenderly across their bodies

Monica's Solo: While two young mothers cradle their one "infant," Monica takes another baby garment—this one dirty & distressed—out of her apron pocket, representing a children she has lost to miscarriage or sickness over her child-bearing years. This is a small dance of remembering. When she puts distressed garment back in her pocket and turns her attention back to her one living infant, the two young mothers are reincorporated into the scene and they all eventually slip behind the quilt cradling their "baby."

Country Dance: Four other dancers i.e. 2 unmarried young women & 2 younger girls all roll out into the stage space into a dance which directly quotes a Kentucky running set but also involves contemporary partnering in addition to the traditional holds, etc. This develops into the "linking" game i.e. a chain of connected poses which is the mothers from behind the curtain also do and link up the girls in front, except Sarah who is distracted by a passing musician

Sarah's Solo: Sarah fancies herself in love with the passing musician and longs to be married. This is a little creation of her mind which she indulges in before linking up with the other dancer behind the garden plot

Field Work I: The women lift Heather & Krystel into the Garden plot box, and they hand out the squares of grass to the other women who spread them out in the space.

Sense of Place: Emily starts a solo with one square of grass; as the squares are distributed, all the women dance one of the islands of land...these are brief solos with individual movement vocabulary for each woman—structured improv-based, then led by Monica—one-by-one the women exit and return with pails of soil to begin filling the “garden plot”

Emily’s Solo: However, Emily continues her solo with the land a bit longer while the other women move slowly in shade. As part of her solo, she consolidates the individual plot of land into one long line of grass on the very downstage edge of the stage space. Once this task is completed, Emily abandons her solo and falls in with the women filling the “garden plot”

Falling: The women continue filling the garden plot during which the following things happen: the younger women are also rearranging the grass squares in rows; the three mothers stop occasionally to tend to their “babies;” falling duets evolve with two women in contact supporting each other as they fall and recover and to return to work; eventually this falling develops into larger group falling moments but always one woman is filling the plot; Magdalen’s solo is also taking place during this continual filling process

Magdalen’s Solo: Magdalen stops to care for her “baby”—pulling the little dress out of her pocket to find that it is now brown, her baby is sick, the rest of the women are in shadow & Magdalen dances a short solo, an angry appeal, which is shadowed

by the other two mother characters, Monica & Michelle. By the end of this section, the plot is about half full, the grass is in rows, and all the women have fallen into rows in front of the grass rows as though they are in church (perhaps all musicians except the percussionist could also fall into the rows—would be particularly nice to have male musician who caught Sarah’s attention earlier enter with a female musician, so we could incorporate a reaction from Sarah & other musicians would be spread out among the women); Magdalen is front of the quilt not “working” & not falling into the rows, Monica sends Heather over to pull Magdalen in, she joins reluctantly...

Exercises in Faith: All women except Magdalen who sits clutching the brown baby dress start doing the same dance in rows based on swaying, rocking, hand waving, kneeling, rising, etc. in place in the rows; eventually during this scene all the women lay their hands on Magdalen

Heather’s Solo: During this moment, Heather has a solo is sort of a childish prayer for healing for the sick baby; once Heather rejoins the women, they begin to walk the rows of the grass and the plot of land as though they are spreading seeds, the musicians return to their on stage set-up

Domestic Cares: Magdalen goes behind quilt to care for sick baby; We can see her looking out the “window” of the large opening the in quilt; she is rocking slowly at first but increasingly faster as the other women are working outside

Field Work II: Meanwhile, the other women continue the walking the rows of grass, spreading of seeds, winding their way up to the garden plot still spreading seeds & then eventually resume filling the garden plot with soil—this time the filling of the soil is done in a circular pattern similar to Kentucky square dancing with the women progressing around the circle as the pails are filled & emptied with women alternating who is on the end getting the pails and who is on stage emptying & passing the pails around (in this last round of soil are small plastic eggs)

Krystel's Solo: While the women are still filling the garden plot with the last pails of soil, Krystel climbs up onto the mound of soil with a small basket and collects the eggs, dancing in the soil. Meanwhile, the other women slowly arranging the grass tiles they form one large 3 ft x 3 ft patch of land. Eventually, Krystel climbs on and over the women as though crossing a bridge as they are all gathering around the patch of grass. Krystel moves around on the grass giving each woman one egg from her basket which the women gently roll in their hands as they dance.

Planting I: While the other women are still focused on their individual egg, Magdalen walks out from behind the quilt with her hands in her pocket. Very calm but determined, she walks towards the other women. When she steps onto the grass, Magdalen takes one hand out of her pocket and extends it towards Krystel who gives her the last egg from the basket (which is a real egg with the yolk & white drained out). She walks towards the soil box taking the now very dark brown distressed baby

dress out of her other pocket. She wraps the baby dress around the egg and then crushes the egg. She climbs up onto the soil, sprinkles the egg shell over the soil, and buries the dress and her feet in the soil. As the women watch Magdalen attempt to bury herself further, they bring their own small egg close to their bodies, enclosing, sheltering the egg with some part of their body. In this process, the women are also lowering their bodies and kneeling at the edge of the grass square.

