

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: EMBODIED HAMLET: DISABILITY,
ACCESSIBILITY, GENDER, AND SCIENCE
FICTION

Christine Hands, Master of Fine Arts, 2019

Thesis directed by: Associate Professor, Patrik Widrig, Dance

“Hamlet” was a thirty-eight minute work of dance art premiered at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland on October 12 and 14, 2018.

The work explored four pillars of research through embodied exploration: representation, accessibility, inclusion, and reinvention. These four themes are discussed in the following paper as theoretical points of inquiry. The first chapter discusses representation of peoples with disabilities. The second chapter explores the accessibility features for audience members which were available at the performance. The third chapter considers inclusion and challenges the canon of traditional white, male casting of the role of Hamlet. The fourth chapter discusses the use of science fiction to tie everything together by creating a space of transformative play-acting where people can exercise their imaginations to create a more inclusive and accessible society. Theoretical and scholarly research informs and then reflects the work onstage in “Hamlet.”

EMBODIED HAMLET: DISABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, GENDER, AND
SCIENCE FICTION

by

Christine Hands

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Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Patrik Widrig, Chair

Lecturer Paul Jackson

Associate Professor Maura Keefe, PhD

Assistant Professor Lisa Nathans

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Dedication

For my Mother, Cherie Hands.

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Introduction

In retrospect, my version of “Hamlet” had little to do with *Hamlet*, and even less to do with William Shakespeare.¹ This thirty-eight minute work featuring deconstructed and reconstructed language woven into a series of scenes and vignettes which were inspired by the famous play, in fact had less to do with the play than the audience might have imagined, although it is precisely the audience’s imagination I appealed to.²

“Christine, you’re squishing me!” A tall, lean woman in jeans and sneakers rolls off of the power chair onto the floor. “Christine, get up!” The audience laughs and a small hand with hyperextended fingers reaches to the body on the floor. These small hands belong to a petite woman with thick glasses, wild hair, and hands that flex and clasp when she is excited. She sits in a blue power chair, legs propped up on her foot pedals, jeans and a yellow sweatshirt match her dancing partner. She pulls to standing the other woman, Christine, clad in jeans and a green sweatshirt. She is slightly older but with the same hair. They move in imperfect unison as they mirror one another in the intimate venue.



Figure 1: Photo by Joshua L. Smith. From L to R: Melissa Hands and Christine Hands in *A Duet with My Sister*. Elgin, IL: 2018.

¹ Throughout this paper quotation marks will refer to the thirty-eight minute dance work I premiered in October 2018, “Hamlet,” and italics will be used to note both Shakespeare’s written text as well as film and stage versions of the three act play.

² See Appendix 1 for a visual sample of deconstructed and reconstructed text.

This is not a scene from “Hamlet.” This is my sister, Melissa, and I dancing onstage together the summer after our mother died and the summer before “Hamlet” premiered. And yet this dance neatly summarizes the push and focus of my art. In *A Duet with My Sister* I offer the audience a disabled dancer and a non-disabled dancer, sisters, who share more DNA with one another than with any other human in the world, and yet whose bodies and minds are far apart on the spectrum of ability. Nevertheless, in this work there is love, connection, and joy. There is community and there is communication. There is a gentle shift toward justice through a dance work which offers a potential for social change by challenging expectation and offering solutions. This is a work of world-making and of social justice in action, wrapped up in the joyful movement of two people who have a relationship on and offstage.

I make work that is personal and based on interpersonal relationships. I ground this artistic work in deep theoretical and scholarly inquiry, putting my work into conversation with other voices that are writing about art, and making art. I let this research seep from my intellect into my body as I move my artistic process into the studio, allowing my kinesthetic knowledge and interpersonal relationships to guide the art-making process. My process is a sandwich of personal experience, intellectual inquiry, and embodied practice which ultimately produces work that showcases our shared humanity. I appeal to the audience’s empathy as a way to make lasting societal change. This paper will situate itself in the middle of this sandwich, in the intellectual inquiry that is done outside of the studio, while acknowledging and addressing the way this work mixes with the other textures and flavors of this sandwich. I will offer theories and research grounded in body politics and cultural studies. On and offstage I am, ultimately, a human seeking to do better for the world I inhabit.

I consider disability theoretically and practically in my art making. My little sister and only sibling, Melissa, has Muscular Dystrophy (MD), an inherited genetic mutation which my mother also had but which skipped me, purely by genetic chance. I did not grow up in a disabled body and cannot know the kinesthetic experience of disability. Nevertheless, I balance at a unique juncture neither inside nor outside of the disability community. I see the power and value in disability culture and aesthetics, and I honor disability representation as the natural progression of my own research interests which focus on the beauty inherent in individuality. A lifetime of feeling stares, of witnessing ignorance, and of considering ableism from my vantage point has given me a chance to champion the disabled community in the dance world in a way that is integral to my work, albeit not always front and center.

These relationships, with my sister, with my mother, and with my own status as a temporarily non-disabled person, have profoundly impacted the trajectory of my life.³ Whether or not that impact is explicit in my creative output does little to undermine the importance of these considerations in this paper. Each chapter is dedicated to research which informs my human experience, an experience which is inseparable from the dance I put onstage.

I am heavily influenced by the radical work of postmodern choreographers from the 1960s and 1970s. These choreographers set out to free the human body from the constraints of other dance forms. According to dance historian and critic Sally Banes in *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, the postmodern movement in dance

³ TAB, or Temporarily Able-Bodied, is a slang term used to describe non-disabled peoples. This term points to the ephemeral nature of ability and serves as a reminder that disability can happen to anyone at any time.

redefined dance as anything “framed as a dance.”⁴ By extension, this redefines a dancer as anyone.

Mark Morris, a distinguished and prolific choreographer who emerged as a new and important voice around the same time as other postmodern movers, is famously quoted for noting (time and time again, as he mentions in this interview), “As I have said before, dancing is for anyone, but not for everyone.”⁵ While initially Morris’ first claim seems at odds with the caveat which follows, in the end I find Morris’ blunt and slightly catty remark is a direct hit. If dance is for everyone and there is somebody who does not wish to dance, does not like to dance, or perhaps cannot dance for moral, cultural, or religious reasons, then that somebody is excluded from being everyone. This makes them at best the other and at worst: no one. But by claiming dance is for anyone, Morris is offering an invitation. Come and dance, if you like. (And if you don’t, stay home; don’t spoil our party.)

I believe in a world where dance is for anyone. The questions I ask in my embodied practice are about the anyones of this world. What makes each of us unique and beautiful? What tears us apart? What brings us together? What makes us a community? I consider the bodies in the room as I create with them, asking them to meet me halfway: embodying the movement I bring to the table but with their own voice and flavor, changing and shifting the movement even as we dance together. Considering the integration of a disabled body into my work is not a far stretch from this focus on the individual. Translating movement from non-disabled movers onto disabled movers, and

⁴ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), xix.

⁵ Mark Morris, “Mark Morris Interview: Dance is What I Do,” interview by Sarah Crompton, *The Telegraph*, March 30, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/dance/7539088/Mark-Morris-interview-dance-is-what-I-do.html>.

vice-versa, requires a new level of problem solving but ultimately seeks the same goal: a unified team of dancers who are unabashedly themselves within the context of the group.

This work remains no matter the context and the movers. Simply put, I am interested in the human experience; I explore and communicate this experience through four pillars of exploration. Through this paper I will offer a perspective on representation, access, inclusion, and reinvention.

Representation offers questions about who and what is being represented onstage. What bodies are onstage? I will consider disability representation explicitly through my works *A Duet with Melissa* and *A Duet with My Sister* before landing on “Hamlet” and the problem of how to represent the disabled community without any disabled bodies onstage.⁶

I consider access while asking who has been given access to the work. I investigate this access onstage but primarily in the audience. “Hamlet” features a number of access features for audience members and I will discuss the experience of working with The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center (The Clarice) as well as the service providers, asking whose responsibility audience accessibility should be.

I will consider inclusion in the context of who is included in the conversation and the art-making. I will consider women playing the role of Hamlet, discussing their portrayals as well as audience reaction, addressing the question of feminine inclusion in a traditionally male role. I will discuss how this research influenced “Hamlet.”

I will consider reinvention, which serves as the engine of this work, explored

⁶ “Hamlet” was a shared event. The night was split with Stacey Carlson’s *dwelling* which was presented before the intermission, with “Hamlet” following. Carlson and I were in close communication throughout our choreographic processes and shared a set and budget. Nevertheless, I have largely excluded discussion of Carlson’s work as it is out of the scope of this paper.

through the lens of science fictional world-making. I will put my work in conversation with scholarship on science fiction as a site of social change and consider “Hamlet” as another site of potential world-making.

These ideas may seem disparate but each of these chapters considers our human condition and how to make change in our world. Dance has the potential to radically intervene in our social mores, transforming and re-imagining in the safe space of the theater. “Hamlet” is not just another version of an epic work, but a choreographic exploration seeking to disrupt tradition by expanding who can participate in this art-making.

Chapter 1: A Spectrum of Ability: Mixed Abilities Onstage

Representation

When I think of disabled dancers onstage I don't often envision people like my sister Melissa. On the contrary, I think of dancers like Joel Brown, a company member with Candoco, a dance company in the United Kingdom featuring dancers with and without disabilities. The picture of Brown on Candoco's website shows him seated in his wheelchair. One muscular arm protrudes from a tan and red top, spiraling across his legs while his wheels glint in the stage lights. He balances on one wheel, propped up by his other arm, covered with rippling muscles from beefy shoulder to forearm. His gaze is intense and there is no doubt that this man is a dancer.⁷ Brown looks nothing like my little sister. Yet, they are both disabled.

Disability definitions encompass a multi-faceted range of ability. I was brought up in a family that traversed this range just in our nucleus: my little sister's disability was congenital, impacting her mind and body, but for my mom MD developed later in life so that she relied on first a cane, then a wheelchair, and finally a scooter. Beyond my immediate family I have other friends and family with a range of disabilities, both intellectual and physical.

How do we define disability, acknowledging that disability is a large and broad term? According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) National Networks' website, disability is "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having

⁷ "Joel Brown," Candoco Dance Company, accessed February 5, 2019, <http://www.candoco.co.uk/about-us/people/dancers/joel-brown>.

such an impairment.”⁸ The Merriam Webster Dictionary similarly defines disability as “a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions.”⁹ Both of these definitions are ambiguous, and neither seem to fully describe the experience of disability.

Disability can be physical or mental, and it can be slight or extreme. Disability can be apparent but disability can also be invisible. Disability can be static or degenerative, or it may even come in episodes. Disability can be present at birth, develop during one's life, or occur suddenly as the result of injury or accident. Disability can be a missing limb, missing gene, missing organ, or a missing part of the brain. Disability can be an extra gene, an extra limb, or an extra bone. Disability can be neurological, cognitive, and intellectual. Disability can be a community, an identity, and a lifestyle. There are a broad range of experiences which the term disability references.

Disability definitions may be based on a variety of models. For example, the ADA’s definition is based on a legal model of disability. Another model is the medical model. In the medical model, “Disability is seen as a medical problem that resides in the individual.”¹⁰ In this model disability relies heavily on the expertise of doctors and professionals. While the medical model is important in many contexts, it is limiting, only purporting disability as a problem to be fixed.

In the social model of disability, it is society “which disables people with

⁸ “Glossary of ADA Terms,” ADA National Network, accessed November 7, 2016, <https://adata.org/glossary-terms#D>.

⁹ “Disability,” Merriam Webster, accessed February 5, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disability?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld.

¹⁰ Olkin, R., 1999, What psychotherapists should know about disability, Guilford Press, New York *qtd. in* Marno Retief and Rantoa Letšosa, “Models of Disability: A Brief Overview,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 74, no. 1, (March 6, 2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4738>.

impairments, and therefore any meaningful solution must be directed at societal change.”¹¹ To illustrate this model, one might consider a person in a wheelchair sitting at the bottom of a flight of stairs. In the medical model the problem might be considered the individual’s inability to walk. In the social model the problem is society’s failure to provide a ramp. The stairs are the problem, not the individual.

In the affirmation, or identity model, “disability is a marker of membership in a minority identity, much like gender or race.”¹² In this model disability can be a positive and enriching part of someone’s life as it informs and impacts their experiences and community. This model is seemingly at the other end of the spectrum from the medical model.

While these are just a few of the models by which we can consider disability, they offer a range of perspectives with which to consider the dancing body in the dance space. While I see the value in different models, I don’t find one model alone can summarize my complex relationship with disability as a temporarily non-disabled person, a family member of disabled people, an advocate for disability rights, a choreographer creating accessible productions, and a teacher with a passion for reaching all the bodies in the room. Rather, my understanding of disability representation is fluid and shifting. It’s important to recognize my status as a non-disabled person who does not have a personal stake in the use of these models. I write about disability from a desire to make space for more people like the people I love but not from an embodied perspective. I work to create

¹¹ Barnes, C., Mercer, G. & Shakespeare, T., 2010, ‘The social model of disability’, in A. Giddens & P. Sutton (eds.), *Sociology: Introductory readings*, 3rd edn., pp. 161–166, Polity Press, Cambridge *qtd. in* Retief and Letšosa, “Models of Disability,” 3.

¹² Brewer, E., Brueggemann, B., Hetrick, N. & Yergeau, M., 2012, ‘Introduction, background, and history’, in B. Brueggemann (ed.), *Arts and humanities*, pp. 1–62, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA *qtd. in* Retief and Letšosa, “Models of Disability,” 5.

positive change in the world from this frame of reference.

Within the world of modern and postmodern dance, there are companies that integrate disability into their work, and many of these companies have their own approaches and identify themselves differently. Some companies such as Dancing Wheels in Cleveland, Ohio and AXIS Dance Company in Oakland, California, refer to themselves as physically integrated, making a clear distinction that their work features dancers with and without physical disability. Other companies refer to themselves as inclusive, and often these companies embrace peoples with intellectual disability, such as Amici Dance in England.

I enjoy immensely watching AXIS Dance Company perform. I saw them perform live in 2018 and they were stunning.¹³ In AXIS' work, disability is incorporated as part of a virtuosic and phenomenal output, as natural to the work as the presence of costumes and music. One of the processes by which AXIS works is translation.¹⁴ Translation is the process of reworking a dance movement or phrase. This may be in order to accommodate a dancer in a wheelchair or a dancer with different abilities within the context of disability, but it may also be an artistic choice. Translation is important for creating unison with casts with and without disability as well as generating movement.

I heavily utilized translation in my first work with my sister, *A Duet with Melissa*. In this work I recorded Melissa dancing in a chair in her bedroom to a piece of Max Richter music. I used the video of her dancing to inform my movement, translating her movement into my own body. This meant dancing in a chair but also moving out of the chair and translating the movement from her arms into my legs. I also added a dancing

¹³ AXIS Dance Company, The Gordon Center, Owings Mills, MD, February 24, 2018.

¹⁴ AXIS Dance Company Physically Integrated Summer Intensive and Teacher Training, Oakland, CA, August 9-18, 2019.

partner, creating a duet, all the while translating from Melissa’s bedroom improvisation.

The piece went on to include a series of recorded phone conversations between Melissa and me as the duet continued, ending with a long embrace on top of a chair as video of Melissa smiling in her bedroom looked on. The video of Melissa is displayed during the work and serves as my “dancing partner” in my mind, although I dance this work



Figure 2: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. Christine Hands in *A Duet with Melissa*. Projection features Melissa Hands. Lighting by Chris Brusberg. College Park, MD: 2017.

with another non-disabled woman. Melissa couldn’t travel to Maryland to perform with me: it was too far and too difficult for her. But in this way Melissa served as my collaborator, even without being physically present.

It’s important to clarify I translated Melissa’s movement into my own body in order to connect, not to “improve” her dancing. Rather, this work showcases the experience of understanding someone else’s connection to music, to movement, and to dance. I would also offer that this work is not about disability. My entire relationship with Melissa is shaped by disability but it is not defined by disability. So too is *A Duet with Melissa* shaped by disability but not defined by it. This was a piece made about the shared experience of being sisters. Of loving someone. *A Duet with Melissa* was always a

piece about people. I didn't dance for Melissa. I danced with Melissa in the only way I could with so many miles between us.

This was the first time I considered the disabled dancing body as a potential for creation on the concert dance stage, despite the fact that AXIS has been in existence since my sister was born, and Dancing Wheels was founded before I was born. It wasn't until I began researching dance and disability that I really started taking an interest in the work of these companies. Why did it take me thirty years to begin making inclusive dance? While one could posit that ableism was a limitation, careful consideration has led me to believe it is the opposite. The work of companies like AXIS and Candoco, in fact, is not representative of the disability I grew up around. This virtuosity, speed, and power is simply unattainable for the community I am regularly in contact with. These dancers reach a level of exceptionalism that is unrealistic and perhaps even discouraging for a dancer with a different type of disability.

