

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: WAY IN: AN MFA THESIS CONCERT  
EXPLORING PHYSICAL HABIT, WHERE IT  
COMES FROM, AND WHAT IT LEAVES  
BEHIND.

Jessie Laurita-Spanglet, Master of Fine Arts,  
2014

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Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies

This paper details the ideas, questions, collaborations, creative process and research that went into the making of my MFA dance concert, *Way In*. With threads beginning in the first year of my MFA work, and continuing past the public showing of my dance thesis event, this paper tracks the forking and developing path of my creative process. My research centers around the following questions: where and from whom do physical habits come from? How are physical habits related to emotional patterns? How do we get stuck in patterns that we can't see? What kind of residue does habit leave behind? This paper also attempts to elucidate my interest in site-specific dance, text and movement, and dance lineage as a factor in creating dance habits.

WAY IN: A MFA THESIS CONCERT EXPLORING PHYSICAL HABIT, WHERE  
IT COMES FROM, AND WHAT IT LEAVES BEHIND.

By

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## Chapter 1: Setting the Stage; Context and Inspiration

### Text and Movement

In the Spring and Fall semesters of 2012, while I was beginning to cogitate on my thesis project, I saw and was inspired by Nora Chipaumire's *Miriam*, Rob Jansen's *A Tramp's New World*, Graham Brown's *Apple Falling*, Zap McConnell's *The Unearthing*, Meredith Monk's *On Behalf of Nature*, Wim Wender's *Pina*, and excerpts from the Dance Exchange's *How To Lose A Mountain*. Among other things, what fascinated me about these works was how text and movement could work together in honor of a single goal. That fall I also took a Theatrical Clown class from UMD Theatre Professor Leslie Felbain, which lead me to be even more interested in the question of how the voice and the body could work together to bring up a feeling or create a particular atmosphere. Meredith Monk and Pina Bausch's work in particular stirred an interest in me about blurring the line between text as a means to tell a story, and text as sound where the letters and intonations become what is important, rather than what the words are actually saying. In Nora Chipaumire's work I was particularly fascinated with her use of sounds and words to create story and atmosphere. She used a blend of actual words that had meaning, along with high-pitched sounds and screeches that evoked an animalistic quality, and for me brought weight and emotion to the character that she was embodying. In Nora's work, I felt that words and sounds were so well intermingled with what her body was doing that

the two no longer felt like separate mediums, but instead were working together to tell a single story.

### *Site-specific and site-adaptive dance*

Although much of my experience has been performing and choreographing in and for proscenium spaces, my interest in site-specific and site-adaptive work has grown significantly in the last few years. Site-specific dance is dance that is made for, and inspired by, a particular place, so that taking it out of the exact place that it was made would change the dance significantly. As discussed in *Site Dance*, site-specific art emerged in both dance and other art fields in the 1960s as a push away from art that could only be viewed in galleries and theaters, and a shift towards art that was made of and for the place where it would be viewed. Along with this came the drive to make the arts more accessible, so that not just those who could afford tickets to a theater could view dance work (Kloetzel, Pavlik, 8). Over the last few years, my interest in creating dances that are for particular spaces has grown, as I've realized how important space and place are to me. Creating work that is rooted in a particular environment has started to feel as important as who the dancers are, what the music is, and what they're wearing.

Because of the particular nature of my thesis project, I have come to think of my piece as site-specific in its creation, but with the potential of being site-adaptive in the future. In my mind, these categories are still evolving, and I think of them more as points on a spectrum rather than completely separate categories. In site-specific work,

the work is inspired by and made for a particular site. In some situations, the choreographer gets to actually create the piece in the place that it will be performed, but in many situations the creator does not have that luxury and has to do much of the creation in a studio or other workspace. Either way, site-specific works are inextricably linked to place, and often cannot be performed anywhere else without significant changes to the work. In site-adaptive work, dance can be created in a place that is similar to the performance venue, and then be transposed into the actual space closer to the performance, or it can be made at the site itself. The difference between the two categories lies in the fact that site-adaptive work can be taken out of its site and adapted for other sites similar to the original inspiration, whereas site-specific work cannot be easily adapted or may be impossible to move. Stephan Koplowitz explains it like this, “In the next category, which I will call site-adaptive, a particular site inspires the content and execution of a piece, but it can be performed in similar sites anywhere” (75). In my situation, because I had very limited time in my performance space, some of my dance was created in my actual site but much of it was made in spaces similar in shape and size. Even though I spent much of my creative time in a studio, the piece was inspired by the Kogod Theatre, the load-in door, and the backstage hallway, thus making the original piece site-specific. However, I feel that the piece could be adapted for another site with a black box theatre, a load-in door, and a hallway, and therefore could have a future as a site-adaptive work.