Michelle's Solo: Michelle also lowers herself to kneeling. In her solo, she struggles to keep her egg enclosed & protected while also pulling out from her pocket & "caring for" the "infant" i.e. the infant dress. It is a struggle between vulnerability and protectiveness. Eventually, Michelle finishes back on her knees at the edge of the grass square & she reaches her hands out in front of her with the egg totally exposed, totally vulnerable.

Planting II: The other women see what Michelle has done & one-by-one also open themselves, leaving their egg unprotected. Michelle is the first woman to rise and plant her egg in the soil as well.

Harvest: One-by-one the other women follow suit and as they complete this task, they all join hands and follow Michelle in a weaving pattern which she has begun. This weaving pattern continues and the women surround the burial plot. Eventually, Magdalen collapses and her fall is softened by the outstretched hands of the other women (3 on each side of burial plot). The women lower her softly onto the grass.

Washing: The women then lift Magdalen out of the soil and keep her in the air until her feet land on the small patch of grass left on the ground. Using the a small pail of full of wet rags, the women wash Magdalen's feet and legs, drying them with the skirts of their dresses.

Weaving: The women then resume the weaving pattern with Monica leading and, they use this to cover the soil with all the grass tiles except the one Magdalen is standing on. One-by-one the women start a big, expansive phrase moving around Magdalen until she finally moves off of her small square of grass to join them. Then, Magdalen picks up the final grass square and the other dancers lift up the lid to the "coffin." As they are lowering the lid over the "coffin", Magdalen slides the last square of grass into the spot where she had buried the baby garment. The women lift Magdalen onto the lid of the "coffin" and she dances as the other repeat a softened version of the church scene movement motif. Then the women fall back into the weaving pattern, winding towards the quilt. Michelle & Monica linger behind and coax Magdalen away from the coffin. The younger women are already behind the quilt and have resumed some of the movement material from the opening of the work. And, the other women walk slowly behind the quilt and fall into the foot pattern.

Ending: The piece ends with all the women behind the quilt as it began.

Chapter 5: Inside a World of My Own Making

By the end of the fall 2008 semester, the dancers and I had generated about thirty minutes of movement material, and I hated most of it. I had followed the neatly composed structure, the “action sketch,” I had worked out to guide the composer. One by one, scenes had been plotted out; long dance phrases had been made and rehearsed. These scenes which had been so alive in my mind over the summer, so dripping with meaning, were hollow. After an entire semester of hard work, I felt trapped; the piece was virtually lifeless, threatening to be still-born. I knew it without anyone telling me, but I still cringed to hear it from my thesis committee. The piece was definitely missing something, something that was the dance equivalent of a heartbeat. I spent most of the holiday break trying not to think about it which meant I thought about it all the time. I realized I was terrified of failing because the piece was so deeply personal for me, in a way which I had never really allowed my work to be before. And, fear of failing equals fear of risk-taking; under those conditions, failure is inevitable. I started thinking of drastic things, things I was really afraid of, big risks I could take. I fantasized about quitting graduate school, so I wouldn’t have to finish the piece, which definitely qualified as the most drastic option. And, then, the solution became very clear to me.

I was most afraid of being on stage, afraid that I wouldn’t have the presence, the courage to speak my own story. This made the decision. I needed to step into the world I was creating; I needed to stop pushing and prodding it from the outside. I needed to shape it from the inside, to feel what it wanted to be, and stop thinking so much. I knew this was what must be done, but I continued to vacillate about it

throughout January. Somehow I thought the dancers would feel betrayed that I wouldn't be watching them, focusing on them, once I was in the piece. I told myself this was my primary concern, the one thing that kept me from committing completely and beginning the real work of actually making it happen. Then, in January, I had a meeting with Michelle Cardoso to talk through the publicity materials and the program which she had agreed to design for the concert. Towards the end of the meeting, I told her what I was thinking, about stepping into the piece as a narrator of sorts, a witness to the memory unfolding. I would dance a few solos and tell stories, some of the family stories I'd been telling them all along. I also had this vague idea about a pre-show with a carefully chosen recorded playlist, projections of landscape photos of Kentucky, and the near constant pouring out of dirt, filling the "coffin" as the audience entered. I spilled it all out and asked her what she thought, how she thought the other dancers might feel about it. To my surprise, she seemed to accept the idea immediately, as though it had been inevitable that this would happen. And, maybe it was.

After that meeting, I felt more at peace about it, and, with a mixture of hope and fear, I started re-envisioning each scene with me there on stage as a guide of sorts, the storyteller and a character in the story at the same time. I had resisted the idea, but now I could see it, me, a version of my real self, on-stage in this memory world I'd created, blurring the line between reality and fiction for the audience the same way the memories existed in the mind. This meant surrendering control of this thing I had created, and, instead, trusting that it would come to fullness without me acting upon it at every moment. Being in the piece meant accepting that there would probably be

things I missed, things I would have changed or fixed if I could have seen them from the outside. I still harbored a few remaining doubts when I told the rest of the dancers, but, like Michelle, it made perfect sense to them. Somehow they had sensed what took me so long to accept. It was a strange feeling, trying to shape something from the inside out, but it was necessary, and, in the end, sweeter than I could have imagined.