Disability studies research brought me to the term "supercrip" which quickly distilled some of my thoughts about physically integrated dance. Supercrip is a term used within disability scholarship that refers to "someone who has excelled so much in spite of his or her handicap that others who do not measure up are to be regarded as inadequate."¹⁵ The supercrip is a disabled person who is independent and has defied all odds to excel in spite of their limitations. This term appears as far back as 1984 in disability rights activist Roberta Galler's essay, "The Myth of the Perfect Body." She discusses her own fight with polio's effects and how she worked hard against dependency, "I became the 'exceptional' woman, the 'super-crip,' noted for her

¹⁵ Jack A. Nelson, "The Media Role in Building the Disability Community," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 15, no. 3 (2000): 185-186.

independence. I refused to let my identity be shaped by my disability.”¹⁶ This term is cited as being problematic for the rest of the population of disabled peoples and even amongst the so-called supercrips themselves. “The stereotype of the independent ‘supercrip,’ although embodying images of strength and courage, involves avoidance and denial of the realities of disability for both the observer and the disabled woman herself.”¹⁷ The supercrip, rather than addressing realistically the needs and unique position of the disabled person within society, creates unrealistic expectations and plays into society’s demands that all people be independent, rather than transforming the playing field of our society to fit the needs of everyone.

Supercrip is a loaded term coming from a non-disabled dancer, but I bring it up because it helps clarify some of my excitement about making dance with my sister. Ann Cooper Albright, dancer and noted scholar, discusses how Candoco doesn’t deviate from the established norms of beauty and virtuosity because they utilize disabled bodies which are very abled. She writes that this focus on classicism creates a schism within the disabled community, parceling out those with exceptionalism and negating those who are less abled.¹⁸ While certainly having disabled performers of any kind in these companies shifts the median ability level of the whole group, when examining the range of disability throughout the world, these performers are still very highly abled individuals. Nevertheless, companies like AXIS and Candoco have clearly defined themselves and do important work representing disability with excellence and virtuosity.

¹⁶ Roberta Galler, “The Myth of the Perfect Body,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 165.

¹⁷ Galler, “The Myth of the Perfect Body,” 167.

¹⁸ Ann Cooper Albright, “Moving Across Difference: Dance and Disability,” in *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 77.

Perhaps understanding why audiences and choreographers gravitate toward the supercrip can help consolidate the conversation. It has to do with the temporary nature of ability. Ynestra King writes, “Of all the ways of becoming ‘other’ in our society, disability is the only one that can happen to anyone, in an instant, transforming that person's life and identity forever.”¹⁹ So in some ways the supercrip is a self-serving metaphor for overcoming adversity for the audience who fears their own mortality. Yet is there one of us who truly can live independently without the help of another? Dependency is a spectrum rather than a definitive state of being. If anything, my initial reticence to appreciating the work of companies like AXIS makes a case for the presence of more companies offering the representation that AXIS misses.

Anjali Dance Company does just this. Anjali was founded in 1995 in Oxfordshire, England and works with dancers with intellectual disabilities, or learning disabilities as they are called in the UK. According to Anjali’s website, “Nicole Thomson, Anjali’s founder, recognised that a powerful new quality could emerge from a company of people with learning disabilities.”²⁰ Further research uncovered that Anjali is in fact only one of many companies in the United Kingdom presenting performers with intellectual disability, inspiring me to make my own inclusive work.

A Duet with My Sister gave Melissa and I a chance to explore more than translation in our first live work together. What I enjoyed in making *A Duet with My Sister* was locating the pockets of potential Melissa has. I did not seek to limit my own capacity for movement in order to even out our abilities, nor did I seek to force Melissa to

¹⁹ Ynestra King, "The Other Body: Reflections on Difference, Disability and Identity Politics," *Ms* 3, no. 5 (1993): 75.

²⁰ “Artistic Vision,” Anjali Dance Company, accessed February 5, 2016, <http://www.anjali.co.uk/artistic-vision/>.

perform beyond her abilities. For example, Melissa is not a dancer by trade, but she performs onstage in community disability theater regularly. Melissa has an active use of her voice but less active use of her body. Over time the goal in dance is to train the body but Melissa’s body moves slowly and with great challenge while her voice is an active part of her communication repertoire. Therefore, much of the movement was dictated as we danced. As we moved we spoke, and this gave Melissa a chance to thrive. She flourished onstage in her own vocal strength but was also able to use her voice to help remember and execute choreography in a timely fashion. *A Duet with My Sister* allowed me the chance to tackle challenge of Melissa’s “limitations” by harnessing her talents and innovating with her to find a solution which defined the dance.



Figure 3: Photo by Joshua L. Smith. From L to R: Christine Hands and Melissa Hands in *A Duet with My Sister*. Elgin, IL: 2018.

In “Hamlet,” there were no disabled bodies onstage nor involved in the design process. Movers with disabilities were invited into the cast but were not able to commit for differing reasons, and the pool of disabled dancers I am in contact with is extremely limited at the University of Maryland (UMD). I made a decision not to aggressively pursue adding a disabled dancer to my cast. One of these reasons had to do with the value of working with

students. Students have easy access to campus, similar schedules, and I already had a working relationship with all the dancers I cast. Bringing someone else into the cast with less scheduling flexibility and the added stress of a commute may have ultimately undermined the value of their diverse perspective. Still, I could have recruited a disabled person from the UMD community to join the cast. Jasmine Mitchell had only taken a semester of dance before joining the cast so ostensibly bringing a new cast member who was just beginning their dancing journey wouldn't have been a barrier.



Figure 4: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. Jasmine Mitchell in "Hamlet." Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

To engage a student at UMD with a disability I would have had to first convince them to think of themselves as a dancer. This is hard work. This is important work. This is work other companies are doing very well through education, outreach, and engagement. This is work that goes much farther than a single dance event. This is the work of community engagement and of building relationships over time. Most

importantly, this is work which ultimately relies on human agency and preference more than it relies on dance itself.

But dance is not for everybody, as discussed in the Introduction. A search for a disabled dancer would have been a search for potential anybodies in a relatively small pool of peoples. This was a search I chose not to undertake. I chose to pour my energy into dancers who were already engaged in the process, such as Mitchell, honoring and supporting their artistry and shifting my focus on inclusion away from the stage space.

Ultimately, more important to me than casting a dancer who was disabled was that the dancers who were present in the process were the dancers who wanted to be there. Going out of my way to engage a dancer just because they have a disability would have done something I don't like to do: minimized someone's contribution to the work to their disability. I want to work with people, not their abilities. It isn't wrong to recruit a dancer with a disability, but it wasn't a choice I made for this work. I made casting decisions intentionally to showcase diversity. I thought about race and gender in casting as well as in the process of creation. Still, I did want disabled representation. I asked myself, how can I represent disability in a dance without disabled dancers?

Bill Shannon's 2018 work, *Touch Update*, in some ways answers the same question I pose. Shannon is a disabled dancer known for his urban fusion and unique movement style which is performed on crutches which he designed himself. Shannon has codified his crutch work, going as far as to set it on dancers without crutches. They hold their hands and move their bodies as if connected to crutches, but they're not. He has also set work on dancers without disabilities using the crutches and technique he designed. Both of these explorations were on display onstage in *Touch Update*.²¹ Shannon's

²¹ Bill Shannon, *Touch Update*, Dance Place, Washington D.C., November 10, 2018.

experience as a choreographer with a disability is needed representation. Groundbreaking dancers including Alice Sheppard and Marc Brew discuss the work they had to do as disabled dancers, consistently translating from non-disabled bodies onto their own. The reverse, translating from Shannon to his cast members, is a wonderful and empowering reversal, in theory.

This was Shannon's first time choreographing without performing himself, and I look forward to seeing what comes next, since this show left me wanting more. To be honest, I spent most of the show wondering if Raphael Botelho Nepomuceno (the performer using crutches in the performance, a Cirque du Soleil alum) needed the crutches. Nepomuceno didn't move quite like I've seen Shannon move on the crutches. But he performed Shannon's codified technique. I thought he used his legs differently than Shannon, and that he performed like a man who doesn't regularly use crutches to ambulate. Still, I kept chiding myself for asking such a question. It is not a disabled performer's responsibility to be "disabled enough," and moreover the medical details of a person's disability are not the audience's business. But in the case of Nepomuceno, he didn't need the crutches and the question I kept asking seemed to have been given credence in a way that made me uncomfortable. When Nepomuceno dropped his crutches to do breakdance power moves with a heavy weight and powerful body near the end of the show, my suspicions were confirmed that I had been watching a non-disabled dancer performing on crutches and I didn't know how to feel. While it's not Shannon's problem, nor fault, that I had a problematic face to face with disability's medical perspective, it did bring me out of my appreciation for the work. And maybe that's not Shannon's fault and maybe I'm missing the point.

But that aside, the other dancers didn't move like Shannon as they performed his codified technique, either. They moved without abandon and without clarity. The energy and momentum which make Shannon's choreography exciting was missing. For me, it seemed that the non-disabled dancers were in some ways disempowered; Shannon's codified technique seemed uncomfortable for them. While this sort of castration could be a powerful statement, I didn't get the feeling this was the point. I wanted to know what else. Now that they know the crutch work, how can they harness their own bodies, sans crutches, to make the dance form not an imitation of Shannon but a new way of moving. How can Nepomuceno dance on those crutches in a way that honors and explores Shannon's crutch work without being an imitation of disability, but rather an exploration of a dance form? Still, these are my aesthetic preferences. What I did learn from *Touch Update* is that I will not be putting non-disabled dancers in wheelchairs, on crutches, or moving with superficially imposed limitation in this way. I, as a non-disabled mover, would be uncomfortable imitating disability from a disembodied perspective. Shannon's perspective may have made me uncomfortable, but it's his prerogative to explore and address his technique in this way. It's not mine.

I considered translation and ability in my creation process, but I did want a more explicit representation of disability. I chose therefore the task of seeking to engage the community with disabilities in the dance audience. I found my niche in "Hamlet" by thinking about access and inclusion broadly, by making the show more accessible through the access services provided. American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation was available at each show, audio description (AD) was available, a touch tour was available, and other services were provided including a script loan. I sought representation through the services offered. The ASL interpreter stood onstage and to the side, visible to the

whole audience. The audio describer's soft murmur could be heard through the entire house. The touch tour was public. Audience members were invited to use any access service, regardless of ability, as discussed further in Chapter 2. Marketing was targeted to communities with low vision or blindness as well as the deaf and people with hearing loss.

Here I found a small catch. Why would peoples with disabilities want to come to a show where they are not represented? But then again, why wouldn't they? I turn to a quote from John Killacky of Dance Umbrella about providing access services, "I have been told, 'Well, those people don't come anyway.' I always answer, 'And why would they if they are not invited into the experience of your work.'"²² I decided that even if no one who needed these services attended the show, this invitation would be important. The access would serve as disabled representation in "Hamlet."

We all have a body. For me, what the work of dancing disability artistry does is in one fell swoop demonstrate these very differences that seem like barriers to our relationships and communication and shatter the assumption of difference. Watching a person dance who seems to be the epitome of someone who "cannot dance," I am forced to reconsider my expectations of what people can and cannot do. I am forced to reconsider the aesthetics of beauty. I am forced to see people as just that, people, instead of the sum of their differences. And because of the nature of art, and because of the relationship of dance to the body, and because we all have a body, dancers with disabilities are so precisely positioned to make us stop and think again. It takes a lot of

²² Judith Smith and John Killacky, "The Cultural Apartheid of Disability: A Conversation Between Judith Smith and John Killacky with Resources and Tips," HowlRound Theater Commons, August 20, 2017, <https://howlround.com/cultural-apartheid-disability>.

work to communicate. And disability representation is taking a huge movement forward to help us do this better.

Chapter 2: Choreographing Access: The Bodies in the House

Access

In “Hamlet,” I set out to create an accessible performance. What would it take to limit barriers for audience members? What does it take to make a dance work as broadly accessible as possible? How many different communities can be included? Along the way other questions arose such as, whose role is it to make this work accessible? What seemed a generally simple task of limiting barriers sparked a larger question of community, visibility, and whether providing access is enough for engaging communities with disabilities.

There is no such thing as a fully accessible performance. People necessarily have competing needs. For example, someone with sensory processing disorders may require the sound at a performance to be at a lower level which may be a barrier for someone with hearing loss. Rather than claim I could do the impossible, or at the least the nearly impossible, I began referring to the performance as “broadly accessible” instead. There were access features in place to serve deaf populations and populations with blindness or vision loss, and we were prepared to accommodate patrons with mobility disabilities, but we certainly could NOT call the performance sensory-friendly (SF). Audience members with autism or sensory processing disorders would have benefitted from the touch tour, but that is where their positive experience with “Hamlet” may have ended.

The performance did offer a number of access features. ASL interpretation, provided by two different interpreters from First Chair Interpreted Productions, was available. The interpreter stood on the side of the stage, in front of seats reserved for patrons utilizing the ASL interpretation.

Audio description was provided by Ermyn King. AD is the act of describing

something visual, or translating visual stimuli into audio. Patrons who require this service receive a headset through which they hear the work described to them. While some AD services are recorded and played back, “Hamlet” was described live. In keeping with the representative nature of the access features, extra receivers were available for patrons who didn’t need AD but might like to listen to it to enhance their own experience.²³ I hoped this opportunity might offer a chance for people to learn about AD, but also to have a new experience watching dance. Unintentionally, King’s voice was also audible in the theater to patrons without headsets. The stenomask she used to transmit her voice was supposed to mask her voice from the rest of the theater, but the venue was so intimate

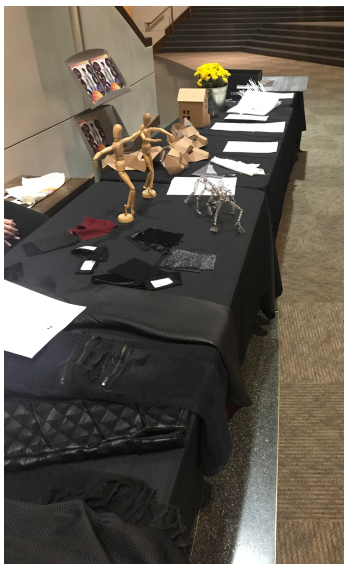


Figure 5: Photo by Christine Hands. Costumes by Alexa Duimstra. College Park, MD: 2018.

that even onstage a light murmur of sound was audible. This had the effect of making her a constant presence in the theater.

To provide additional stimuli for the blind and low vision populations, I arranged a touch tour. The touch tour is the perfect example of active and kinesthetic audience engagement. Costumes, props, and paint samples from the set were available to be touched and handled. Costume swatches from both works as well as a model of the set were available. Additionally, King provided metal and wooden figures which could be

moved into positions from the dance, allowing people to feel the shapes the bodies onstage would be making. We did not have anyone attend the touch tour who needed the services provided, but several people did investigate. Children who were at The Clarice

²³ See Appendix 2 for an example of signage encouraging audience members to use a headset.

were especially interested in this tactile experience.²⁴

In the end, we had to pull a dancer's costume from the touch tour after dress rehearsal. She had a life-threatening allergic reaction to an unidentified source after the first touch tour. While we encouraged people to sanitize their hands before handling costumes, we were unable to control the risk that something she was allergic to would end up on the fabric she would wear onstage. For her health and safety, we couldn't risk anyone touching her costume. This was a small but telling example of the way audience access comes into contact, and sometimes butts against, performer needs. A workaround lived in the use of fabric samples.

Beyond the touch tour, however, I had little to do with the access services. I was invested in the outcome but let the professionals handle the artistry of this communication. I had some communication with King about the project, but mostly she based her description off of rehearsal footage. I had a little more communication with Kevin Dyels from First Chair Interpreted Productions about the ASL interpretation but generally I made my work, knowing this access would be available, but without really putting my work into communication with the access features beyond making them available.

Early in the design process the projection designer Paul Deziel and I discussed whether to use open captioning or ASL interpretation as solutions for access. I made a largely aesthetic decision to hire an ASL interpreter. I wanted a body onstage representing a portion of the population who we were not representing through the dancers' bodies, calling attention to and giving a voice to people who communicate in

²⁴ See Appendix 3 for an example of the touch tour script, detailing information which was shared with patrons.

other ways. Whereas everyone could have experienced and also utilized the open captioning, I wanted the ASL interpreter to bring specific awareness to the presence of peoples who use ASL in our communities. The ASL interpreter was a visual presence for the whole theater, whether they could sign or not. I wanted the interpreter to have that constant presence for the audience.

To my surprise, a couple of weeks before the show opened, we received a request from a patron who was planning on attending and was deaf



Figure 6: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. From L to R: Kevin Dyels, Anna Liddle, and Hana Huie in “Hamlet.” Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

but not fluent in ASL. This sparked an immediate decision to provide scripts with small clip lights at request (available as patrons entered the theater) but brought up a bigger question. By providing a specific type of access I had inadvertently excluded peoples with hearing loss or deafness who were not fluent in ASL as well as patrons using another form of sign language, such as British Sign Language. Peoples with hearing loss, especially those who may experience hearing loss later in life, often do not learn ASL. While The Clarice does provide assistive listening devices, this was not as broadly accessible as other choices at our disposal.²⁵ I was struck by how easy it would have been, with a projection designer, live board operator, and projectors all over our space, to

²⁵ Assistive listening devices are used to enhance people’s hearing.

open caption the work in a way which was aesthetically interesting and also provided access to not just the patrons who use ASL but also patrons who do not sign.