### *Connections between emotions and physical carriage*

Before coming to the University of Maryland I was working as a full time Pilates Teacher at Thinking Body Pilates Studio in Charlottesville, VA. Pilates is a series of exercises and beliefs about how the body works that were developed by Joseph Pilates in the early part of the twentieth century. Much has been discovered about how the body works since Pilates developed his methods, and so the practice has changed significantly in the last hundred years. However, many of Pilates' original exercises and ideas about concentration, precision, and breath are still taught today. As a Pilates teacher, I had many clients that I worked with for two years or more, seeing most of them once or twice a week. This long expanse afforded me the perspective of seeing the client's body change over time. It also created some fairly close relationships, as working with someone's body is wont to do. I had one client in particular, David, who I worked with from 2008 to 2011. David was very tall with long limbs, and he tended to walk on his toes with his weight forward and his heels lifting up with a little pop at the end of each step. David had an overly curved thoracic spine and jutted his head forward with his chin raised high. In the fall of 2010, David lost a lot of money in the stock market and went through a very tough time personally. I have never seen someone shift so greatly in my entire life. David went from a tall proud man to a slumped man who dropped his heels and carried his chin lowered towards his chest. This was the first time I had seen such a direct and clear shift in someone's body, and the first time that I had seen it so clearly accompanied by a shift in mood. While this is certainly not a scientific study, watching David go

through these changes heightened and tuned my curiosity about the relationship between a person's emotional life and a person's physical posture.

For as long as I can remember, I have known about and been drawn to the Alexander Technique. The Alexander Technique is a mind-body technique of self-observation that leads to tension release, physical ease, and I believe, self-knowledge. It was developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is used by artists of all types as well as people from all walks of life. What draws me to the Alexander work is that to practice it, you really have to look at yourself and what you're doing in a way that feels very deep and very personal. It is this looking inward, coupled with Alexander's ideas of bringing awareness to habits and then inhibiting habitual responses to those habits, that makes the technique so fascinating to me. In Charlottesville, where I grew up, there is an Alexander teacher-training school that keeps Charlottesville stocked in the Alexander teacher department. As is sometimes the case, the Alexander community in Charlottesville is very connected with the dance and theatre communities. Katharine Birdsall, a choreographer with whom I worked for years before coming to UMD, is an Alexander teacher who brought ideas from the technique into her choreography. Alexander Technique looks at physical habit, and so in this way the idea of habit has been either in the background or the foreground of my dancing life for a long time. When I came to UMD I did a semester of Alexander Technique work with Theatre Professor Leslie Felbain. Through a semester of working with her, I was able to move past a painful hip injury and once again realize the power that the Alexander Technique has for me.



### *Putting it all together*

My background and experience with Alexander Technique, my experience teaching Pilates to David and seeing the connection between the physical and emotional sides of people, my new interest in site-specific and site-adaptive work, and my fascination with text and movement were what laid the groundwork for my thesis project. In addition to these interests, when I was planning and thinking about my thesis, I decided that I wanted to push myself to try something that was new, challenging, and experimental for me. I didn't want to make something that only used the body and music as means of communication, because that's what I had done before. In this way, my thesis concert was developed out of interests that had deep roots in my previous work and study, but was also a departure and a leap into something new and exciting for me.

*Way In* was a site-adaptive work in four sections that uses text and movement to explore physical habit. My performance event was an immersive experience where the audience shifted their perspective by turning their chairs around and moving to different parts of the space as the work progressed. The work looked at where our habits come from, how physical habits are connected to emotional habits, when a habit has become unnecessary, and the residue that habit leaves behind. It is my hope that audience members left my show with new questions about their habits as people, movers, and viewers.

## Chapter 2: Formal Beginnings

### Movement Analysis

The thought research for *Way In* began formally in UMD Dance Professor Miriam Phillips' Movement Observation and Analysis class, although clearly experiences that I had leading up to graduate school and in my first year at UMD also influenced my thinking and interests, and led me to make certain choices and be drawn to certain ideas. Professor Phillips' class centered on the work of Edward T. Hall and Rudolf Laban. Edward T. Hall was an anthropologist who investigated culturally specific ideas about space and time. Hall's method of analyzing space and what it means about people's values is called Proxemics, and is outlined in his books *The Dance of Life*, and *The Hidden Dimension*. Rudolf Laban was a Hungarian dance artist and theorist who developed Laban Movement Analysis, which is a method of describing, analyzing and embodying movement by looking at it through the lenses of body, effort, shape, and space.

For our final project, Professor Phillips asked us to devise a project of our choosing by drawing on concepts touched on in class. I chose to concentrate on LMA and to use it to analyze a particular mover. I wanted to see if I could tease out the movement signature that she brought to all different types of movement. I was trying to get at who she was as a mover and to see what made her recognizable even in different movement styles. The dancer that I studied was undergraduate dance major Emilie

Davignon. Working on this project is what peaked my interest in what makes movers the individual dancers that they are, who influences them, and why certain influences stick while others fall away.