The first thing I choreographed after I decided to step into the piece was the “Amazing Grace” section. At that point, I had already choreographed the upbeat section we called the “church phrase,” and I had planned Heather’s solo as a sort of quiet prayerful addition to the church scene as I had originally envisioned it. However, for a while, I had been really attracted to this version of “Amazing Grace” recorded by traditional Kentucky singer, Jean Ritchie. The recording was rather raw, layered with the background noises of clinking dishes and the murmur of people talking, but this seemed very appropriate for the quality of the piece. Regardless, the harmony and vocal quality of the singing was pure, honest, and lovely. I wanted to find a place for this sound in the piece, so I listened to it over and over again until it brought back memories of the year I memorized all the words to that hymn, the year my mother was hospitalized for the first time. Singing that song and visiting my mother in the hospital are my clearest memories of that time in my life, but I have read my mother’s medical records and the account of the circumstances that led to her admission to Eastern State Hospital against her will. Thinking about all this, the image of Magdalen when she finishes the mother’s grief trio flashed through my mind; every time she dances that trio she looks wild, disheveled and heartbroken by

the end. This is basically how the doctors describe my mother when she was admitted. I wanted to wash this image away with something more powerful than the pain and terror of that kind of grief, and then I knew where “Amazing Grace” fit into the piece.

I choreographed the ensemble part of the “Amazing Grace” section very quickly. All of the gestures and postures are based on the actions of household tasks because my mother always said she prayed best when she was washing dishes or scrubbing a floor; nothing like being on your knees, cleaning up somebody else’s mess, to inspire the kind of humility required to talk to God. Out of that movement, my solo choreographed itself, like all I had to do was channel through my body something that already existed in there without my previous knowledge. It took me time to be able to perform it as easily as I had choreographed it, but, eventually, the solo came together with the ensemble part, and it felt as close to perfect as anything I’ve ever made before. If I had more time, I probably would have kept changing and refining other parts of the piece, but this section I wouldn’t change.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of preparing myself to enter into the piece was the process of composing and rehearsing the monologues, the stories I would tell, which would shape the parallel narrative of the work. I committed to this process because I wanted the audience to experience the work in a way more akin to how I felt when I watched the scenes unfold. For me, every scene and every symbol in the work connected back to at least one family story. I realized that when I watched one of the scenes I was experiencing two stories at once, and the complexity of this feeling was rich; I wanted to find a way to give the audience this experience as well--

watching one story, hearing another story and feeling them connect inside you. I began by jotting down all the family stories which somehow connected to the piece for me; this was clearly too long of a list, but it was a good place to start. Then, I looked at the shape of the work as it existed at the time and identified places in the structure where a monologue would serve nicely to smooth a transition from one scene to another. Originally, I narrowed it down to eight monologues; I ended up cutting one of the monologues later in the process because it would have been too disruptive to the fluidity of the work. It just wasn't needed even though it had already been composed and rehearsed.

Arriving at that point where the monologues were composed and rehearsed was more difficult than I expected. Expressing myself through written language has always been a natural thing for me; my mother wrote children's stories and poetry as a hobby, and I think she passed along her skill and her passion for writing to me. But, this task was different. I tried writing the monologues the way I have written so many things, but I crashed and burned in that first attempt. My first written versions of the monologues were a complete failure. They sounded fine on the page, but, as soon as I tried to speak them out loud, every word seemed false, forced or overwrought. Clearly, I needed a new tactic because my normally reliable writing skills were useless. During my research time at Berea College, I had listened to a lot of oral histories as well as storytellers who told traditional tall tales, the kind that are passed down through families through the telling and are never written down. Remembering the richness of all those voices, I decided to try composing the monologues entirely through an oral process of sorts.

Whenever my mind was free to wander--on the bus, sewing costumes or quilting--I “rehearsed” the monologues by “telling” the stories to myself over and over again. Each time I told the story I would change it a little--the language, the information, the feeling--and, eventually, I found myself telling the stories in the same way very consistently. At this point, I transcribed the monologue according to the oral “composition” just to make sure I didn’t lose my preferred version over time. This composition process meant that I was never negotiating between the conventions of written and spoken language; the stories had already existed in the oral history “record” of my family, and they remain that way. The written scripts were only compiled in order to insure that I would be consistent when my lines became cues for the dancers, musicians and technical crew. The strange thing about the distillation process through which I shaped these familiar stories is the reality that now it is difficult for me to tell the stories any other way. The “codified” versions of these stories, which I developed for the stage, are now cemented in my memory. These stories which began as highly variant, personal stories were intentionally shaped to be most effective in performance, and now the performative versions have morphed into the purely personal because I can’t tell the stories any other way now. Maybe it will change over time, but, for now, my conception of these memories has been significantly altered by the way in which I chose to tell these stories during this creative process. I suppose that’s one of the occupational hazards of being an artist--you and your work are always in conversation, always influencing each other.

Chapter 6: The Monologues

Prologue

I am entering the space, carrying a bucket of dirt to the garden / burial plot when I stop to look at, to really consider the image projected on the scrim. It is a photo of a large tree planted just outside the fencing of a horse farm. I set down my bucket and begin to trace the shape of the tree in the photo with my hand, then my body, and then these actions unfold into a small, brief dance with my back to the audience most of the time. When I finish I stretch my arms out, trying to wrap myself around the image of this large tree. And then turn to the audience to speak.