That said, supratitles or subtitles, stuck on a screen or a wall in the way an opera provides them, could be considered a visual eyesore for some designers. A designer making that argument, *I don't want this screen here because it negatively impacts the hearing audience*, is problematic but not without merit. There is no reason the access features can't be designed into the show rather than slapped on at the end, as if an afterthought. The designers and disabled audience deserve an integrated design which considers access from the start. It was too late in the design process to bring text back into the projection design, but I thought that in other works or future iterations of "Hamlet" perhaps projected text would be a more accessible solution, providing access for patrons who can and cannot sign.

Joel Snyder, audio describer, notable author, and AD trainer, writes about the benefits of AD for patrons without low vision or blindness. While AD is ultimately a service for those with vision disabilities, he writes, "It is useful for anyone who wants to truly notice and appreciate a more full perspective on any visual event."²⁶ I find this idea fascinating for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons is that dance is sometimes seemingly inaccessible for people who have not studied dance. As a graduate teaching assistant, I notice many of my students struggle to find meaning when witnessing a dance event. But Snyder purports, "AD conveys the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—the rest of us, sighted folks who see but who may not observe."²⁷ AD can provide an entry point for new dance

²⁶ Joel Snyder, "Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal," *International Congress Series* 1282 (2005): 937, doi:10.1016/j.ics.2005.05.215.

²⁷ Snyder, "Audio Description," 937.

observers, regardless of their vision abilities.

This is an interesting connection because several times I found I was concerned the people in charge of access services were "giving away" more to audience members than I was comfortable with. I was concerned they were offering too much information to people using the access services. Dyels had requested what I interpreted as "Spark Notes" for my script: annotations to help to distill the heavily deconstructed language to guide the signers in deciding how to sign it. I provided this but I was surprised when later Dyels, Front of House Staff, and my rehearsal director agreed to print out this very annotated script instead of the one I had already provided for audience members (without annotations). A compromise was achieved in presenting a script with some annotations.²⁸ Still, this decision may have seemed like a guest services decision, but ultimately as a choreographer I was heavily invested in the experience of the guests who needed access services as well as the patrons who didn't. I didn't want anyone having "insider" information other hearing or sighted patrons might not. As the choreographer, I didn't want patrons to know that a particular scene was choreographed based on Gertrude's state of being. I wanted patrons to witness the physicality of the dancers onstage and make their own connections based on their personal experiences and preferences.

Likewise, King also provided insider information in her pre-show talk, defining and explaining modern dance's departure from ballet, in addition to reviewing the storyline of *Hamlet*. But other sighted and hearing guests in the theater didn't have this information. I later spoke to Esther Geiger, who works with Joel Snyder to help script his AD for dance, and King and Geiger both pointed out that blind and low vision patrons may face excessive barriers to access in the dance world, which means "Hamlet" could be

²⁸ See Appendix 4 for the script available to patrons at the door.

their first experience with dance. Maybe providing this extra information is not as much special treatment as attempting to achieve equity. Some venues offer dance classes as part of their access services in order to allow patrons a kinesthetic experience with dance.

I thought that this information King offered might have helped non-disabled patrons who were struggling with “Hamlet” to find meaning in the work. Upon reflection, I thought that maybe I should have provided this information for everyone, rather than just the patrons using AD. In my consideration of access, in spite of trying to be as broad as possible, I still may not have gone broad enough. In thinking of access as a service provided to peoples with physical barriers to entry, I failed to consider the general population who we regard as neurotypical and non-disabled who may yet come up against roadblocks to digesting the work.

And yet I also have the control, as a choreographer, to say I only want to give so much information away. Where do I draw the line between spoon-feeding an audience my performance, and allowing them to have an active experience? I want the audience to have the agency to make a decision about what they are viewing. In a scene in which I pulse with my hand on my heart I may be thinking about my mother, I may have told the cast this is Hamlet mourning his father, and the audience may see something totally different. They may see a dancer alone. They may think of Laertes weeping for Ophelia. They may see remorse. It all depends on their experiences and what they notice. Offering too much information could also limit the audience’s experience, forcing them into a passive role rather than encouraging active engagement with the work. As a dance educator, and as an advocate for communal growth through art, my preference is to encourage audience engagement. I find that while I may have made other choices to encourage the audience to find meaning in the work, I would not have provided more

information like Dyels and King were requesting.

Still I am unable to reach a compromise in my competing desires. I want to provide patrons who have access needs a positive experience, but simultaneously I want to provide them an experience that is similar to the experience the rest of the audience is having. Providing access is not the same as metaphorically holding someone's hand and guiding them through an experience. In a series of vignettes which author John D'Agata has written about Martha Graham, he recounts being an audio describer for a Graham concert, "I'm their eyes- the head usher reminds

me- but not their interpreter, which means words like *scary* and *boring* and *like* and *therefore* are out of the question."²⁹ D'Agata is implying the same thing Geiger, Snyder, and King insist- that the job of the audio describer is to translate the visual aspects of the work, not to insert their own interpretations.

If sighted patrons are watching the show with confusion and unrest, trying to remember the story of *Hamlet*, shouldn't all of the audience members be having that



Figure 7: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. Christine Hands in "Hamlet." Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

²⁹ John D'Agata, "Martha Graham, Audio Description Of," *The Georgia Review* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 318.

same experience? Or because all of these populations are having a different experience already, is this a moot point?

While listening to King's descriptions, at times I wanted to jump in and re-write portions of her speech. I wanted to change the language to reflect perhaps what I had envisioned, or to draw the audience's eye to what I wanted them to see, rather than what King was describing. Having heard King's description, I think that next time I use an audio describer I will be more invested in the descriptions, exercising more control.

And yet, each audience member sitting in the theater, regardless of ability, has a different experience seeing a work. Can I really exert this level of control? Columnist Eleanor Margolies writes, "At best, a description is a negotiation between members of the creative team, but it will always be partial, reflecting the viewpoint, experience and limitations of the describer."³⁰ It is the audio describer's task to decide the focus. While there will be variations of interpretation amongst many audience members, the audio describer is tasked with determining what is critical and what is the driving idea. An audio describer can't possibly describe everything; their task is to decide what to describe. The choreographer's main focus guides their description. And this is exactly why I think the choreographer matters- who better to determine what is critical than the choreographer?

Geiger pointed out that she recently spoke to dancers in Heidi Latsky Dance who were writing their own AD mostly out of necessity: audio describers trained in dance are few and far between in the United States.³¹ Yet, Geiger questioned whether this was the

³⁰ Eleanor Margolies, "Going to Hear a Dance," *Performance Research* 20, no. 6 (2015): 18, doi:10.1080/13528165.2015.1111044.

³¹ Heidi Latsky Dance is a New York dance company working with disabled and non-disabled dancers.

best choice. Not only is taking the choreographer's time and energy away from their task of making dance, but also the experience of the choreographer is very much inside of the work. She suggested that perhaps someone with a little perspective on the work would be a better choice. While I might know that a section is about grief, from the outside each viewer will interpret this differently. Some might see tears of sadness, others may see tears of remorse, or guilt. It would be entirely possible for me as a choreographer to choose language and metaphor that “gives it away,” inadvertently coddling the audience, which is precisely what I have been seeking to avoid.

Still, I might argue that as a choreographer it is my artistic voice that is the best voice to be translating my work across senses. These words which come from me, even if providing an experience that is different from seeing a work, offer an experience that is wholly mine. And yet I am not the expert. So many choreographers don't have a passion for language or any experience in description. Maybe collaboration is a good choice, not for the sake of our work but so that the audience can have the best experience possible, with the perspective of the choreographer contributing to the work and also the expert wordsmith in the audio describer guiding the AD.

How do we negotiate the experiences all of our audience members are having, especially if accessibility is not on our radar as a dancemaker? Does access need to be on our radar? Does every choreographer need to have a say in the access to their work? For some choreographers, perhaps the task of providing access is daunting, or even unsavory. I asked King how much communication she usually has with choreographers. The answer was not much. It's not standard practice, at least in the United States, for audio describers to work with the choreographers or directors. In fact, King recounted one experience where an international dance company even asked why AD was being provided. It is a

visual art form, why try to accommodate these audience members?

While I initially gasped at this notion, shocked at the discourtesy of this remark, in retrospect many creators are aware of their audience. Someone making a work with nudity or other adult themes and content is not trying to include children- or they would alter their content. So too perhaps a choreographer is not trying to include peoples with blindness. While I believe we should be creating more access, this is where the venue and presenter really matters. As access is often the responsibility of the presenting organization, choreographers or directors who don't consider audience accessibility as part of their work don't need to. While I think there is a place for creators to consider access from the beginning, either as a part of their work or as a constant consideration, the presenting organization is the liaison between maker and audience and ultimately has the responsibility to its community and its patrons. And this is why the presenting organization is so important.

The presenting organization knows its patrons and its audience. For example, The Clarice is in an area without good public transit, where peoples with blindness may be unlikely to live, but with schools, many of which service large populations of students with autism. The Clarice has good relationships with schools and therefore the community might need SF performances more than accessibility for peoples with low vision. This might be a better place to invest money for this organization, knowing their community.³²

“Hamlet” could never have been a SF performance. Loud noises, startling shifts in lighting and sound, and an atmosphere which required audience members to be quietly seated for the duration of the work are among the aspects of the performance that

³² See Note for more information about SF performances.

excluded some peoples with autism. In addition to the seating and technical elements which were integral to the work, any audience members who did leave their seats, as sometimes happens in SF performances where peoples who are sensory seeking may come onto the stage in order to touch something particularly enticing, could have caused a patron or performer injury. Moreover, as performers our needs would have been in direct conflict with the audience. In a section of the dance in which I, as a performer, quietly pulse my body in a dance of mourning, even the faintest whisper in the theater could throw me out of character. An audience which moved and made noise would have been a big challenge for the performance.

This is not to say I won't create other works that are designed to be SF, but this is exactly the point. "Hamlet" was not designed from its outset to be a SF show. It was designed to be accessible to other communities. Adding a SF veneer over top of it would be a sloppy attempt at access. While a venue can offer access services to patrons, there is a question of whether this relationship really goes as far as needed to create access.

So I find myself drawn back to the idea of considering access at the outset of a work's creation. Louise Fryer, a British radio broadcaster and audio describer, writes about a show she created in which AD created the script, rather than describing the show in retrospect. Fryer writes, "I was effectively influencing the action...In traditional AD, it is the action that leads to the description, but in this production, it was the other way around, as my descriptions ended up generating the action."³³ In the work, Fryer was at times a part of the play rather than a soft murmur in the background.

Likewise with open captioning being a part of the design process, AD could be

³³ Louise Fryer, "Staging the Audio Describer: An Exploration of Integrated Audio Description," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2018): 13, doi:10.18061/dsq.v38i3.649.

incorporated in other ways. Alice Sheppard exercises control over many of her access features. For example, Sheppard has considered her AD not as an afterthought but has gone so far as to reimagine what AD can be. Alice Sheppard comments that, “The best practice [for audio describing dance]...is if you describe the facts of what is happening onstage. The experience of that description for users is that it is not artistic.”³⁴ She asks about how to render a dance in sound. Sheppard and her team developed an app called Audimance. It is designed by Laurel Lawson, Sheppard’s partner in *Descent*. “It translates movement into a sonic experience with multiple content streams, including poetry and sonic renderings of dance alongside traditional audio description.”³⁵ The audience has the opportunity to DJ their way through the show. Sheppard has considered the patrons without sight and provided them with something interesting and engaging. They have not been an afterthought, but integral to the making of her work, in so much that she even made another event for them at her event.

In “Hamlet” access was considered from the outset to offer representation. Access was a choice I made rather than a necessary part of the work. “Hamlet” would still be the same dance without these access services. This is unlike Alice Sheppard’s work. Everything about her mission as a dance artist means access is not a choice, but a necessity. Sheppard began dancing because of a dare. Homer Avila, a dancer who lost his leg to cancer but didn’t stop dancing, the subject of the 2006 documentary “Phoenix Dance,” dared her to take a class, and she did.³⁶ Now Sheppard works as a dancer,


³⁴ Alice Sheppard, “Dance, Disability, and Discourse,” Temple University (2018), Performance and Talk.

³⁵ Kevin Gotkin, “Alice Sheppard is Moving The Conversation Beyond Loss and Adversity,” *Dance Magazine*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/disability-dance-2574024089.html>.

³⁶ Homer Avila, *Phoenix Dance*, Fanlight Productions, 2006.

producer, and choreographer full time. Sheppard’s work is defined by disability culture and aesthetics. In *Descent* a giant ramp graces the stage, a veritable playground for the dancers in wheelchairs who get to experience a stage made just for them. For Sheppard representation can’t be separated from the audience to the stage space. Her shows are regularly sold out, by disabled and non-disabled audience members.

Part of the process of accessibility in “Hamlet” was also the marketing and community engagement. I worked with The Clarice to market to patrons who required ASL Interpretation and AD to enjoy the show. Without going into too much detail, emails and flyers were distributed and I even offered a bus to a few organizations with low-vision and blind members of their community. Audience members were surveyed following the performance via email. This was a voluntary survey and out of the 350 attendees 30 responses were gathered. Of these 30 respondents 2 respondents answered that the access features provided were necessary for them to see the show. 4 respondents answered that the access features provided were helpful but not necessary. I know one of

If you used these features, were they necessary for you to engage with the performance? 

22 responses

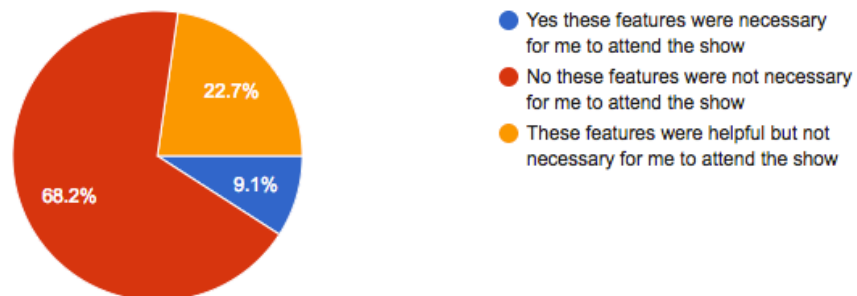


Figure 8: Screenshot of a chart generated by Google Forms.

the dancers’ mothers used the AD to supplement her low vision, but whether she was one

of the four respondents is unclear. Front of House and King also surveyed audience members informally and confirmed there were very few patrons in attendance who needed our access services.

While I was aware at the beginning of my process that there was a chance no one would attend the show who needed ASL interpretation or AD, that was not the point. Of course I would have loved to have a bus full of people experiencing dance through King's description, but I do not feel any of this work was in vain. As Snyder writes, "All people need to be full participants in their nation's cultural life. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access."³⁷ I learned a lot through this process. But moreover, everyone in the audience at each performance had the chance to experience access features. More importantly, "Hamlet" provided a service unavailable at most shows The Clarice presents. An invitation was extended to a community often left out of the conversation. A space was opened up in our building. We took a step closer to greater equity and while we may have had marginal traffic through our access features, I am not discouraged. On the contrary, I believe that these open doors and minds have the potential to grow and increase exponentially. And maybe others too will begin creating work where access is no longer an afterthought, but a part of the process.

³⁷ Snyder, "Audio Description," 939.

Chapter 3: To She or Not to She: Playing the Role of Hamlet

Inclusion

Playing the role of William Shakespeare's Hamlet is, for many actors, a crowning accomplishment in one's theatrical career. While many men have played the role of the Danish Prince, there is also theatrical history dating back to the 1700's of women playing the role.³⁸ Before beginning my own take on the Prince Hamlet, which I emphatically insisted would not be "another white male Hamlet," I considered a number of film and theatrical versions of this famous play, exploring how different actresses have embodied this character who has fascinated audiences for hundreds of years, before adding my own dance to the canon. I considered different embodiments of this role, seeking to define what drew me to this story, and this character.

Ultimately my love affair with Hamlet goes beyond a footnote or a simple answer. He's a character as complex as any flawed human, routinely refusing to be categorized or summarized. Through the 1,048 lines and seven monologues Hamlet recites during the play, Shakespeare offers us a deep look at a man troubled by his own inner demons, struggling between the undefinable limits of wrong and right following the untimely death of his father. Hamlet exists between binaries; he is a man capable of a great depth of love and also cruelty. He is a character who struggles between clear and decisive action, and intellectualizing consideration which slows his decision making. He is a man of great intellect and also physical prowess.

³⁸ Leslie Bennets, "Why Not a Woman as Hamlet," *New York Times*, November 28, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/28/theater/why-not-a-woman-as-hamlet.html>.

In these multiple iterations of his character, Shakespeare offers us a chance to use Hamlet as a mirror to ourselves, reflecting what we want and need to see as much as he offers the story of a man. In Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* he recites the infamous "To be or not to be" soliloquy facing a mirror, contemplating his mortality as he takes a long and measured walk toward his own reflection.³⁹ Unbeknownst to him, Polonius and Claudius are behind the glass, unseen voyeurs hidden behind his own reflection. For me, each of us are Claudius and Polonius, watching and listening as another human reflects, unwittingly, the deepest crevasses of our hearts. Hamlet's ability to reflect and mirror our own human condition is what has brought me back to the play year after year.