So, this is Kentucky...the way I like to remember it. This photo was taken in Jessamine County, not far from where I grew up. And no matter where I go, the beauty of this place stays with me. Of course, I spent the first eighteen years of life wishing to be somewhere—almost anywhere—else. Two weeks after I graduated from high school, I headed north to live with some of my mother's family in Wisconsin. I felt like I had a lot to leave. And, I haven't actually lived in Kentucky since. And yet, it still is and always will be home—full of places where my memory comes alive.

This is the story of the Kentucky that I knew, where I was born, where my mother taught me to value the hand-made, the slightly shabby, the rough edges in life. And, this is the story of a place I can't remember, the Kentucky where my grandparents lived out in the country and their families raised tobacco on other's people's land. And, this is the story of the Kentucky I like to imagine where families were close enough to help each through the hard spots. This place is sort of a place

in-between where the stories I've heard and the stories I've lived can meet, where memory and fiction breathe the same air.

Monica's Solo

The mothers are finishing the “dishwashing” hand phrase, and they exit. I am seated in a rocking chair downstage right sewing. Monica also exits and then returns with a basket full of baby garments—all in shades of white-- which she begins to fold as I begin to speak. During Monica's solo and my monologue, the four “girls” are shifting and rolling on the floor under the edge of the quilt as though sleeping as in one bed.

My great-grandmother, Mary Hobbs, was born in Fayette County, Kentucky in 1907. And, her life's work was birthing and raising up 10 children of her own: George William, Edna, Charlie, Pat, Virgil, my own grandma Sadie, Judy, Alex Ray who they called “Little Man,” Bebe and Roger Gene. Her own momma died when she was about twelve years old, so she brought up some of her brothers and sisters as well. All of her children lived until adulthood except little Edna who died when she was two years old. Grandma Hobbs said she died of a brain tumor...that there wasn't much the doctor could do at the time. No hospital to take her to. Nothing to do really but make her comfortable and watch her pass out of this life almost as quickly as she came into it. When my own brother, Wade, was born, he was small and not quite right and the doctors tried to prepare my mother that he might not live very long. Of course, she wouldn't listen—however rational or reasonable, compassionate even—their counsel. She was determined that he would live...I mean, really live...not just survive.

At some point after I finish talking about Edna, Monica comes to the last infant garment; this one dark brown and more tattered than the rest. And, she dwells on this one which reminds her of the child she had lost and grieved. I speak again as Monica finishes her solo, folds the brown, tattered dress gently and lays it in the basket and places the neatly folded white infant garments on top.

My mom had a great admiration for my Grandma Hobbs. I think my mom saw herself in my Grandma Hobbs. They were both the kind of women who made the best out of few choices, who made useful and beautiful things with their hands, who just poured their lives out into their children....My mother did eventually prove those doctors wrong. She fought for my brother's medical care which we couldn't afford and for his right to the special education the schools did not feel inclined to provide. Wade turns 29 this year.

Mother & Daughter Duets

As I am talking, Monica picks up the basket and exits. She enters again passing behind the quilt to kneel beside Heather and place her hand on her head. Monica dwells there for a while before Heather starts to stir. Magdalen reenters to "help" with Heather. The other girls also stir with Sarah & Emily passing behind the quilt to exit, and Michelle entering to "wake" Krystel. Monica, Heather & Magdalen dance together until Magdalen withdraws to take her baby garment out of her pocket and moves with it. Michelle & Krystel move together separately from the others. I am speaking as the music plays and the dancers move.

My mother and I were close...which is not to say that we got along all the time...but I think we understood each other. We were just so much alike. We both laugh really loudly at movies, embarrassingly loud, and cry easily just about anywhere else. Both of us passionate, stubborn, occasionally down-right infuriating.

I remember one day my mom came home this dress which she bought for me at some thrift store...which was not the problem with the dress. Most of my clothes were hand-me-downs or from secondhand shops. The problem was: the dress was really, really ugly. It was plaid. Red, orange, green, blue plaid. Polyester. I mean, to a thirteen year old, this thing was like a rainbow of embarrassment. I just refused to wear it. And, I had never spoken to my mother like that. I knew how hard she worked, how the few dollars she had spent to buy me that dress were precious...but, in that moment, I just didn't care. I could not be seen in that thing. And, she could not make me wear it.

And then, suddenly, for the first and only time in my life, I felt my mother's hand smack hard against my face...and it stung. We sat in silence for while ...I think she started crying first. She held me and I let her. I think about that day a lot. About how she must have felt...tired, rejected, like she just didn't have anything else to give. I don't think I have ever loved her or hated her more than I did that day. Because, in a way, she was right. In a way, I was rejecting her. I wanted so many things she could never provide. And, I wished I didn't. I wished it could be like it always was....

Women's Work

Like me, my Grandma Sadie loves to tell stories about her momma. And, I'm always happy to hear stories about when my great granny Hobbs was a young mother, about all the things she did to provide for her family. She made and mended the clothes they wore, quilted the blankets they slept under, and even raised much of the food they ate. And, she made all kinds of biscuits, pies and special treats from scratch, of course—not to mention just the daily cooking and scrubbing up after with all those mouths to feed. Women's work, I guess. But of a kind that very few women know much about these days. But, in her lifetime, Grandma Hobbs also spent many days out in the fields bringing in tobacco harvests, and she helped her husband run a dairy and then corner grocery...which puts me in mind of my own mother who would sometimes stay up sewing all through the night to make our Christmas presents but she also fixed our car many times when it seemed we were completely stuck. And, as a self-taught mechanic, she once worked at a small engine repair shop fixing lawn mowers. They both just did what needed doing and left it to other people to decide what kind of work it was. And, to their daughters it sometimes seemed like they could both do just about anything.

Amazing Grace

I was in the third grade the first time my mother was hospitalized. And, while the doctors were taking care of her, my brothers, Wade and Phillip, and I lived with our Grandma Sadie. That was the year I memorized all the words to the hymn Amazing Grace and practiced them in my Grandma's kitchen until I felt ready to sing them for the world. The world in this case was the congregation at Meadowthorpe Baptist Church where my grandma and pa have attended services since I was small...up until today. And, I don't know if I was really any good, but I sure was proud of myself. But, I never told my mom about my big moment. I knew she would have been there if she could and I didn't like to admit that life went on without her. And, it was also just hard to understand why she couldn't be there. When we went to visit her, she didn't seem sick. She wasn't hooked up to any machines like you see on TV and she seemed really calm like she was partly in a dream. I did see her take some pills. And, she promised she would be home to take care of us soon.

Burial

The day my mother died, I was at a summer camp. I was fourteen. And, for a long time, I wished that I had died too. I think that's natural. Children are bound to bury their parents someday, but being mostly still a child myself it just seemed so unreal. And, it was this impossible thing to understand. What was she thinking when she walked in front of that train? Was she in a dream? Did she understand what she was doing? Did she understand that she was leaving us? Did she think about what would happen to us? Was this my fault? I did blame myself for not being there. I still want to believe it would not have happened on that exact day—July 3, 1992—if I had been there. Maybe another day but not that one. Because when you bury someone you loved so much, it is some kind of comfort to believe that it is your fault. Because if it was your fault, you could have stopped it, you had some control that you just somehow failed to use. And, maybe, just maybe, next time you're just about to lose someone like that you'll remember this and you'll be able to stop it. I thought that way for years. I can't say it helped.

Washing

Magdalen collapses into the arms of the other dancers who have surrounded the burial place in order to bury their eggs in the soil. They carry her to the small patch of grass on stage and wash her hands and legs clean of the dirt as I speak.

In my story, no one could save my mom—not me, not my Grandma Sadie, not my Grandma Hobbs. Her mind had become like this place, where past and present, memory and fiction, get all jumbled together except she couldn't quite sort out the reality at her fingertips from the waking nightmares that haunted her...pursued her really.

But, in this story, in the Kentucky I imagined, we can wash away (*I am washing my hands which are dirty from burying Magdalen feet & lower legs*) the kind of darkness that clings. We can, with our own hands, weave together something...

I don't finish my sentence out loud, but, instead, begin dancing. One by one the dancers leave Madaglen, set one patch of grass over the dirt in the burial place and join dance phrase that I had begun and continue dancing. Then, I drop out of the phrase and watch the dancing. Magdalen steps off the last square of grass and joins the phrase. One by one the dancers are dropping out of the phrase to slip behind the quilt and repeat the small foot phrase from the beginning of the piece. Once, they are all behind the quilt, I speak one last time.

This is not exactly the story I lived. But, this is the story I choose. This is Kentucky. The way I like to remember it.

Chapter 7: That Single Fleeting Moment: Performance

The most incredible thing to me, however, was that even though I had been working so closely on the project for almost three semesters, the final product was still a surprise to me each night we performed. It felt new each time and emotions welled up in me during the piece where for months I had just been going through the motions. It was a very powerful thing.

--Heather Cameron, Dancer

When I read these words, I was so grateful that Heather had taken the time to simply and beautifully express just exactly how I felt when it all came together during those two brief and fleeting performances on March 26th and 28th. We had made this thing together, and yet once we set it in motion each night, it carried us forward as though we didn't know how or where it would end. It was powerful...at least, for those of us on stage and backstage. As we were acting out our parts in this story, the story was simultaneously acting upon us as well. Our parts were carefully choreographed, scripted and rehearsed with allowances for variation but not improvisation; after all, we were playing out a series of memories, layers of memories real and imagined, where all is remembered, already transpired. Despite this, like Heather, I felt the newness each time, the sudden push of emotion fresh again each night. The piece acted upon me just exactly as my strongest memories do, memories which have played out in my mind countless times and yet still retain the power to bring me near to laughter or tears the instant they are recalled.