With such a complex character full of potential, it is no wonder women and men have sought this role. I will argue that the most complex and fluid physical interpretations of Hamlet's shifting gender bring to life the most successful performances of *Hamlet*. In exploring iterations of *Hamlet* I find that actresses who successfully embody and perform Hamlet's gender ultimately offer a complex and transgressive physicality that refuses to shackle the male character to a gender binary. And so too does Hamlet continue to refuse a polarized reading. Perhaps this articulates our own desires as a viewer for a complex physicality onstage that echoes the matrix of identities we individually inhabit. How many of us slide neatly and comfortably into binary categories?

When women played men onstage in the 18th and 19th centuries these parts were referred to as "breeches roles" or "travesti roles." While these roles were often titillating for the male audience members, they also point to a larger movement of women's liberation.⁴⁰ According to Dr. Sophie Duncan of Oxford University, "Hamlet is not

³⁹ Kenneth Branagh, *Hamlet*, Castle Rock Entertainment (Warner Home Video: 2007). DVD.

⁴⁰ Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 11.

merely the most famous character in all of drama, and an archetype for masculinity, but an entire acting tradition...For a woman to intervene in that history is an incredibly radical and complicated act, taking up the ultimate men's space in drama."⁴¹ While I find the idea of women usurping male authority through their performance of the Danish Prince incredibly compelling, I ultimately disagree with Dr. Duncan. I would argue that Hamlet is and always has been a character with a slippery gender.

In *The Mystery of Hamlet*, written in 1881, Edward P. Vining posits that Hamlet is a cross-dressing woman.⁴² Sara Bernhardt, who played Hamlet in the 1800's, is reported to have said she thought of Hamlet as a woman as well.⁴³ Many actors play Hamlet with a shifting physicality, sliding between masculine and feminine gendering.

I focus on gender performance of Hamlet largely because my own version of "Hamlet" sought to confuse gender as a way to offer more people inclusion into this weighty acting tradition. This is not an analysis of gender identity but specifically an analysis of gender performance. Judith Butler famously theorized that gender is not fixed but is instead a performance of behaviors which are coded as masculine and feminine.⁴⁴ This argument will serve as a standard for discussions of gender performance hereafter. In this study I will not be analyzing any trans performers. An investigation of transsexuality and Hamlet is an area for further research, and it would be an interesting topic. In the 1700s English performer Charlotte Charke may have been the first biologically-born woman to play the role of Hamlet. Offstage, Charke identified as

⁴¹ *qtd. in* Jack Doyle, "Thy Name is Woman," *OZY*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.ozy.com/flashback/thy-name-is-woman/37337>.

⁴² Edward Payson Vining, *The Mystery of Hamlet* (Philadelphia: J.B. Pippincott and Co, 1881).

⁴³ Bennets, "Why Not a Woman as Hamlet."

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Charles Brown and cross-dressed as a man.⁴⁵ I will also not be explicitly considering race or cultural performance in this chapter. While my cast featured two black performers, an Asian woman, and two white females, I was conscious of the racial diversity but not in direct communication with racial issues through the work. The intention of the work was not a direct commentary on race or race relations. On the other hand, the work was in direct communication with gender both through costuming and movement and research. Assuming our gender is a performance, what are the markings of masculine and feminine gender? How do we define masculine and feminine gender performance?

Gender performance varies culturally as well as over time. Class, race, and country of origin can impact one's perception of gender. Nevertheless, in my research I found enough similarities between readings of gender as far back as the 1800s to today across Europe and North America to warrant some broad strokes when defining masculinity and femininity.

Reviews of Sarah Bernhardt tell us that when she did travesti roles she altered her physicality, adopting a certain swagger.⁴⁶ In comparison, when Diane Torr performed in drag in the 1990s, Stephen Bottoms describes being amazed at the change in physicality as Diane transformed to Danny. In the introduction to the book Bottoms and Torr co-authored, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, Bottoms writes, "Danny walked on slowly, planting his feet squarely onto the stage floor as if he owned it, and then stopped, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at us."⁴⁷ One hundred years later and swagger is still masculine. Bottoms goes on to describe how

⁴⁵ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36-38.

⁴⁶ Heather McPherson, "Sarah Bernhardt: Portrait of the Actress as Spectacle," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 20, no. 4 (1999): 420, doi:10.1080/08905499908583459.

⁴⁷ Torr and Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles*, 1.

Danny strolls around the stage carelessly, gaining the audience's command by doing almost nothing. Danny takes up time and space.

The space Danny takes up is echoed in the New York City MTA's campaign to



Figure 9: Photo by Christine Hands. MTA Subway Poster. New York, NY: August 2015.

“Stop the Spread,” which is clearly directed at males.⁴⁸ Images on the buses and subways in New York City show an image of a cartoon with its legs spread, taking up more space than the single seat it is allotted on the crowded train. The implication is that men take up

space, whether or not it is considerate.

Another coded gender behavior implies that women are shrewd, using wit and manipulation to accomplish their ends while men directly address their needs. Vining writes, “Woman, has less strength to accomplish her desires by straightforward action, so she is compelled to bring them to pass by shrewdness and subtlety. Where strength fails, finesse succeeds.”⁴⁹ Eden Davies analyzes Warren Lamb's work with gender and movement in *Beyond Dance: Laban's Legacy of Movement Analysis*. She posits, “A woman giving instructions runs the risk of being bossy if her authority is not tempered with some humor or caring affection.”⁵⁰ This rings true for women in the workplace today who risk being called “bitchy” if they portray any characteristics of leadership that

⁴⁸ MTA, New York City Subway, 2015 Poster Campaign.

⁴⁹ Vining, *The Mystery of Hamlet*, 47.

⁵⁰ Eden Davies, *Beyond Dance* (London: Brechin Books Ltd., 2001), 157.

their male counterparts may freely possess. The idea that women must use cunning rather than strength has been around since the 1800s.

Yet, it is Vining's point that Hamlet is a woman because "Hamlet preferred to win by indirect means, rather than by driving straight forward to accomplish his end" which strikes me.⁵¹ I find this concept of direction being associated with masculinity echoed elsewhere. In the early 1900s Warren Lamb posits that, "The combination of bound flow with directing is more often seen in a man."⁵² According to Lamb, men associate free flow with indirect movement and decelerating. While Lamb doesn't exactly qualify that men aren't indirect, rather noting they prefer direction, he also notes that in men directness is associated with action. When men are indirect, they decelerate, maybe even grinding to a halt. In the article "The Terpsichorean Tramp," published in 2001, Paul Franklin claims that dance is feminine because strength and effort is masked.⁵³ This also echoes Lamb's analysis from the early 1900s that when women are directing, their movement is graceful, but men use bound energy to direct.

Likewise, certified movement analyst Janet Kaylo uses Jung's anima and animus to evaluate embodied gender in her article "Anima and Animus Embodied: Jungian Gender and Laban Movement Analysis." She writes:

"James Hillman... states that animus as 'the rational soul in man' is behind the ego of Western culture. When we think of this particular ego, is it penetrating, precise and Directional? Would we consider the ego of Western culture Light, Decelerating, and accommodating through Shaping?"⁵⁴

⁵¹ Vining, *The Mystery of Hamlet*, 48.

⁵² Davies, *Beyond Dance*, 151.

⁵³ Paul B. Franklin, "The Terpsichorean Tramp: Unmanly Movement in the Early Films of Charlie Chaplin," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001): 49.

⁵⁴ Janet Kaylo, "Anima and Animus Embodied," *Body, Movement, and Dance in Psychotherapy* 4, no. 3 (2009): 182, doi:10.1080/17432970902917984.

The question, used in rhetorical fashion, seems to answer itself; the implication is that the ego of the West (with its colonizing ways) is penetrating, precise, and directional. These similarities between different centuries and mediums are notable, and worth considering when analyzing bodies onstage. Bound and directional movement is a hallmark of masculinity.

Effeminacy is another way to define and clarify coded gender performance. David Gere writes that effeminacy is never a reference to the feminine. It is reserved for the male rendered “not male.”⁵⁵ In Joe Goode’s dance, *29 Effeminate Gestures*, choreographed in 1987, the choreographer defines movement that is not male but is instead effeminate. Goode establishes rules that the male body must follow and then proceeds to demonstrate twenty-nine ways an effeminate body can break these rules. According to Goode, “Masculine fingers never flutter.”⁵⁶ The male body should wield strong and directing energy and the body should not be flowing or graceful. The legs should be spread and the man can take up time and space. He has that luxury. He should be decisive and he does not shape to those around him. And he better not have a broken wrist.

Using these definitions of masculine and feminine gender performance, I can look at the bodies of women performing Hamlet and analyze how they are embodying gender in their performance of the role. To be clear, the above definitions of feminine and masculine behaviors are neither steadfast nor definitive. They do not encompass all the complex and individual ways different communities of people perform gender in Western

⁵⁵ David Gere, “29 Effeminate Gestures,” in *Dancing Desires*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 358.

⁵⁶ David Gere, “29 Effeminate Gestures: Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy,” in *Dancing Desires*, ed. Jane C. Desmond, 357.

culture and do not account for the ways we each shift freely in our physical selves from moment to moment. Nevertheless, they offer a way to read the body based on our social norms and expectations. They are not intended to shackle or dictate the gender of any body, rather to understand the way our society has, for hundreds of years, encouraged men and women to behave. In understanding the ways some bodies refuse these categorizations, I am suggesting that the space of the theater offers a way to undo some of these limiting expectations.

I previously referred to Bernhardt and the way her body apparently strutted onstage in breeches roles. In the brief surviving film clip of Bernhardt's *Hamlet*, I can see her Hamlet is physical and lithe, quick and sharp, a boyish Hamlet in spite of Bernhardt's age of fifty-four.⁵⁷ His thin legs are neatly on display.⁵⁸ (One could argue this accommodates Laura Mulvey's famous theory that men act and women appear.⁵⁹) Accounts from the period herald her performance. In one account, "To the left of the Queen stands Hamlet, purposeful and unbending, his feet widely spaced, his left arm fully extended, and the index finger of his left hand pointing."⁶⁰ In this account he is described as having a very masculine physicality. Other accounts note Bernhardt's "little white hands"⁶¹ and especially in England (Bernhardt was French) the press wrote that it was impossible to forget Hamlet was being played by a woman.⁶² Responses to Bernhardt

⁵⁷ "1899 Hamlet, the Fencing Scene with Laertes," YouTube, accessed May 14, 2018, https://youtu.be/Mp_v_dP8s-8.

⁵⁸ Reviewers of Sarah Bernhardt always referred to Bernhardt using male pronouns when she played Hamlet. I too will follow this tradition by using he/ him/ his pronouns when describing the movement of performers playing the part of a male Hamlet.

⁵⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane De Gay (London: Routledge, 1998), 270-275.

⁶⁰ Gerda Taranow, *The Bernhardt Hamlet: Culture and Context*, Artists and Issues in the Theatre 4 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 163-164.

⁶¹ Taranow, *The Bernhardt Hamlet*, 165.

⁶² Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, 111.

were mixed, colored by culture depending on whether the press was coming from France or America or England.

Bernhardt appears to be balancing on the edge of a transgressive Hamlet, especially considering she was notable for her femininity in other roles. Bernhardt herself is quoted as saying that it is precisely her femininity that made her apt for the role of Hamlet, claiming that as a woman of fifty-four she could contribute both physical agility befitting a youth and also mature thought.⁶³ As a woman past her youth, one can ask what leading roles were left for Bernhardt, and while she may not have taken on the role of Hamlet to deconstruct or complicate his gender but rather to bolster her own career, nevertheless her *Hamlet* is infamous in theater history. Moreover, Bernhardt not only served as the lead performer but also as producer and director for the performance.⁶⁴ No matter what may have transpired onstage, ultimately she was the prime “act-er” behind her performance, claiming her authority over the production in every aspect.

Another star who produced her own *Hamlet* is Asta Nielsen. In the silent film from the 1920s, produced by Nielsen’s production company, ArtFilm, the story is rearranged to be loosely based off of Edward P. Vining’s *The Mystery of Hamlet*. Thus, through a series of events Hamlet is born a girl, but raised as a prince. Hamlet is secretly a woman.⁶⁵ I find this role allows Nielsen to be simultaneously empowered in her masculinity and her femininity. As a woman, her femininity is not portrayed as a thing of shame or the cause of her inability to take action and murder her Uncle, as with many male portrayals of the role, but as a part of her complex identity as the secretly female

⁶³ Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, 100.

⁶⁴ Taranow, *The Bernhardt Hamlet*, xvii.

⁶⁵ Asta Nielsen, *Hamlet, 1921* (Deutsches Filminstitut, 2011), DVD.

heir to the throne of Denmark.⁶⁶ In a heated argument with her mother she clenches her fists and darts toward her mother in anger, she holds her concealed breasts and cries (via inter-titles), “I am not a man... I am not allowed to be a woman.” She rests the back of her delicate wrist on her forehead before collapsing on a bench. Angered, she rises, her face leering at the Queen as she lunges forward, fisted hands clenched behind her body as if ready to swing either one of them at her retreating mother. Her movement is at times direct, aggressive, and bound.

Yet when mourning the death of her father, her body sighs over his coffin, her eyes never fixed but indirectly scanning the space; her body is free-flowing and light as she caresses the dead king’s final resting place. In this moment she is neither stereotypically masculine nor feminine, grieving her father with an unassuming presence. Nielsen’s Hamlet carouses with the lads at University, fences with Fortinbras, drinks beer heartily, and storms into her mother’s wedding feast, cloak sweeping behind her, taking the space of her own palace in stride as a prince should. She also eyes Horatio with desire, seduces an unwitting Ophelia, and dies in battle, stabbed through the heart. She demonstrates power and traditional trappings of princely masculinity even while in another scene she leans against her mother’s throne, eyes scanning the room, body still and somber, secluded and apart.

Her performance is multifaceted in its levels and complexities, yet as a woman I find her freed from the constraints of requisite gender expression. Her solace and angst need not be the result of an effeminate disposition but rather the secret she has kept bound inside of her.

⁶⁶ I use “she/her/hers” pronouns with Nielsen since the character of Hamlet in this film version is secretly a woman.

On the other hand, Maxine Peake's portrayal of Hamlet from 2015 (with Peake playing Hamlet, directed by Margaret Williams) left me with an oversimplified understanding of the melancholy Prince.⁶⁷ She plays the role almost as a drag role, stereotypically masculine, the only tell-tale sign of femininity are the delicate hands and wrists that haven't quite made the transition to a strutting and bound prince in the way the rest of Peake's body has. In an interview, Peake said that the most important thing she brought to the role was playing Hamlet as "a Northern working class woman."⁶⁸ From Northern England herself, Peake certainly has an inherent physical relationship with her working class upbringing. Peake played this role in Northern England: the work was premiered in Manchester. Peake played the role as a Northern Englishman to a Northern English audience. Peake's Hamlet feels a bit like the kind of lad you would find storming the football pitch and less like the Prince of England.

As Hamlet, Peake stands with legs spread, hands clasped behind his back.⁶⁹ He projects his lips and voice forward, mouth chewing the words in his accent as he angrily spits text at the other characters onstage. His head twitches on his neck and when he wipes his lips it's not with a finger but the whole arm, his movement bodily and full. His movement is consistently bound, direct, and explosive. He takes long swaggering steps and it is only sometimes, in the circle of an exposed wrist, or the body that seems to move in pieces away from the thrust of Laertes' sword, the left arm seemingly lost and dangling as the rest of him lunges and weaves, that we see the echo of femininity in this prince.

⁶⁷ Maxine Peake, *Hamlet* (Spirit Entertainment, 2015), DVD.

⁶⁸ Maxine Peake, "Creating a Female Hamlet," interview by Hay Festival, *Talking About Shakespeare*, Vimeo, July 18, 2016, video, 2:00, <https://vimeo.com/175228865>.

⁶⁹ While other characters in this version of *Hamlet* have had their genders changed, Peake's Hamlet remains male.

Yet this femininity is a seemingly leftover remnant of Peake's bodily experience rather than an intentional insight into our main character.

Hamlet kisses Ophelia with a hungry fervor, rubs a book along his crotch to vex Polonia (the mother-hen reimagining of Polonius) and follows moments of quiet with moments of vexed passion, arms sweeping across the space. This feels like a Hamlet who is not in touch with his feminine side. Peake's Hamlet feels like a very angry youth. While it would not serve my purpose to limit anyone's interpretation of Hamlet by demanding they embody the Prince as a man in touch with his feminine side, I find Peake's embodiment of Hamlet lacks dimension and dynamic. Always tensed, always ready to spring, energy pulsing beneath the surface, I have to ask if Peake's portrayal of this angry, twitching masculinity does more to shackle Hamlet to his gender (even if it is regionally specific) than to release him from it.

I find Peake's Hamlet lacks the depth of Nielsen's complex portrayal. While this spitting, angry Hamlet may present the bodily limitations of a contemporary working class Northern man clearly, a body limited by the expectations of his society, I find that constraining the body of the Danish Prince in this way presents a specific image, but not one that can unravel the age old problem which follows Hamlet from room to room, "What is a man?"⁷⁰ Nor does it address the question I am asking, "What else can this prince be?"