Of course, I was performing within a created landscape which echoed some of my most powerful memories of the life and death of my mother. Still, it seems remarkable that Heather and I felt the same way even though the stories enacted in

the piece were not so personally dear to her. I felt this sincere engagement with the piece from all of the dancers. I was on stage for a good portion of the piece, even when I wasn't directly involved in the action; however, the few times I was backstage, I felt just as much a part of what was happening on-stage as if I was still out there myself. One of my favorite "performance" moments was being backstage during the mother's grief trio. Except for the three dancers on-stage, the rest of the cast was gathered backstage stage left, preparing for our next entrance, and we were all watching the trio progress on-stage with complete involvement. We had watched them dance that trio so many times; it was one of the first set phrases in the entire dance. Yet, none of us could take our eyes off of them. We wanted to be as much a part of that moment as we could even though it didn't need us. I have never had this experience before, this feeling that everyone involved was so completely committed to not just their own performance but to each other and to the work itself. I guess I could try to take credit for this, as though I did something in the rehearsal process which would guarantee such a response in the dancers, but this wouldn't be truthful. Instead, I credit the work, the stories themselves, for bringing us together around a worthy common purpose, and I credit the dancers for being not just lovely, capable performers but confident, sensitive women with strong character. My little experiment in community-building would not have succeeded if they didn't enter into the process with the willingness to submit themselves to the work with a great deal of humility and sensitivity.

My own performance--the dancing and the speaking--felt as easy and natural as breathing. I haven't felt so simply immersed in performing in a long time. Gone was

the voice that has plagued me for the past few years, whispering to me that I won't be able to perform much longer, that I'm slipping in my capacity to bring something to the stage worth an audience's attention. All the movement was technically and texturally clear and present for me. My body felt strong and articulate, and my spirit was totally committed to every movement. This is not to imply that it wasn't challenging. Making the transition from dancing to speaking, managing the back and forth of my performance role, required my full energy and intention. I had been mentally disciplined to stay in the moment as a performer, completely present in that world and not permit myself to dwell at all on all the production details that were out of my control. This was a struggle for me in rehearsals, being able to fully embody my own role in the work, not allowing myself to slip into the mindset of the director or a designer. What made this easier was focusing my attention completely on the miracle of the dancers, their performances. I just focused on staying with them, remembering that these scenes would unfold a finite number of times, and I should savor every minute while I could. Usually, I experience a certain amount of anxiety coursing through me as I perform, but I was able to stay surprisingly relaxed during the run of this show because I consciously wanted to make the time stretch, to make that "single fleeting moment" last as long as possible.

Although there were lots of moments during that production week that I don't want to forget, one of the most precious performance experiences for me happened during dress rehearsal. During the mother's "women's work" phrase, which was built by abstracting some of the actions associated with household work tasks, I am speaking and talking about all the things my great-grandmother did to provide for her

family: “She made and mended the clothes they wore, quilted the blankets they slept under, and even raised much of the food they ate.” When this scene played out on the night of the dress rehearsal, tears flooded my eyes, and I had to pause for a moment before I could continue with the monologue. Watching the dancers, their hands articulately at work and their attention so purely focused on the task at hand, I was incredibly proud of them, and it was a maternal kind of pride. And, then I saw that they were wearing clothes that I had designed and made for them with my own hands, staying up all night working, like my own mother used to do to make Christmas presents for my brothers and me. I had made the quilt that hung behind them and shaped the whole world they were so alive in at that very moment. I just experienced this overwhelming sense of emotion that in the process of making this piece I had actually become more like the women who raised me, the women whose stories I was honoring, the women who I admired so much. To make this dance, I had to actually become more of the person I wished I was, and I realized that no matter what happened on opening night I would have always have that precious knowledge, the knowledge that this piece had shaped me as much as I had formed it.

When I worked with Tere O’Connor in that choreographic process workshop here at UMD, I remember him saying that, “What you bring up in a dance may be what you need to learn next.” I guess what I needed to learn was how to be the kind of woman I want to be, who lays down their life for others, who does excellent work without requiring praise, who takes as much joy in the accomplishments of others as she does in her own achievements. I’m not saying that the process of working on this project has made me all of things which I value so much in the lives of the

women who came before me, but I do think those are things I need to learn, and making this piece forced me to take a hard look at the reality of embodying such ideals. It takes sacrifice. And, the small sacrifices of time and ego that I had to make to meet the demands of building this world and investing in those dancers are a good start for me, a good beginning in the direction I want to go. And, in this way, each of these performances felt like beginnings for me, like when they ended each night, I was just getting started. It is a good feeling to have since I will soon be graduating and need to start building a new professional life for myself beyond the Clarice Smith Center, which has been my artistic home since the day I moved to Maryland.

Chapter 8: Through Other Eyes: Processing the Feedback

Writing about dance is something I enjoy doing. Finding a way to evoke through language the quality and texture of such a temporal thing as a dance is a worthy struggle; I always end up seeing the work--and myself in the work--more clearly as a result of the effort. Despite the truth of this, writing about my own work is something I have to really coax myself into doing. Grappling with the task of forming words around the mysterious, infuriating and joyous process of making this dance has been particularly exhausting. How do you really see something when you're so close to it? How do you write about your own work? It's like writing about your own face or your own voice; it seems just too close for clarity. Of course, I do write about my own work--here and elsewhere--but I often feel it is easier to see my work clearly through other eyes. Since the performances of my thesis project, I have been fortunate to be able to see the work through the eyes of lots of other people who have graciously given me their feedback on the project. I will briefly discuss here some of the responses to the work which I received which shaped the way I see the work myself.