Perhaps the Hamlet I dream of is one that is in fact more androgynous than masculine. If I go back to the anima and animus, Jung's theory is that each of us possess femininity and masculinity. Perhaps what I want most in a performer embodying Hamlet is an actor in touch with both of these aspects. This idea of having multiple genders

⁷⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.5.33.

present in us is often the pass given to artists who are given license to be more free in their gender performance than the rest of society. According to Jean Cocteau, one of Charlie Chaplin's earliest French champions, the male artist "must be partly male and partly female."⁷¹ What I am missing in Peake is this understanding of Hamlet's potentiality.

Zainab Jah, a British-African actress, played the role of Hamlet at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia in 2015. Jah is one of two black women I came across in my research to take on the role of Hamlet. According to the director, Blanca Zizka, "Zainab's particular abilities - her presence and charisma, her strength with language, her physicality - suggested Hamlet to me."⁷² While Jah's embodiment of Hamlet is complicated by the intersectionality of her nationality as well as her black body, in this iteration I found Jah's performance was exactly what I have been looking for.⁷³

The first time we see Hamlet, he is sitting in a chair at the side of the stage. Hamlet takes time to answer, sitting with legs wide, taking up time and space.⁷⁴ He doesn't move from his seat until long after Horatio enters, jumping up and spinning, movement light but agitated. Jah's Hamlet is in some moments soft and subtle and in other moments explosive and overpowering. Hamlet leaps to and from the stage platform effortlessly, rarely still. In the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet is walking and gesturing indirectly, legs taking big strides. He shifts weight on one leg and then another, the wide stance unbalanced as if he is standing on uneven ground. Hamlet sits on

⁷¹ *qtd. in* Franklin, "The Terpsichorean Tramp," 52.

⁷² A.D. Amorosi, "At the Wilma, A 'Hamlet' That Upends Expectations," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 31, 2015, <https://www.wilmatheater.org/press/wilma-hamlet-upends-expectations>.

⁷³ Zainab Jah, *Hamlet* (Philadelphia: Wilma Theater, 2015), archival footage.

⁷⁴ Jah plays Hamlet as a man.

the edge of the platform, knees together. Suddenly his arms are bound and direct as his voice increases. He points directly but his arms are light again. The gestures have delicate fingers sometimes, and then sometimes a strong palm. Hamlet sweeps his arm across the front of the body, effort light, indirect, wrist circling and spiraling, then he claps his hands hard, arms bound. Then Hamlet settles into a traditionally masculine pose, elbows on knees, legs spread wide. Jah is moving, in the space of a single soliloquy, through a complex web of masculine and feminine movements.

It's not until Jah stands between the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that I realize how small she is. She barely comes up to their shoulders; she is the smallest performer onstage. Yet there is a presence to her which fills the space and the stage in the same way Torr's Danny commands space in spite of his small stature. Jah's physicality is unmatched onstage, and to me, Jah plays Hamlet in much the same way that Joseph Papp describes Diane Venora, who he directed as Hamlet in his 1982 production at the Public Theater in New York, "Diane is a strong Hamlet, but not a macho Hamlet; vulnerable, but not hysterical."⁷⁵ Jah's Hamlet is a man, the Prince of Denmark, but Jah herself is not playing the role as if trying to assert a masculine physicality. Jah plays the role as a human, vacillating from direct to indirect, light to strong, bound to free in a single moment onstage. The gendered coding is slippery and fluid. While for example David Tennant's Hamlet is only feminine when he is alone, and much more masculine when he is in the company of others, Jah's Hamlet feels free to perform as the moment and line call for, rather than any gender expectation which may be layered onto the character.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Bennets, "Why Not a Woman as Hamlet."

⁷⁶ David Tennant, *Hamlet with David Tennant*, Royal Shakespeare Company (BBC: 2010). DVD.

Thinking about all these female Hamlets takes me back to my favorite lanky white male Hamlet, Kenneth Branagh. In re-watching Branagh I find he too slides between femininity and masculinity, sometimes embodying both in a single moment. In his famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy he is slow and steady, taking space and time, his legs together rather than spread under his thin frame, his hand clasped in a fist that refuses to be bound or free, lightly gripped. When he cries at Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery” his body is tense, angry, and bound yet simultaneously indirect and fluid. He comes flying back into the frame with a complicated physicality that swings and spirals even as he careens directly toward Ophelia, body bound. As he pushes her across the space he is penetrating her space in an aggressive manner and yet his back is curved across her form, shaping and vulnerable even as he exerts his masculine presence.⁷⁷

Branagh’s portrayal of Hamlet is critically acclaimed, as was Nielsen’s. Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* was the first version to be filmed, and both Jah and Peake received international press for their portrayals. I think we can safely say that audiences don’t want a simple masculinity. The Hamlet we know and love is one that is as complicated as we are. I believe the reason we love Hamlet so much is that he echoes the many competing parts of ourselves.

How did my reading of these bodies impact my own choreographed portrayal of Hamlet? Returning to my own fascination with this character I realize that part of what draws me to him is this complex gender which is present in the physical portrayals but also the text of the play. While cis and straight, my own gender performance has been a complicated site of self-expression for as long as I can remember. The chance to not just embody but actually choreograph this complex human, categorically refusing to be tied to

⁷⁷ Branagh, *Hamlet*.

a single identity, is a heady prospect. The chance to embody this masculine physicality without losing my own femininity is an empowering prospect. In “Hamlet” I sought a layered gender performance. While seeking to find power and strength I don’t often associate with my own dancing, I also didn’t limit myself to a performance in drag. I sought a gender understanding which would not necessitate a reading of gender in a binary system but would allow for a slippery and sometimes uncomfortable refusal to be categorized.

In my “Hamlet” I offered moments of vulnerability pushed up against powerful and physical movement erupting out of the body with a roaring ferocity. For myself as a performer I intentionally sought a power that was heavy, grounded, and forceful in a way that feels unfamiliar. And yet in my solo early in the work I pulse quietly, the smallest clutch of my broken heart in stark contrast to the roaring fervor that comes later. Yet even in this contained moment of vulnerability in which I am indirect, shaping in self-care, my arms and abdominals pulse with a strength that was physically demanding and anything but light.

Costumed in black clothes which likewise refused to be feminine or masculine: half skirts, shoulder pads, and body armor didn't conceal the body nor mask it- instead exposing our skin and offering unexpected softness



Figure 10: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. From L to R: Christine Hands, Jasmine Mitchell, Hana Huie, Anna Liddle, and Nana Edu in "Hamlet." Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

and hardness on our forms. I did not seek masculine or feminine movement but sought more- more vulnerable, more powerful. While this movement is wrapped up in the history of codified gender behavior, and I was certainly aware of it, I didn't try to strip any of the dancers of our normal behaviors. Instead I raised the stakes. Mitchell had a movement solo though she is an actress first. I had vocal solos though I am a trained mover and uncomfortable using my voice onstage. Nana Edu is a soft-spoken and sometimes quiet mover who was asked to be powerful beyond the scope of his every day in the role of Claudius. Hana Huie, a stocky Asian woman with a strong ability to hold her emotions in, was given the chance to be heartbroken and later a powerhouse of fury as she raged across the stage. Light and airy Anna Liddle, a product of years of ballet

training, emerged with a voice like a foghorn as she settled into her hip and growled the name of her character,

“Ophelia.” Recognizing the history of gender performance offered me

a chance to work in conversation with it to intentionally empower

each performer without limiting their potential to make choices outside of their codified behavior.

While the audience may not have followed the story of *Hamlet* enough to understand characters throughout the moments onstage, what I believe I did accomplish was an empowerment of the bodies onstage through choreography that was dynamic with a range of potential. Each performer’s slipping in and out of the title role offered Shakespeare’s prince a chance to be more than man, but a human, interpreted through many different bodies and identities.

Where I think I fell short was actually my relationship with the script, rather than the bodies onstage. Through conversation and word of mouth I gathered that patrons unfamiliar with the play struggled to locate Shakespeare’s tale of *Hamlet* in my version of it. Which is no wonder, with characters switching from moment to moment, and at other times each of the five performers playing a different emotional state of the same



Figure 11: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. From L to R: Hana Huie and Christine Hands in “Hamlet.” Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

character. In one scene we directly translated the text into our physical bodies. I choreographed a version of Act 3 Scene 2, the scene in which Hamlet talks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in circles while they insist he come to his mother's room, but the section holds no distinguishable trademarks of the play. While the entire work was *Hamlet* to me, it was also about our human condition. Ultimately as I have proposed, Hamlet mirrors the myriad parts of ourselves. A clear narrative wasn't necessary for me to understand the work. As a choreographer I have some control over what an audience experiences, but abstracted narrative intentionally leaves the ebb and flow of the story in the audience's hands. Someone struggling with loss may have experienced grief while others may have seen conflict or passion. What one sees depends on one's own state.

I came to wonder if in the end the title of "Hamlet" created a stumbling block. The title of the work was chosen too early in the process. Since the marketing needed to go to print before I had percolated on the work as a whole, I chose the title "Hamlet." It was simple and clearly stated what I was doing. Perhaps a different title, a quote from the play, or even a title which didn't allude to *Hamlet* at all, would have allowed audience members to find their own meaning and story in the work, rather than seeking a narrative that didn't exist. I wanted audience members familiar with the play to be able to put my dance in communication with Shakespeare's play, though. Alternatively, program notes could have provided this resource, but likewise removed the agency of the audience to see what they needed to see in the work (as discussed in Chapter 2). Still, as a gendered reading no one could doubt that the humans onstage were empowered and fluid in this reading of the bard's tale.

More than for my own personal gain, according to Torr and Bottoms, embodying new gender identities allows us to begin to challenge and liberate ourselves from

oppressive gender norms, “Alternative stylizations of the body may therefore open up alternative possibilities for lived experience.”⁷⁸ They ask, “How else might I live in the world? How else might the world respond to me? What unexpected pleasures might this experience give rise to? And how might power relations, in the process, be reconfigured?”⁷⁹ Jill Dolan posits we can use the stage “as a laboratory in which to reconstruct new, nongenderized identities. And in the process, we can change the nature of theater itself.”⁸⁰ Audrey L. MacNevin uses the classroom to allow students to embody other physicalities. She writes, “Subjecting one’s own body to the physical gestures and proxemics of others adds a concrete, visceral dimension to the otherwise abstract sociological concept of ethnocentrism.”⁸¹ By embodying other physicalities, in other words, we are challenging assumptions and can begin to build bridges rather than make rules.

And here is where this research meets my work with disability. “Hamlet” is doing something similar to what *A Duet with Melissa* does- letting me try on a new physicality and put it on display for an unexpecting audience in the safe confines of play-acting. Here in this space where radical transgression is not threatening but to be expected (it is called acting after all) we can challenge audience expectation, leaving them perhaps uncomfortable and confused but with an experience of representation that is now a part of their human experience. And slowly over time these experiences and memories can start to shift our society toward more acceptance, more empowerment, more diversity.

⁷⁸ Torr and Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles*, 31.

⁷⁹ Torr and Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles*, 34.

⁸⁰ Jill Dolan, “Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?,” in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover: Tufts University, 1992), 8.

⁸¹ Audrey L. MacNevin, “Embodying Sociological Mindfulness: Learning About Social Inequality Through the Body,” *Teaching Sociology* 32, no. 3 (2004): 320, doi:10.1177/0092055X0403200306.

For me, embodying new possibilities in my dancing does all of these things. But more importantly, if Hamlet is, as we have said, one of the meatiest roles in theater history, why shouldn't every performer, regardless of how they perform gender, have a shot at it? After all, we've been ingesting transgressive Hamlets since the 1700s. Isn't it time to release the expectations of gender and just let Hamlet, and by extension all of us, be?



Figure 12: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. From L to R: Jasmine Mitchell and Nana Edu in "Hamlet" performing "Be/ Not to Be." Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

Chapter 4: Dancing Our Future: The Unexpected Match of Dance and Sci-Fi

Reinvention

“All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.”⁸²

This quote from Octavia E. Butler’s acclaimed work of speculative fiction, *Parable of the Sower*, is widely used by scholars considering science fiction (sci-fi) beyond its entertainment potential. Octavia E. Butler, a pioneering black woman in a field dominated by white men, conceived of complex and dynamic characters and realities. In *Parable of the Sower* Lauren, a young woman of color in a futuristic America falling apart at the seams, creates a religion known as Earthseed. The God of Earthseed is Change.

“The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.”⁸³

While Lauren’s utopian religion is far from perfect, this simple statement perfectly encompasses the canon of sci-fi in the service of social justice. The radical imagining that Lauren practices echoes the works of other sci-fi writers and conceivers. The metaphor holds even more clearly as no creator’s work offers perfection, but an imperfect creation can do the work of moving society in a direction that seeks to limit

⁸² Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Steven Stories Press, 1993), 13.

⁸³ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 13.

and/or expose oppression. “Hamlet” was located in a sci-fi world, created through a joint effort by the designers and also the movement of the body. Sound, costumes, light, set, and projection worked together to place “Hamlet” in a world outside of our own. This layer was added to an already heavily-laden work for this precise reason: “Hamlet” was always intended to be a work of world-re-imagining. Why not re-imagine it in the fertile ground of sci-fi?

The term “speculative fiction” is used to refer to works of world making. Works of speculative fiction often encompass works of fantasy or other genres that may not readily slide into the term “science fiction.” In *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby writes, “Speculative fiction is...less defined by boundary-making around the word ‘science,’ stretching to encompass related modes such as fantasy and horror.”⁸⁴ Streeby describes science fiction as a category in the larger umbrella of speculative fiction.

Not all speculative fiction writers would agree with Streeby; there is a rift in the literary fiction circle around these two terms. Margaret Atwood, who famously authored the dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, notoriously separated herself from works of sci-fi by defining the genre as no more than “talking squids in outer space.”⁸⁵ This claim didn’t go over well in the literary community, and directly contradicts Streeby’s definition, but this particular literary debate is beyond the scope of this paper. For the duration of this chapter I will use the term science fiction (sci-fi) to encompass works of

⁸⁴ Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 20.

⁸⁵ Cecilia Mancuso, “Speculative or Science Fiction? As Margaret Atwood Shows, There Isn’t Much Distinction,” *Public Books*, The Guardian, August 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/10/speculative-or-science-fiction-as-margaret-atwood-shows-there-isnt-much-distinction>.

radical world building. I look at popular culture as well as works hailed by the literary community as seminal works of art, considering both as potential catalysts to change what they touch.

In the introduction to his book, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, self-defined “scholar of race, gender, and genre in Black and American cultural production” André M. Carrington describes the importance of sci-fi to him, and the broader populous.⁸⁶ He writes,

“The tradition of intellectual inquiry into popular culture points toward speculative fiction as an exemplary venue for understanding how the production of literature and culture fits within the structure of societies in which it takes place. In particular, there has been a generation of cultural criticism published about the ways in which popular texts resonate with the interests of attentive, actively engaged fans and academic researchers concerned with gender, sexuality, class, national identities, and changing technologies.”⁸⁷

Carrington defines the value of sci-fi to our larger society, particularly those engaging with speculative texts.

Before I read *Parable of the Sower*, I choreographed a sci-fi dance work in which alien and space explorer are changed forever by sharing touch.⁸⁸ In *The Chromanauts* (2016, restaged 2018) three peaceful “explorers of time and quantum-chroma space” (known as the Chromanauts) head off on a mission to explore other worlds.⁸⁹ They meet the Astromonid, an alien-like creature who dwells on a planet they crash land upon. After a nervous first encounter the visitors become linked to this alien creature, physically

⁸⁶ “About,” André M. Carrington, PhD, accessed February 17, 2019, <http://www.andrecarringtonphd.com/about/>.

⁸⁷ André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2016), 1.

⁸⁸ *The Chromanauts* was originally choreographed in 2016, and was re-staged in 2018. The characters of the Chromanauts are the brain-child of John Mosher, visual artist and Professor at Salisbury University.

⁸⁹ John Mosher, “Statement (Chromanaut),” accessed December 2, 2018, <http://www.johncmosher.com/words.html>.

changing from unique individuals to create an amoeba-like quartet. The Chromanauts eventually return home, but their trip has changed them. Even as they settle into familiar routine their movement is different, more fluid, with memories of their time with the Astromonid filtering through their bodies.



Figure 13: Photo by David Gladden. Sydney Lemelin as “the Astromonid” in *The Chromanauts*. Costumes by Christine Hands; Lighting by John Mosher. Salisbury, MD: 2017.

The Chromanauts

exemplifies Octavia E.

Butler’s quote, literally embodying the change Lauren conceives of. *The Chromanauts* was created in collaboration with John Mosher, a visual artist. Mosher invented the Chromanauts and together we conceived of the storyline in seven parts. Beyond the story onstage, this process of collaboration demonstrates the potential for change. By offering the Chromanauts to be shared, Mosher allowed them to be changed, and in turn change me. What was born of collaboration exemplifies the potential of this sort of world-making to create change.

The Chromanauts is a campy work, with four women wearing heavy makeup inspired by 1960’s supermodel Twiggy and costumes that draw inspiration from sometimes sexist depictions of women in early sci-fi films and T.V. Nevertheless, the women are strong and brave; they are the protagonists and antagonists as well as the sidekicks in this work. Without men or figures of authority, they maintain their agency, creating a femininity that is strong and sensual without any point of reference to the male

body available onstage. One could argue that these women are subject to the male gaze



Figure 14: Photo by David Gladden. From L to R: Celeste White, Christine Hands, and Jasmine Watkins as “the Chromanauts” in *The Chromanauts*. Costumes by Christine Hands; Lighting by John Mosher. Salisbury, MD: 2017.

onstage or make the case that since the inventor of the Chromanauts himself is a male we merely maintain the status quo: men acting and women appearing. But this theoretical proposition would ignore the actuality of the bodies doing the changing and the shared experience of collaboration which was at play.

I will make the case that sci-fi has value precisely because it allows us to imagine the potential futures we want to exist in. I will further make the case that through dance we can practice these futures in real-time, allowing us to physically embody and thereby make real these aspired realities.

adrienne maree brown is a multi-racial native of Detroit who writes of the pleasure and joy in social justice.⁹⁰ She is also a lover and practitioner of sci-fi. She

⁹⁰ adrienne maree brown publishes her name without capital letters.

writes in her book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, “Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together.”⁹¹ Sci-fi matters for marginalized communities. While sci-fi is often relegated to a place in the margins, outside of the popular and mainstream literary genres, the work of sci-fi visionaries serves an important task in our society.

In an article written in memoriam of sci-fi writer Joanna Russ following her death, Stephen Burt writes, “Science fiction delivers a promise and a warning. It also delivers hope: depicting imagined futures, events and characters not possible here and now, [science fiction] says that things can and will be otherwise.”⁹² I would pick up where Burt leaves off and go further to say that the radical re-imagining of the rules and laws of society in sci-fi, and the imagining of what could be, has the potential to build that which can serve as a space of refuge for marginalized communities.

Spaces of physical refuge exist in our world: dance clubs in the 1970’s often served as a place of subculture. Dance historian Sally R. Sommer writes about underground house dancing in her article “‘C’mon to my House’ Underground House Dancing,” “Underground is the name given to the clubs where house dancing takes place; it also signifies a way of life. This life takes place after dark, out of sight, and has its own codes and transactions.”⁹³ Here dancers can practice their own worldmaking in a space with its own rules and its own culture. These are places where one can be what one cannot be on the other side of the door. Sci-fi provides this same refuge.

⁹¹ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 19.

⁹² Stephen Burt, "When Science Fiction Changed: Joanna Russ, In Memoriam," *Beacon Broadside*, May 20, 2011, http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2011/05/joanna_russ.html.

⁹³ Sally R. Sommer, “‘C’mon to My House’ Underground House Dancing,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 289.

Tuesday Smillie is a trans artist working across mediums. She has created a number of works inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin's seminal work conceives of a world of brown-skinned humanoids without gender except in "Kemmer," akin to heat, when they take on a gender to mate. Published in 1969, Le Guin's writing seems limited especially when considering this work from our vantage in 2019. Le Guin used only masculine pronouns for characters who weren't in Kemmer, and created a world which many read as homophobic and transphobic. Le Guin wrote of only heteronormative sexual pairings and only binary potentialities for the bodies in Kemmer.

Still, this was a clear attempt to consider gender and sexuality in the world around her. Le Guin writes, "Along about 1967, I began to feel a certain unease, a need to step on a little farther...I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society."⁹⁴ Le Guin's attempts, while they may leave something to be desired, can be considered a valuable attempt to push and challenge the status quo.

I am struck by Smillie's reading of Le Guin's efforts. She writes,

"Le Guin offers us something more valuable than a piece of fiction that mirrors a specific politic: she dares to dream and allows that dream to grow and evolve. To build another world, we must first be brave enough to imagine how that world could be, knowing we will make profound mistakes in the process. By looking to Le Guin's practice as a model, we find that the radical act is how we proceed as our failure becomes clear."⁹⁵

Smillie uses a scene near the end of the book to illustrate this claim:

"In the white weather one could not see a crevasse until one could look down into it—a little late, for the edges overhung, and were not always solid. Every footfall was a surprise, a drop or a jolt. No shadows. An even, white, soundless sphere: we moved along inside a huge frosted-glass ball. There was nothing inside the ball, and nothing was outside it. But there were cracks in the glass. Probe and step, probe and step. Probe for

⁹⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," in *The Language of the Night : Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Ursula K. Le Guin and Susan Wood (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 155-156.

⁹⁵ Tuesday Smillie, "Radical Imagination And The Left Hand of Darkness," *ADA*, no. 12, <https://adanewmedia.org/2017/10/issue12-smillie/>.

the invisible cracks through which one might fall out of the white glass ball, and fall, and fall, and fall...I stood there in the middle of nothing. Tears came out and froze my eyelids together. I said, 'I'm afraid of falling.'"⁹⁶

Smillie writes,

"This description of a frustrated attempt to move forward toward a shared future goal feels familiar... We push forward not knowing exactly how we are going to get *there* or where exactly *there* even is. We are so steeped in the violence of our present socio-political circumstance that it can be hard to envision or understand what our end goal tangibly looks like. But we try with each step, not knowing where our foot will land: sometimes we hit the unexpected stair, sometimes we miss, sometimes we use male pronouns for a planet full of beautiful androgynons and get called out by our peers. We keep trying, because we are hungry for a just world."⁹⁷

I am struck by Tuesday Smillie's reading of this scene with Genry and Estraven crossing the ice, in the white weather, the place without shadows. Smillie posits that this is similar to the experience of contemporary activists, academics, artists, and allies (fellow practitioners of sci-fi) attempting to push society to a better, more inclusive space; in the effort to make a better world we enter into in uncertain territory with no idea where the next footfall will take us. Yet Smillie notes that what matters is not that the voyage is perfect or flawless but that we keep moving forward together. For Estraven and Genry, to stop means to die. So too for us as imaginers and seekers of a better world, there is no direct path to a better place. All we have is the voyage.

Smillie's interpretation of this scene is a beautiful metaphor for our human experience, and a beautiful way to wrap up the complex and problematic questions that Le Guin's book raises. While it's easy to read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as short-sighted and problematic, it's also easy to forget Le Guin was a pioneer not just in sci-fi literature but in attempting to imagine a world without gender: this is a task that is still challenging fifty years later. Ultimately as a writer she took a risk, climbed into the unknown void,

⁹⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: ACE Books, 1969), 265-266.

⁹⁷ Smillie, "Radical Imagination And The Left Hand of Darkness."

and left her footsteps for the rest of us to either follow or diverge from, in dialogue with her work. There is no way to determine whether this dialogue made the world we have today a little more possible. After all, the world building which takes place in sci-fi has the potential to make change.

Two movies which came out recently, one in 2016 and one in 2018, struck me by their offered potentials, potentials which were more than needed in the current political and social climate. With xenophobia on the rise, police violence against men and women of color pouring onto the news and protestors into the streets, and with men trying again and again to dictate the bodies of women, *Rogue One* and then *Black Panther* offered different options than the America which is emerging.

Rogue One, a Star Wars film, featured at its head a strong female protagonist.⁹⁸ Star Wars has never shied away from powerful women, but Felicity Jones was the clear lead in the film, unlike other Star Wars movies where characters serve as part of a larger ensemble. Jones' costar Diego Luna is a notable Mexican actor, and this strong Latino representation was also a Star Wars first. Luna's Mexican accent was the subject of a viral twitter post in which "rivalwaysknew" writes about seeing the film with her father, "I wanted my Mexican father, with his thick Mexican accent, to experience what it was like to see a *hero* in a blockbuster film, speak the way he does."⁹⁹ Other characters in the film included a racially diverse cast including Forrest Whittaker, Donnie Yen, and Jiang Wen. While there are a number of criticisms of the film's lack of female diversity

⁹⁸ Gareth Edwards, *Rogue One*, Lucasfilm Ltd. (Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures: 2016). Film.

⁹⁹ *qtd. in* Clarisse Loughrey, "Rogue One: Diego Luna Shares Emotional Story About Why Representation Matters," *Independent*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/rogue-one-star-wars-diego-luna-representation-mexican-cassian-andor-a7508921.html>.

beyond the lead, and a glaring absence of women of color, the film did needed work (even if it could have done better). In a country in which Latinos are increasingly vilified and feared, a Star Wars character with a Mexican accent offers people a chance to imagine a world where Latinos are not the enemies, but perhaps the heroes of the stories we imagine. Certainly this representation matters in media beyond sci-fi, but I posit that representation in a fictional world might allow a reality to hatch more fully than in other mediums.

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a political activist and one-time member of the Black Panther Party, currently serving a controversial life sentence in prison. In his essay “Star Wars and the American Imagination” Abu-Jamal posits that Star Wars reflects a complicated American relationship with imperialism. Not only are the villains explicitly called the Empire, with Imperial Star Ships and Imperial Troopers, but the ragtag rebels are our heroes. This is complicated by the unveiling that Luke Skywalker himself is the son of Darth Vader. Vader was once a rebel and now a leader in the Empire.

“That is the meaning of *Star Wars*: we *were* rebels; we *are* Empire.
And like all rebellious children we were but going through a phase.
We are getting ready for adulthood after we sowed a few wild oats.
Once grown, we put on our imperial uniform, and bowed to the Empire.
'It is your destiny.'
Right? Unless-”¹⁰⁰

Here the essay ends, leaving us to recall the final battle in *Return of the Jedi* in which Vader has a change of heart and the Empire is defeated (if only until a new series a generation later). Abu-Jamal seems to imply that our destinies are not so steadfast. Star Wars can be read as a film series that glorifies and offers victories to the rebels, even while offering us a glossy but complicated chance to explore human nature.

¹⁰⁰ Mumia Abu-Jamal, “Star Wars and the American Imagination,” in *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (Oakland, CA: AK Press and the Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2015), 257.

Written as blockbuster sci-fi, *Star Wars* has touched the lives of many, from children to adults, without being described as a political drama or a social commentary. Yet it does all this in the safe space of a movie with mass appeal. Regardless of political affiliation, families will flock to the theaters, bringing home children who will spend the rest of the night imagining themselves defeating the Empire. Perhaps in this way the films are subtly indoctrinating future generations of rebels and resisters?

Black Panther potentially offers a similar impact on our society. Released in 2018 and a blockbuster success, going on to earn a Best Picture nomination at the 2019 Academy Awards, *Black Panther* created a world steeped in black and African culture in which the black body was beautiful, powerful, and had agency.¹⁰¹ In Wakanda, a fictional African country free from the influence of colonialism, there is another option. Writes Carvell Wallace in the *New York Times Magazine*,

“‘Black Panther’ is a Hollywood movie, and Wakanda is a fictional nation. But coming when they do, from a director like Coogler, they must also function as a place for multiple generations of black Americans to store some of our most deeply held aspirations. We have for centuries sought to either find or create a promised land where we would be untroubled by the criminal horrors of our American existence.”¹⁰²

In addition to offering people of color this alternative option, a place to practice their own agency free from the oppression they face outside of the theater, as a white woman I began to wonder if films like *Black Panther* can also offer us small steps away from racism. Walking out of that theater with black bodies as the heroes and role models flashing behind my eyes, I wonder if the unbidden racial biases in my own mind aren’t being chipped away at as I fawn over these fictional characters.

¹⁰¹ Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther*, Marvel Studios (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures: 2018). Film.

¹⁰² Carvell Wallace, “Why ‘Black Panther’ Is a Defining Moment For Black America,” *New York Times Magazine*, Feb 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>.

Janelle Monáe's music video, "Many Moons" is another example of this spacemaking which liberates the black female body while simultaneously providing commentary on the world outside of the world she has created. In this film, Monáe plays the role of Cindi Mayweather, an android and prototype for the other androids we see in the film, all played by Monáe. There are echoes of slavery as the audience bids for the androids. At the end, Cindi's eyes flash with electricity and then go dark as other androids pace around her, barefoot, and shrouded in white veils as if the Willis from *Giselle*, bringing Cindi home to her eternal resting place. Monáe sings, "And when the world just treats you wrong/ Just come with us and we'll take you home."¹⁰³ One might see this as a heavenly ascension from her worldly troubles, but perhaps death doesn't have to be the only way out.

In her essay "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons," Ursula Le Guin writes, "For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true...its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living."¹⁰⁴ If what *Wakanda* offers is freedom, then perhaps what movie-goers could be in *Wakanda* is also true. If not in 2018, in the future. And perhaps Monáe's film does more than offer criticism.

Throughout the work, Monáe appears in traditionally Eurocentric tropes and themes, re-envisioning a white-centric history with a black woman at its center. In addition to the Willis-like army of Monáes at the end, she struts through the scene in elitist fashion: riding gear, top hats, suit coats. She creates a variation on a modern-day

¹⁰³ Janelle Monáe, "Many Moons" (Los Angeles: Atlantic Records, 2008), <https://youtu.be/EZyyORSHbaE>.

¹⁰⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York: Ultramarine Publishing, 1979), 44.

cakewalk, perhaps poking fun at the unknowing audience who “ooh” and “ah” without knowing they are the brunt of the joke.

On the stage, above the various androids being sold, Cindi herself wears a white tuxedo and saddle shoes and in her dancing Monáe harkens to an age of black dancers in the 1930s. She moves with an energy that reminds one of the explosive dynamism of the Nicholas Brothers while her knees knock in and out with the fast freneticism of Josephine Baker. Her dancing holds in it the echoes of an entire history of black dancing in America, in the footwork and improvisational energy that can be traced all the way back to the African continent.

One could read the fetishization of black bodies rather than agency in this scene, but there is more going on. Monáe, who came out as pansexual in 2018, also provides women gazing at women, unabashedly lustfully, in a way that provides a voice for the queer community. The audience screams as Cindi throws her jacket into the crowd, girls at a One Direction concert. While arguably providing a liberating space for black bodies, Monáe doesn't stop short of the potential for an intersectional and multi-faceted commentary that holds space for multiple bodies at once.

adrienne maree brown calls our work to change the world “‘science fictional behavior’—being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations.”¹⁰⁵ Sci-fi can be used to underscore a number of important movements. Climate change and the environment is a topic ripe for sci-fi's potential. Posthumanism and technology are other examples of movements which we see considered through the genre. What ties all of these topics together is the body. The body is at the center of discussions of future worlds. Whether it is the body we possess, the

¹⁰⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 14.

body we fear, the body we or dream of, or even the absence of the body. The body is the main, inescapable player in sci-fi.

The body also has an undeniable stake in this conversation. Not only does the body suffer or survive based on the impacts of climate change, technology, oppression, and bigotry, but the ways our bodies interact with one another is essential for considerations and discussions of our human condition. adrienne maree brown writes, “Together we must move like waves. Have you observed the ocean? The waves are not the same over and over— each one is unique and responsive. The goal is not to repeat each other’s motion, but to respond in whatever way feels right in your body.”¹⁰⁶ We are the waves, connected and independent. In this way our reactions to and relationship with the shifting fabric of society is fluid and conversational, not rigid and repeatable. adrienne maree brown writes of an ocean that reminds me of the ephemeral nature of dance.

Sci-fi has the potential to decenter our individuality, allowing us to consider the fluid potential for ourselves, thereby also allowing conversation and discourse that can cross the aisle. The collaboration that occurred during *The Chromonauts* is one such example of this fluid change. The bodies onstage, morphing into one creature, lifting, supporting, and moving as one, demonstrated physically this theoretical construct.

When we consider it, the body knows more about science than a pen and paper. All sci-fi is the result of imaginative work, whether grounded in science or not, which has sprung from a visceral being. The experience of the human body can’t be separated from the genre. Even literature has the physical experience of a human’s body at its core. But, when this body transforms into an alien- not from a blank slate but from human as

¹⁰⁶ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 14.

happens in dance performance- isn't that like sci-fi already? Dance offers us this physical transformation. Dance is already wrapped up in physics, biology, chemistry, anatomy, and technology. Sometimes dance already seems like sci-fi.

On the concert stage, companies like Chunky Move have the potential to use technology to transform the human body into something else. *Mortal Engine* (2008) uses advances in technology to alter the body, creating something we haven't seen in our daily existences.¹⁰⁷ Onstage the body is sometimes shrouded in shadow, or vibrating as electric light pulses out of it, or seems to be evaporating as small dark shadows slough off the image projected off of the body. The use of projection offers new realities for the body onstage. And yet the body never disappears, always the catalyst and the subject, if not always the focus. The dancers wear sheer clothing, nipples and skin exposed, their human form is often clad in shadow or vibrant light but it is never absent. Yet the human body is rendered somehow different in this work, always human, but never familiar.

Other dance companies have had this same effect on me; the first time I saw Batsheva Dance Company perform in Ohad Naharin's *Deca Dance* (2000) I could only describe them as aliens.¹⁰⁸ The dancers' bodies moved so fluidly and unexpectedly that there seemed to be no remnants of their human forms. Yet this feat of virtuosity is not fantasy but in fact a result of the very real use of scientific principles. Momentum, bones, muscles, skin, organs, beating hearts, torque, forces, resistance, gravity: these are principles at play onstage. Dance and science are not an unexpected match- in fact they're mated for life.

¹⁰⁷ Chunky Move, *Mortal Engine*, Cronos4.tv, accessed February 24, 2019, <http://www.cronos4.tv/2011/05/mortal-engine/>.

¹⁰⁸ Ohad Naharin, *Deca Dance*, Hancher Auditorium, Iowa City: University of Iowa, October 19, 2006.