When Laura Mertens interviewed me about the project to get ideas for the press release, she asked me a great question, "What do you want people to get from this work? What do you want them to walk away with?" I paused for just a moment, and said that I hoped people would think more about their own stories and share them with others. I wasn't sure if this was possible: to make a work that actually invited the audience not just into the story unfolding before them but also into their own

neglected stories. Somehow the piece did seem to work on people in that way, or, at least, on some people. I invited an older gentleman who lives next door to us to the show, and, when he talked to my husband afterwards, he started sharing stories about his childhood which he claimed he hadn't even known he'd remembered. He said watching the piece just opened up his past for him in a new way. Marie Visosky, who works in the dance department, had a similar reaction to the work; she said that she spent her entire drive home that night remembering some of the difficult stories her own life and considering them again for the first time in a while. Many of my students who wrote performance reviews about the piece shared with me stories about their relationships to their own mothers and grandmothers as well as their stories of leaving home and struggling to find a way back. Michelle Cardoso's mother told with me that the work was painful for her to watch because it brought back so many difficult memories for her, but she said she felt lighter afterwards, like experiencing those feelings again allowed her to release some of them. Every time someone responded to the work by telling me their own story, I wanted to rejoice. My main reservation about sharing some of the stories of my life was making the whole work too focused on me personally. I wanted the primary focus to be on the community of women, how our stories belong both to us and to the communities in which we live. I believe that we need to share our stories with each other in order to live as fully as we can. I was relieved to find that for many people this story, my story, functioned as a small portal back into their own story. This was exactly what I hoped for, and I don't understand exactly how the piece achieved that end. It is a bit of mystery to me, but a mystery I enjoy.

I am also grateful to my students and others who took the time to tell me what specific parts of the work meant to them because many times this knowledge expanded my idea of the work as well. One of my students was born in India and studied bharata natyam when she was young, and she compared the hand movements in *Women's Work* to the mudras of Indian classical dance. She really enjoyed the intricate hand movements in the piece because she experienced them as meaningful symbols important to the storytelling process similar to how the mudras work in the traditional dances of her native country. I loved this comparison because it made me really value this aspect of the choreography more myself. The emphasis on the hands, which are frequently less articulated than the rest of the body in modern dance, was intentional on my part. As I say in one of my monologues, my mother taught me the value of the “hand-made, the slightly shabby, the rough edges in life.” I was taught to value hand-made things over commercially produced stuff and the “real thing” over the imitation, like an old silk dress over a shiny, new polyester one. In celebration of all things hand-crafted and the skillful, articulate hands which form such things, I consciously explored many different forms and textures of the hands during the rehearsal process, but, over time, I can see that I did choose a specific vocabulary of hand “symbols” of sorts which do have a life of their own in the piece. Considering this student’s observation caused me to revisit that process and rediscover for myself the shape and meaning of the hand articulations in the work.

Listening to other people’s reactions to the work, I was always surprised by the specific moments or elements which particularly captured their imagination. One of my students, Kelsey Coons, wrote a whole paragraph about my first solo and its

relationship to the projection of the tree, and she closes by saying:

“Her opening movement sequence ended as she superimposed herself in the foreground of the tree with her back to the audience. She extended one arm up and one arm out. I couldn’t help but think Foster was likening herself to this tree, with her own roots in the same ground—the marley stage and the southern soil.” In my conception of that solo, the tree represents the remembered past as well as my survival in the present, and I feel like I am trying to bring the past and present together into one moment by trying to reach into the image. Although she expresses it differently, and I hadn’t actually thought of myself as rooted in the way she suggests, I love the way she talks about this moment. It makes it come alive for me in a different way than how I experienced it in the moment. Many of people also responded very strongly to Monica’s solo which is early in the piece and introduces the baby dress as a symbol of a lost child. Most of the feedback talked about how my narration during her solo merely served to clarify, but that the sense of pain and loss experienced by Monica’s character was most strongly communicated through Monica’s movements, the quality and emotion with which she moved. I was encouraged by this because it assured me that the narration simply added another layer of complexity to the audience’s understanding, but the movement could have stood alone and been effectively communicative. At one point, I was a bit concerned that I was turning to the monologues because I had failed as a choreographer, so it was reassuring to have it affirmed by several people that moments like this were strong through the movement first and the monologues simply enriched the moment, adding another layer of meaning but not acting in the place of the dance.

Finally, some of the most precious feedback on the piece came from my Grandma Sadie and her sister, Pat, who traveled here from Kentucky to see the concert. I had purposely refrained from telling my grandma the full extent to which our family stories were featured in the work because I wanted it to be a surprise, and I hoped she would find it to be a delightful surprise, not a vexing one. Seeing the piece through my grandma's eyes was the best perspective of all. She just kept talking about how perfect everything was, how the whole thing "put her in mind of momma" and how "honored" she felt. Her eyes were filled with tears eyes off and on just talking about it, and it was so sweet to me to know that to the person who knew it all the best, we had gotten the feeling just right. She said it felt just like home.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

I want to pierce the veil of toughness that we all have in our lives and to uncover the vulnerable center, the confused, flailing human part of us that we conceal and avoid. I want to make "human scale" dances....I want each dance to be a "telling", telling with the body (where have I been, where does my longing reside) and telling with the voice (this is how I see the world)....I feel like I am searching for a kind of "folk" art that can be expertly crafted and yet feel unsophisticated, naive, credulous.”