Sci-fi is what happens for me when I watch movement that doesn't seem grounded in my human experience. The result of Gaga, practiced by Naharin's dancers, onstage, is work that pulses and bubbles with all the guts and blood of a very real body.¹⁰⁹ Maybe it's not that these bodies are making fiction but an ultra reality in which we are allowed to become hyperaware of bodily possibilities. Perhaps that is more helpful than equating these dancers with the other.

Or perhaps the chance to see our bodies as potential spaces for inventing fiction is exactly what we need. Dance for Parkinson's research has showed the neurological benefits of dance for peoples living with Parkinson's Disease. And yet Dance for Parkinson's director David Leventhal stays away from the medical model in approaching the practice. Dance for Parkinson's is about dance, not treatment, and not therapy. Any therapeutic byproducts are a happy secondary outcome, never a goal.¹¹⁰

What Dance for Parkinson's offers is a moment in time where an imagined potential can be a reality. In a room with bodies sharing and moving together the disease can, if only for a short time, fade from the foreground. While the physical reality of Parkinson's won't be erased, nor cured, in these classes I found myself surrounded by people moving with a freedom that was not physical. Surrounded by community and sharing movement offers exactly this type of radical world building where this virtuosic space of dance is not off-limits to anyone. Students are offered guidance and instruction that echoes the quality of training a professional dancer would receive. And this transgressive world building begins to seep out of the classroom into volunteers, friends

¹⁰⁹ Gaga is an improvisational movement language coined by Ohad Naharin, who for many years directed Batsheva Dance Company in Israel. Gaga offers movers a way out of the constraints of their movement habits. Gaga is taught to trained dancers and also for the community.

¹¹⁰ Dance for Parkinson's Internship and Introductory Training, New York, NY, June - August, 2018.

and family, and eventually an international organization. If this is not radical world-building, I do not know what is.

In this way, perhaps most of my dance creations are works of sci-fi as I am seeking alternative realities onstage and in collaboration. My work is often directly in conversation with the world I inhabit. In works like *The Chromonauts* and “Hamlet” I intentionally veer into the genre of sci-fi, but other works may be doing the same work as these pieces, even while dancing in another genre.

“Hamlet” uses design elements to invoke a science-fictional world even while using human characters. Inspired by the design elements of *Blade Runner 2049*, moving light, moody fog, and clear linear light patterns grace this world.¹¹¹ The music is nearly entirely composed of electronic sounds, the only natural sound is the crackling of a metallic can which is

eerily post-apocalyptic.

Costumes are simultaneously futuristic while bringing to mind ancient warriors, with gender-confusing cuts and builds which hide, expose, and distort the gendered bodies of the dancers. At first reflection I considered



Figure 15: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. From L to R (background): Anna Liddle and Hana Huie; (foreground): Nana Edu in “Hamlet.” Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

¹¹¹ Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049*, Alcon Entertainment (Columbia Pictures: 2017). Film.

that this is where the sci-fi stopped. Perhaps I had used a dystopian backdrop only as imagery rather than actively engaging with this world. But considering the definitions of sci-fi that I have laid out above, I was definitely world making.

“Hamlet” doesn’t engage technology to alter the human body. “Hamlet” engages the bodies but renders them fluid and un-defined. Taking a cue from Le Guin, the bodies shift characters. Sometimes they are feminine, sometimes they are masculine, in any given moment trading roles across genders, races, ages, and movement backgrounds. Dancers act. Actors dance. I am practicing the very real world I dream about.

Feedback before the work was presented at one point brought up the “#MeToo” movement as a viewer pondered if a moment in which Edu is partially hidden behind a set piece, his voice difficult to hear, was my attempt to emasculate the sole male in this female empowered work. In rehearsal, considering this with the dancers, they were frustrated. They pushed back, asking for our work not to be politicized as I considered changing casting. I gathered from their reactions that they just wanted to be bodies, freed from the constraints of our society in the world we were creating onstage. And while I find it impossible to truly remove the gender and racial biases from the audience or even our rehearsal, this world that they envision is the one I offered.

Naomi Jacobs, an English Professor at the University of Maine, writes that in posthumanist and dystopian texts, “The posthuman body need no longer be confined to one gender, one sexuality, one race, one subjectivity...In its cyborg wisdom the posthuman body refuses fixity, definition, boundaries.”¹¹² While “Hamlet” doesn’t seek to create a posthuman or cyborg, it does explore a fluid and shifting individuality which

¹¹² Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency,” in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moyla (New York: Routledge, 2003), 94.

seeks to sink into the meaty organic in order to render fluid our physical experience. And this is done without science but with imagination and the human body.

“There are more things in heaven and in earth, Horatio/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”¹¹³ And so too for Shakespeare, who would never have imagined his work as I deconstructed it, I took Shakespeare’s *Elsinore* and imagined something totally different. Sci-fi allows all of us who have a stake in the worlds we are imagining a chance to come out of the shadows and dance in the sun, or suns, depending on the world we have imagined. Jacobs also writes, “When power is understood...as a constantly shifting interplay of forces and tendencies, the self must be seen as a hybrid of many conflicting discursive formations as a result of those very conflicts, spaces can open up for resistance, spontaneity, self-creation.”¹¹⁴ And so my work seeks to undermine the power structures, freeing the bodies onstage.

Which perhaps brings me full circle to ask, is all dance sci-fi? I only have to consider the choreographer whose work inspires me most, Pina Bausch, to come to a simple, unpolluted answer. No. Not all dance is sci-fi. When I watch Bausch’s work I do not see speculation or world building. I see humans. I see emotions. I see bodies. Bausch’s work favors the emotional and visceral experience of the body. I see people shrouded in clothing, their hair and breasts are free, their bodies moving with a presence thoroughly concerned with the physical experience of being in the world.

In *Café Müller* (originally choreographed in 1985) a dancer moves throughout the stage with her eyes shut while another dance scrambles to move the chairs and tables strewn across the stage.¹¹⁵ The stakes of this relationship are very real and watching this

¹¹³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1:5:174-175.

¹¹⁴ Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency,” 95.

¹¹⁵ Pina Bausch and Wim Wenders, *Pina* (The Criterion Collection: 2011). DVD.

my body is tense as the work unfolds. In *Vollmond* (originally choreographed in 2006) dancers leap and slide sensuously across a wet and watery stage, leaping from a large rocky set piece, clothes and hair dripping, clinging to their bodies which sway and curve with delicious voluptuousness.¹¹⁶ I watch this with my own physicality on edge, my skin remembering the feeling of water. When I watch Bausch's work I am not thinking of the future nor am I transported to another world. I am instead transported to my own physical presence. My body tingles and tenses and I weep for reasons unknown to my intellect while something deep inside my guts and joints is released from a place I can't identify. I am a fully watery and physical being watching this work.

Perhaps the difference is the setting. Bausch's work is surrounded by our physical world: water, pain, danger, dirt: we have lived experiences which we can connect with to allow us an active sensory experience with these works. But with *Chunky Move* it is light which tricks and teases the eye, creating confusion which forces the audience to relocate their point of reference from the real to the imagined, or speculative.

But where does this leave Batsheva, whose work doesn't rely on tricks or confusion but on bodies which move so unexpectedly fluidly? Perhaps somewhere in the middle, varying from piece to piece depending on the costume and subject matter, and whether these super-bodies are contacting and connecting with a theme that I have experienced, as well.

In this way I can safely pull the label of "science fiction" off the majority of my own choreography which is built to reflect upon the world around us. But in "Hamlet," which creates a dystopian world that may be grounded in our experience but ultimately diverges in search of something different, perhaps something better, there can be no

¹¹⁶ Bausch, *Pina*, 2011.

doubt of the speculative and imaginative nature of this work.

The radical imagination at play in creative world building can serve as an incubator for social change. Not all dance is concerned with altering reality for the audience, but those works that are have the potential to offer something different to performers and audience members.

Conclusion

At the end of “Hamlet” I stagger across the stage, body heaving with exhaustion as I make the final push through my last solo. I make eye contact with Mitchell as my legs buckle and I collapse to the floor, spasming before lying still, my chest rising and falling as sweat pours from my body, the physical evidence that in spite of my character’s death I am still very much alive. Mitchell clutches her heart, a reprise of my grief solo, before letting out a long sigh of air which the rest of us pick up before it dissolves into the sound of the wind.

After a show closes, especially one which the cast has been rehearsing for a long time, as was the case with “Hamlet,” there is a certain let-down. There is a brief period of bittersweet reflection and nostalgia and there is the shocking halt of not only performance adrenaline but also the breakneck pace of performance week. The day after “Hamlet” closed I sat in jury duty, missing my cast while my muscles and vocal cords ached with the memory of the weekend’s physical exertion. Then comes the question, what next?

I poured everything I had into “Hamlet.” I had located the myriad parts of myself and left them metaphorically on the dance floor. A lifetime of research had gone into one performance, as it has come pouring out in this paper. I had challenged myself on every level and I had lived my art not just onstage but offstage. In rehearsals I had embodied my research, doing my best to support and challenge the dancers even as I was challenging myself. Every night I danced I had poured out my rage, fear, and grief. I was exhausted. I was full of ideas and curiosity but the canvas of my body was blank. It was months before I could hesitantly return to the studio as a choreographer, asking my body to find a new story.

“Hamlet” held in its existence not just a performance but a lifestyle. In this paper I’m less interested in whether “Hamlet” succeeded as a work of dance or not. I did more than make a dance: I made a world. I made a world where access was valued, where representation mattered, where inclusion was a given, and where we had permission to be more. adrienne maree brown writes, “I started reading sci fi obsessively, looking for options, for other worlds where I wasn’t dismissed as an idealist or an inferior.”¹¹⁷ “Hamlet” was this world for me. “Hamlet” was my active love note to the human experience.

During tech one of the stage manager’s father passed unexpectedly and terribly. I stood onstage the next night, hands on my heart, my body convulsing as I held not just my grief but hers in my body. “Hamlet” was really, in the end, not about one character but about our humanity. Onstage we held not just our own bodies and their potentialities but offered ourselves as a canvas for the audience. In the theater we held



Figure 16: Photo by Jonathan Hsu. Christine Hands in “Hamlet.” Costumes by Alexa Duimstra; Set by Emily Lotz; Lighting by Chris Brusberg; Projection by Paul Deziel. College Park, MD: 2018.

¹¹⁷ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 14.

space and made space for new audience members. And in rehearsal we invented new potentials.

The four pillars introduced in this paper have gone on to find their way into a syllabus at the University of Maryland. My Introduction to Dance class section focuses on access and inclusion in the field of dance and so my students are tasked with researching representation onstage, seeking inclusion in the dance classroom, learning about access in the theater, and practicing their own reinventions. Perhaps in this way too I am preparing the next generation to look for more in the world around them; to open their imaginations; to tackle a role that was never made for them; to imagine the world they think would be a better world; to consider the world around them with more consciousness and sensitivity; and to think more about who we see, and what that means.

What's next?

Hamlet's last line reads, "The rest is silence."¹¹⁸ But Horatio takes up the mantle, promising to tell Hamlet's story. The rest is certainly not silent. That final breath in "Hamlet" dissolving into the sound of the wind carries on it the hope and promise that even after the show ends the story is not over. In my solo of grief I turn in a circle. It was after my mother died that I for the first time envisioned time not as linear but as circular, my body and my memories carrying her in them. I looked in the mirror and saw her, not me, for weeks. I saw in my face a photo of my mother before I was born, standing on a cliff in New Zealand. I also saw myself, 32 years old. And I saw the future that I would live without my mother, but always with these reflections to guide my path. So too did "Hamlet" hold in it the past, present, and future of a world, all of these things existing at once in between each of these pillars. The past which informed it, the present which it

¹¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5: 2: 351.

existed in, and the future it imagined.

So, what's next?

Whatever you imagine it to be.



Figure 17: Personal photo. From L to R:
Christine Hands and mother Cherie Hands:
Illinois, 1987.

Appendix 1

To construct the script for “Hamlet,” I worked with dramaturg Yiwen Feng to take apart Shakespeare’s words and put them back together. To make the so-called “King’s Speech,” which Mitchell recited early in the work, I printed out Claudius’ speech in Act 1 Scene 2 cut the words apart and taped them back together in a partially random order.

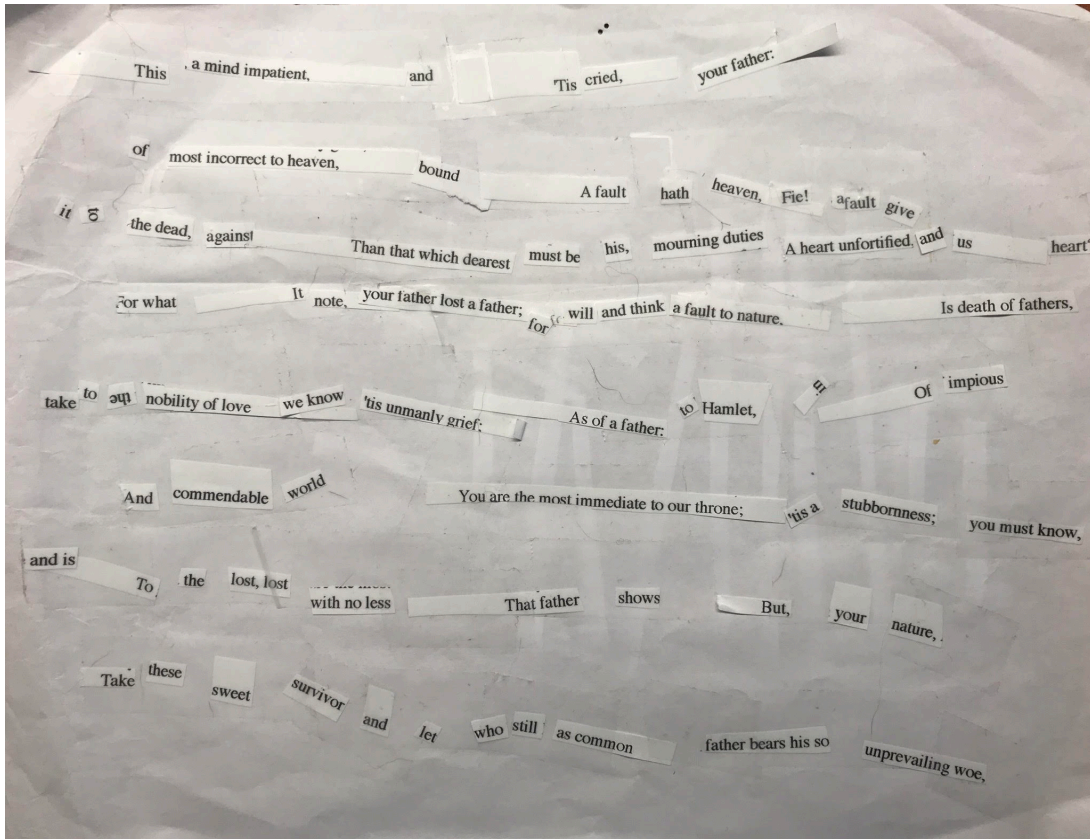


Image Description: Words have been cut apart and taped unevenly on a wrinkled white piece of paper. Some words are nearly upside down as if sliding off the page. It reads: “This a mind impatient, and ‘Tis cried, your father: of most incorrect to heaven, bound A fault hath heaven, Fie! A fault give it to the dead, against Than that which dearest must be his, mourning duties A heart unfortified, and us heart? For what It note, your father lost a father; for will and think a fault to nature. Is death of fathers, take to the nobility of love we know ‘tis unmanly grief: As of a father: to Hamlet, in Of impious And commendable world You are the most immediate to our throne; ‘tis a stubbornness; you must know, and is To the lost, lost with no less That father shows But, your nature, Take these sweet survivor and let who still as common father bears his so unprevailing woe,”

Appendix 2

This is the signage that was posted near the headsets which were used to transmit the AD.



These headsets will carry live Audio Description (AD) of the performance. Described stage visuals help create access for patrons who are blind or low-visioned.

Sighted patrons also value experiencing AD.

Curious?

Please take a headset to hear the performance described.

Image Description: The logo for AD is at the top of the page. The text reads: These headsets will carry live Audio Description (AD) of the performance. Described stage visuals help create access for patrons who are blind or low-visioned. Sighted patrons also value experiencing AD. Curious? Please take a headset to hear the performance described.

Appendix 3

These are the scripts which were available at the touch tour. They were written in joint effort between myself and the designers. The volunteers staffing the table (the cast of Hamlet) had these at their disposal to share with patrons wanting to know more. There was also a copy of the script posted on the table so that patrons could read at their leisure, if they wished.

Image Description: Each page features the touch tour logo at the top (two letter T's in a circle) and the ASL interpretation logo on the bottom (two hands touching).

Hamlet:
Anna's Costume



This is a costume from the second piece you will see this evening, Hamlet. None of the costumes in the piece look the same and none of them are symmetrical. They are all black with touches of red. There is an emphasis on different textures within the bodice of each costume. There are shapes and textures built into the costumes that distort the perceived gender of the dancer.

This costume is worn by Anna. She is a tall and thin woman with fair Caucasian skin with an olive undertone and brown hair worn tied back. The bodice, or upper body of her costume is made of a black pebbled texture material. It is inset with burnout mesh backed velvet. Please feel it. This material shows hints of the skin underneath it. The bodice is cut across her upper chest, near her sternum, to expose unexpected parts of her body.