--Joe Goode

During my first year of graduate school, I had the privilege of working with Joe Goode in a week long creative process workshop here at UMD. Joe talked about making work on a “human scale,” and I knew exactly what he meant. Of course, he has dancers that can do some virtually superhuman things, but he wasn’t trying to make work that was flashy or clever or spectacular for the sake of those things alone. Instead, he was interested in making dances that were vulnerable and effecting, but not emotionally manipulative like all those shallow tear-jerkers Hollywood churns out every year. I loved his idea that what he was doing might be “folk” art because I’ve always thought I’d be making art quilts or elaborately hand-woven baskets or something like that if I’d never discovered dance. I am attracted to the apparent simplicity yet profound beauty of such things, things which are skillfully made but lacking in pretension. Throughout the process of making *Women’s Work & Other Stories*, I thought a lot about this idea of contemporary dance as folk art and what it meant to me personally to make work on a “human scale.”

Joe describes “folk” art as something that is “expertly crafted and yet feels unsophisticated, naive, credulous” which is as good a definition as any I have read. When I was growing up, I watched a lot of “fine” art on PBS--ballets, operas,

orchestra concerts and such, but, on a day-to-day basis, I had a much more intimate experience with the arts and crafts which comprised my mother's artistic outlet. Our home was full of the things she made, and she had so many mediums: drawing, painting, sewing, knitting, crochet, macramé, and writing. I feel like Joe's definition of "folk" art perfectly describes the kind of things she made. They were well-made, every detail attended to, but they were simple, delightful things with no pretense to greatness, hand-crafted with great care to be enjoyed. For a long time, I've wondered why making dances couldn't be as simple as that, the process of making something with great care for the enjoyment of others. This is not to say that I don't value the ability of dance, of art in general, to fracture preconceived ideas and conjure up worlds beyond the boundaries of our daily existence. I want my art to challenge people, me especially. I want to make dances which bring people to a place of looking and really seeing the stories, characters and settings which might otherwise be neglected, passed over, or just tuned out by the noise of everyday life. But, most of all, I want to make well-crafted dances that speak clearly and truthfully into the lives of others, shining light on the fragile, beautiful mess of our shared humanity. I want my art, my craft, my labor, to be something that serves others and brings people together; this is what making work on a "human" scale means to me.

These are the things I want to be true of the dances I make, but, even though I work hard and have big ideas, I usually fail. In fact, I consider this the first time I have ever succeeded in making a dance that nearly lived up to my high expectations. Inexplicably, this project, *Women's Work & Other Stories*, actually touched other people, people who know me as well complete strangers, in a way that was clear,

true, and meaningful. Somehow this project brought the dancers and me together with such unity that we were able to embody our characters and flesh out this world so fully that we actually touched the audience in an authentic way. Most of all, the work was powerful enough to change us--the storytellers ourselves. We made this thing, set it in motion and played it out each night, but it acted upon us too. This project, these performances, knit us together and made us really smile, laugh, weep and cry. We weren't "acting;" we were "being" together, allowing ourselves to truly feel the emotions of our characters and articulate them with our whole bodies. The miracle of this project coming together so beautifully and mysteriously humbles and terrifies me because I know there is no guarantee I will ever create something equally affecting again. While I still take great joy in the sweetness of this experience, I am fully aware that every dance is an unknown world in the beginning. When I am ready to walk into the studio to begin a new work, I will be starting all over again from scratch, and the frustrations and exultations of this process will be merely instructive memories.

That said, I am a bit amazed at how simple the work was in the end, amazed at how delightfully uncomplicated but rich the work felt as it unfolded each night. In fact, when I watched the piece on DVD for the first time, I was almost shocked at how simple it seemed, how one moment seemed to lead into the next so naturally, so effortlessly. However, I know that every gesture, every word and every object was considered in detail, selected among many other possible options, and painstakingly crafted. The process of making this dance was anything but simple, full of more complications, frustrations and conflict than I've experienced during any of my past

choreographic processes. Sarah Kramer, one of the dancers in the project, expresses it well: “This was a long, emotionally taxing experience, but I have truly learned a lot about myself, my dancing and my choreographic process.” I couldn’t agree more. It was an intricate, messy, difficult process to weave together this deceptively simple fifty-five minutes of dancing. This dichotomy reminds me of the basket weaving class my mother and I took together. Even the most basic of baskets took hours of labor, and my hands ached afterwards. Each flat reed had to be soaked, pulled and shaped to form a basket, and, after all that work, what remained was a small, lovely thing which never betrayed the difficult process that was required to build it. The experience of making this small, lovely dance called *Women’s Work & Other Stories* has made me appreciate anew the power of simplicity. Perhaps all the most sophisticated things in life are actually the apparently “simple” things because they’ve already endured the painful refining process of actualization, and all the complicated things are simply incomplete, or in the process of being undone. It is something to think about, and maybe a place to begin my next choreographic investigation, but for now I’ll just with the questions I have and enjoy where I am at this moment. I just want to savor the sweetness of this process and the memory of this piece a little longer, and then I will be ready to get back in the studio and get back to work.

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