She wears a skirt over a pair of faded black denim jeans. Please feel them. The skirt is made of four separated panels of pleated silky black material and the back two panels are lined with red. The skirt hangs around one side of her body and the other side of her body does not have any skirt hanging over it. When the dancer is still, the panels hang like a single piece skirt and when the dancer moves they fan out from each other. Please touch it.

?

Questions? Please ask!

(The ASL interpreter is available at request!)



**Hamlet:
Christine's Costume**



This is a costume from the second piece you will see this evening, Hamlet. None of the costumes in the piece look the same and none of them are symmetrical. They are all black with touches of red. There is an emphasis on different textures within the bodice of each costume. There are shapes and textures built into the costumes that distort the perceived gender of the dancer.

This costume is worn by Christine. She is a tall and long woman with a lean but muscled body. She is fair with pale white skin that has a pink undertone. She has brown hair with an asymmetrical haircut. The bodice, or upper body of this costume is made of velvet with a pattern embossed in. The pattern is cut so it has one sleeve that falls to her wrist. Her right arm hangs bare while a strip of thin fabric slides around her neck and slices around her back, exposing her shoulders and upper back. Sometimes her right side sneaks out of the costume design, exposing her lower belly on the right side. The sleeve is made of faux leather with embroidered triangles. It is constructed of overlapping scales so that it looks like armor.

The skirt is attached to the costume and hangs over the left side of her body. It has slightly shiny black embroidery and is lined with red. Under her skirt Christine wears shredded jeans. Across the front they are lined with holes. Please touch!

?

Questions? Please ask!

(The ASL interpreter is available at request!)



**Hamlet:
Jasmine's Costume**



This is a costume from the second piece you will see this evening, Hamlet. None of the costumes in the piece look the same and none of them are symmetrical. They are all black with touches of red. There is an emphasis on different textures within the bodice of each costume. There are shapes and textures built into the costumes that distort the perceived gender of the dancer.

This costume is worn by Jasmine. She is a short woman a petite build. Her skin is mahogany brown with coral undertones. She has black cornrows. The bodice, or upper body of the costume covers one of her shoulders. One of her shoulders is left bare. The shoulder piece is made of scales that are matte black and catch the light at slightly different angles from each other. Please feel them.

The bodice hangs long, to her knee on the left side of her body. On the right, starting at her ribs and moving to the middle of her back, the bodice is cut out. Three panels of fabric create lines of exposed skin. She wears a short arm cuff on one wrist.

The skirt is worn over faded denim jeans with textured fabric and zippers at the knees. Please feel them.

?

Questions? Please ask!

(The ASL interpreter is available at request!)



dwelling & Hamlet: Model of the Theater



This model represents the stage in 1/4 inch scale. This small box represents the whole theater. This model allows the designers and choreographers to see the scale of the set while being able to move around the pieces to create different looks. It gives them a three-dimensional rendering of their actual set.

In the model box, there is the cyc (or the back wall of the theater which the lighting designer and projection designer use to project color and images on). There is the bare stage space, which is covered in black flooring in the theater. In this model box is also the seating arrangement for the audience. The risers go up into the back of the theater, raked away from the stage. There are two side aisles.

On the stage, there are 6 panels which are on wheels. (In this box you will only find 5 panels- one got lost.) The panels are the main scenic element. These panels are moved throughout dwelling where they can become a barrier for the dancers. Dancers peek out from behind the panels and move them to block one another's pathways. In Hamlet, these panels are stationary. They are positioned like this: one panel is tipped over in the back and one stands in the back of the theater on the audience's left. On the audience's right, 4 panels are arranged seemingly haphazardly. Two are crossing each other and one is angled into the stage. A final panel in the back is facing the audience. The next touch station has samples of the panels.

You can move the panels if you would like. I can also arrange the panels for you, to demonstrate where the panels will be during the show.

?

Questions? Please ask!

(The ASL interpreter is available at request!)



dwelling & Hamlet:
Paint Samples



When the building of the set begins, paint samples are made to replicate the textures used in the show. These samples show the two sides of the panels that make up the set. One side of each panel is mirrored and the other is textured to look like stone. Here you will find the mirror and stone samples. Please feel the difference between the two samples.

The mirrors are smooth. Though they are reflective, the dancer's reflection is sometimes distorted or blurred. These mirrors reflect light into the space. Sometimes they create amoeba-like shapes onto the cyc (or back wall of the stage). Sometimes the reflection is seemingly broken and looks like a river, with bright and winding lines of light moving across the walls, floor, and other panels. The grey stone is rough and absorbs light. It is dark gray and looks old and faded.

dwelling starts with the stone side facing the audience. The panels act as a barrier. As the piece progresses the mirrors are used to open the space and cast shadows and reflections.

In Hamlet the stone walls ground Hamlet in a cold futuristic world because of the color and texture. Sometimes the light reflects off the mirrors, casting eerie shapes around the stage, but unlike in dwelling, these shapes do not move.

?

Questions? Please ask!

(The ASL interpreter is available at request!)



Appendix 4

This is the script which was made available for patrons at the performance. It contains the script the cast used in rehearsal as well as some notes about meaning.

Image Description: The beginning of the script features images of each dancer from the waist-up standing against the textured gray panels that make the set. Behind the panel the cyc is purple. None of them smile, except Anna. They all wear black asymmetrical costumes. Hana is Asian with a round face and black hair that is long on top and shaved on the sides. One arm and one shoulder are exposed in her black costume. Nana's skin is black with a rose glow. His hair is pulled up on top of his head. One arm is exposed and a diamond is cut out of the chest of his costume, exposing his muscles. Jasmine's skin is mahogany, her hair in braids. She wears a warrior-like costume over one shoulder. Christine's hair is short, cut in a pixie, and her skin is white with a pink tone. Her shoulder, arm, and part of her abdomen are exposed. Anna's hair is long, pulled back, with a small half smile on her lips and her pale olive-hued skin peeking out of her costume at her upper arms and across the chest. The script's text includes blue font which indicates additional language added to the text for the audience's benefit.

Hamlet

by Christine Hands
William Shakespeare's Text Reconstructed by Christine Hands with Yiwen Feng

Oct 12 and 14, 2018
University of Maryland MFA Dance Thesis Concert
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center

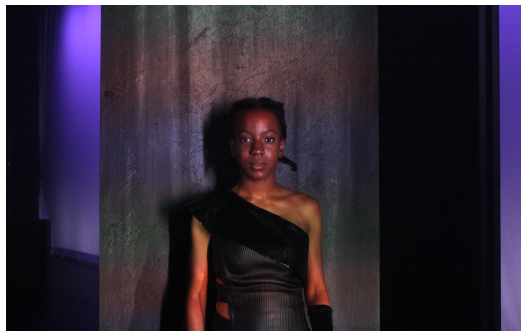
The Dancers



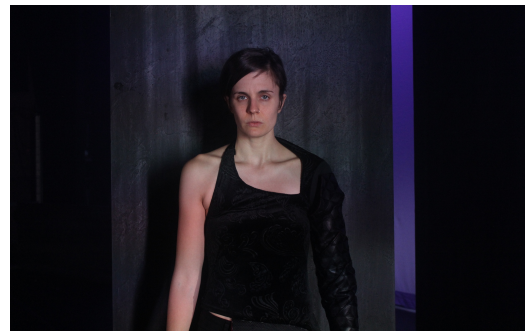
Hana



Nana



Jasmine



Christine



Anna

Choreographer's Note:

Shakespeare's text was deconstructed and reconstructed for this work. In some scenes, the text is missing key language, in other scenes words have been intentionally scrambled. While the notes clarifying meaning may provide context for your viewing pleasure, I encourage you to think of the language and movement as poetry: open to individual interpretation.

Scene 1:

Hana: worth
Nana: bloody
Jasmine: nothing
Hana: thoughts
Christine: take
Jasmine: devil
Anna: soul
Nana: daggers
Christine: speak
Anna: conscience

Scene break:

All (*voices overlapping*): Who's there? Who's there?

Scene 2:

Jasmine:

This a mind impatient, and tis cried your father Of most incorrect to heaven,
bound (Your impatient, grieving mind should find comfort knowing that your
father is in heaven.)

A fault hath heaven Fie! A fault give

It to the dead, against that which dearest must be his mourning duties.
(The dead would not want you wallowing in your sorrows.)
A heart unfortified and us heart? (Your father was taken too soon.)
For what it note, your father lost a father;
For will and think a fault to nature. Is death of fathers. (Your father lost a
father. It is natural.)
Take to the nobility of love we know 'tis unmanly grief; (This mourning is
unmanly.)
As a father: to Hamlet, in of impious
And commendable world.
You are the most immediate to our throne; (Think of me as a father- you are
the heir to my throne.)
tis a stubbornness; you must know
And is to the lost, lost with no less that father shows
But your nature, (Stop being stubborn, I am your father now. Lost is lost.)
Take these sweet survivor and let who still as common father bears his
so
unprevailing woe. (Be in the present, here with me. We have survived and our
lives continue. This sorrow is useless.)

Scene 3:

Hana:

He was a man.

Take him for all in all.

I shall not look upon his like again.

(He was the epitome of good man. I will never meet anyone like him again.)

Scene 4:

Music. Static.

Scene 5:

Music. Driving. Repetitive.

Scene 6:

Voice from the speakers (completely distorted):

Orisons thy in nymph

*remember'd sins all my be (You are my terpsichore and I have sinful thoughts
of you.)*

So believe me

*once. you love did I proof. it gives time now but paradox, a sometime was this
likeness: his into beauty translate can honesty of force than bawd is it what*

from honesty transform sooner will beauty of power the for truly; (I once loved you but I don't anymore. Your beauty is but a farce.)

Ay, (A sigh of longing.)

Scene 7:

(overlapping, improvisational)

Jasmine: To

Nana: Not to.

....

Nana: Not to.

Jasmine: To.

Scene 8:

Sound of crunching and cracking with a ringing.

Scene 9:

Music. Driving. Repetitive. The sounds of crunching and crackling lie underneath.

Scene 10:

(voices overlapping)

Hana:

My dear

Sister

Ophelia

Fear it

Anna:

Pretty Ophelia

Poor

My dear

Sister

Christine:

The fair Ophelia (The pretty Ophelia)

Nymph (Muse)

In thy orisons (in your prayer)

Be all my sins remembered. (remember all my sins)

Jasmine:

I loved Ophelia.

40,000 brothers with all their quantity of love could not make up my sum. (40,000 brothers could not love Ophelia as I loved her)

Scene 11:

Nana:

Rank (*repeated indeterminate amount of times*) (It smells like the trash in the alley.)

Pray can I not (I cannot pray.)

Guilt

My crown, mine own ambition and my queen. (The things I obtained when I killed my brother are the crown, my queen, and the fulfillment of my ambition.)

Corrupted currents (The water is tainted.)

What then? Bow What rests? Bow

when one can not repent? (When one can't ask for forgiveness.)

BOW

Blood

Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (Your prayers can't reach Heaven if you don't mean them.)

O wretched state! O bosom black as death! (The wretched country. My black heart.)

A brother's murder (I murdered my brother.)

I am still possess'd (I still have the things I obtained that I killed my brother for.)

Guilt

cursed hand (My hand is cursed.)

brother's blood (The blood of my brother.)

Offense's Gilded hand (The sin's gold hand.)

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow (There is not enough rain in heaven to clean my black heart.)

But o what form of prayer (But what form of prayer?)

Forgive me my foul murder, I did the murder (Forgive me for murdering my brother.)

My queen my crown and mine own ambition (I still have the things I obtained that I killed my brother for.)

O my offense is rank it smells to heaven (My sin is so disgusting they smell it in heaven.)

Scene 12:

Music mixed with silence. Sound is upbeat and playful.

Scene 13:

*Music like the sound of deep waves.
(voices overlapping, improvisational)*

Nana:
Sit by me.
The drink.

Christine:
Have you forgotten me?
My dear Hamlet?

Hana:
What wilt thou do? (What will you do?)
How fares my lord? (How are you?)
No more!

Anna:
Come hither. (Come here.)
No more, sweet Hamlet!

Jasmine:
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul. (You make me look inside my own soul.)
And there I see such black and grainèd spots. (I am lost in thought and all I see is nothing/ like black spots.)
Thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
(You have broke my heart into halves)

Scene 14:

Silence. Christine is crawling under the audience seating. Her voice moves from beneath the audience.

Christine: How all occasions do inform against

Jasmine: And spur my dull (Everything I have learned has helped me make my decision but also stay my hand and my action.)

What is a man,

If his chief but to sleep and feed? (What am I if I only exist to eat and sleep?)

Christine: No more.

Jasmine: Sure, he that made large looking before and unused. (I'm useless and I'm disgusted with myself.)

Christine: Now, whether it be

Jasmine: Of thinking too precisely
but one part

three parts coward, coward, coward, (I'm a coward.)

I do not know

yet I live, yet I live

Christine: Yet I live

Jasmine: Sith I have cause and will and strength and means (I do not know why I am alive while I have the means to do the deed but I don't do it.)

Christine: To Examples earth exhort

Witness this army

delicate and tender prince,

Whose spirit divine puff'd

the invisible event, (I see this army with a young prince in the lead and young soldiers marching to their fate.)

Exposing mortal and unsure

fortune, death and danger dare,

Jasmine: an egg-shell. (Their lives are fragile, like an eggshell.)

Rightly to be great

great argument,

greatly

When honour's stake. (The honor of my father is at stake.)

How stand

That have a father kill'd

Christine: a mother stain'd, (How am I standing here when my father is dead and my mother has married his brother, staining her reputation.)

Jasmine and Christine: reason reason reason

Jasmine: and my blood,

Christine: my shame, (I must find my reality and reason with myself- pull myself back from the abyss.)

Jasmine: I see

imminent death

Go to their graves like beds,

try the cause,

Christine: tomb tomb tomb

Jasmine: hide the slain? (I see this army as ghosts in their graves.)

Christine: O, from this time forth,

Jasmine: My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing ... (From now on I will think of killing the King or nothing at all!)

Scene 15:

(Omens mean nothing and things are out of my control- God controls all. Fate is predetermined. What's to come will come. Even the death of a bird is predetermined by fate.)

The sound of wind. Repetitive.

Nana and Jasmine with Christine:

Augry (omens)

defy

sparrow

fall

providence

now

not to come

not to come

now

not now

come

All: READINESS ALL. (I am ready for it)

Scene 16:

Grunting voices. Driving music.

Jasmine: The drink.

Hana and Christine: Both sides. (Both of them!)

Jasmine: They bleed on both sides. (Both of them are wounded)

Scene 17:

Music fades back down into just the sounds of a breath.

Note

The Clarice hosted a small series consisting of two sensory-friendly (SF) performances on November 13, 2018. The performances featured a string quartet from Austin, Texas: Invoke. In addition to playing violin, cello, and viola, Invoke added a mandolin and banjo to the set. The performance differed from a concert event such as “Hamlet” in a number of ways. The space was arranged so that there was extra seating available. While some risers were pulled out, as one would expect at a traditional concert, there was also space for people to sit on the floor all around the musicians. Carpets were arranged around the musicians on all sides. Any areas off limits to audience such as the stage and backstage were clearly marked off by red tape. Outside of the theater a “break area” was cordoned off and available for patrons who needed to get out of the theater. Additionally, lighting was kept to a comfortable low glow with houselights on and the musicians highlighted minimally. Fluorescents were not used at all as the flickering that is produced by fluorescents can be detrimental for peoples trying to limit their sensory exposure. Earplugs and tactile toys, called “fidgets,” were available for patrons. These included streamers and colorful ribbons in addition to small gummy-like dolls and figures. A Social Story™, which provided pictures of the theater, set out expectations for patrons. And these were just the services The Clarice provided.

Invoke present a number of SF events through an organization called Azure, and the four musicians were familiar and comfortable with the atmosphere. They were prepared for students coming onto the stage trying to touch their instruments, for raucous dancing to the banjo, for noises of joy (or otherwise) coming from the audience, and for any other unexpected occurrences. The musicians let patrons gently touch their instruments before the show, and when a few patrons did come onstage to feel something,

they gently blocked the more delicate instruments while parents, volunteers, or teachers, brought the patron back to their seat.

This comfort and generosity of spirit from musicians prepared for a neurodivergent audience whose behavior does not fall in the realm of what we would usually anticipate in a concert venue, made it clear that the inviting atmosphere of the SF performance was not just The Clarice's responsibility. Without the knowledge and comfort of the band, the event could have been an uncomfortable experience, rather than a positive one, for patrons who find themselves regularly excluded from events.

The Clarice had two performances: an afternoon matinee with school groups and an evening performance open to the public. While the afternoon performance was far more heavily attended, at both performances parents and school staff began with their children seated quietly, encouraging them to behave as one would expect neurotypical students to behave. It didn't take long (the banjo seemed to elicit uncontrollable dancing from many patrons) for audience members to abandon the seats and their confinement to sit on the carpets, dance, sing, or run around the space. It almost seemed as if the patrons were testing the water, gently dipping in their toes to decide whether this was truly an event where their children could be free. Finding that it was, the event changed tones and patrons were able to be free, and included.

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