### Way

Physical research for my thesis concert started when I began work on a trio in the fall of 2012. The trio was a research-testing lab for my thesis, but the result of all the studio time was a piece that stood on its own. For this piece I worked with UMD undergraduate dancers Ellen Clark, Emilie Davignon, and Adrian Galvin. Other than researching ideas for my thesis, I wanted to make a piece that fall because I felt that it was important for me to stay in the habit of making dance. I knew that if I were to take a semester off from creating and researching work in the studio, then I wouldn't be able to hit the ground running when it came to my thesis work.

In creating *Way*, I wanted to try something that was fairly new to me: to use my rehearsals as a time for exploring and answering questions. In the past I had used a model of dance making where I'd spent a lot of time alone in a studio before rehearsals started. I would use this time to make and memorize movement that I would then bring in to rehearsals for my dancers to learn. In this way, I maintained control over the actual movements in the piece. For *Way*, I spent time outside of rehearsals writing and thinking about ideas that I wanted to explore, and coming up with improvisational structures that I thought might get at my ideas. I would then bring my ideas and improvisational structures in to the rehearsal studio and allow my

instincts and the dancers to guide what happened next. *Way* was performed as part of the Shared Graduate Dance Concert at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center in February 2012. I enjoyed the process of making *Way*, and felt that the outcome had moments that were very rich, and others that still needed more investigation.

It was during my investigations for *Way*, and during the summer of 2012 when I took a workshop with Axis Dance Company, that I began to think of dancers as translators. Axis Dance Company is a mixed abilities company; they work with movers who are physically disabled as well as able-bodied movers. Because of this mix, movers who work with Axis constantly have to make choices about how to do movement that was made on a very different body than their own. That might mean taking a movement that was made on someone who is wheelchair bound and figuring out how to do it standing, or it might mean taking a movement that was made on an able-bodied person and doing a version with a walker. As movement is making its way from one person's body to another, there are choices that are constantly being made about how to translate that movement onto one's own body.

In the Fall of 2012, when I was back at school and working with only able-bodied movers, I started to think about the choices that are made when movement is translated from one able-bodied mover to another. My thought was that even if two bodies are relatively similar, movement never looks the same on two people, and so I wanted to know what accounted for these differences. Part of what makes movement different from person to person is physiological, part is habitual, and part of it is

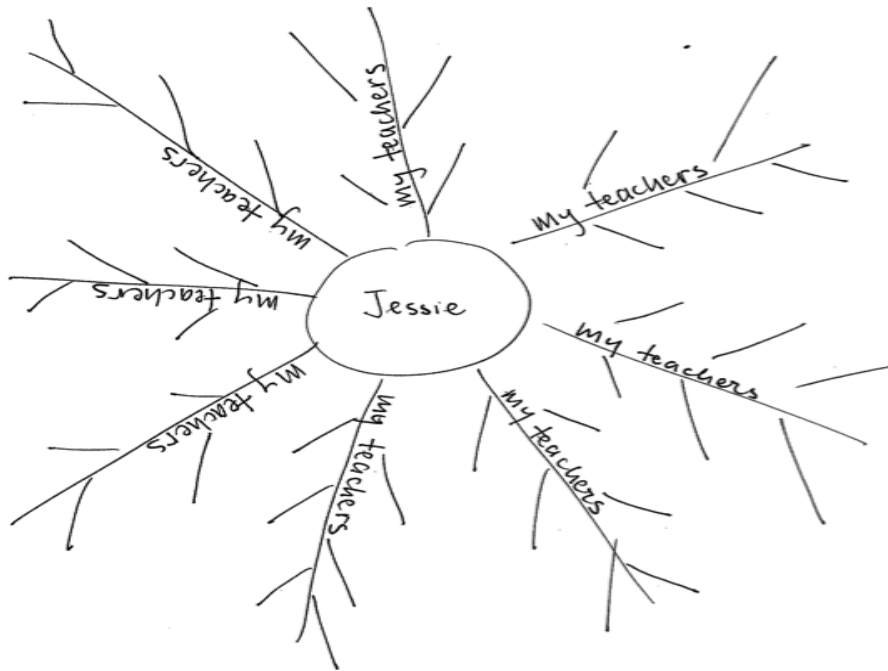
based on choices that the individual mover is making. The same goes for watching dance; some people see shapes, some see a story, some see the weight of the movement, and the variations go on and on. In the making of *Way*, we used this idea of the dancer as translator to create what I called a “translation continuum section” where one dancer would act as source and the other would be the translator. After much practice we got to know ourselves fairly well as translators and were able to make clearer choices in the moment. The continuum went from the second dancer trying to do an exact replica of the first dancer’s movements, (no one can do an exact replica of someone else’s movement, but it was the intention that was important) all the way to the second dancer doing something that was not related at all to what the first person was doing. The continuum went from exact replica, to translation of, to inspired by, to reminiscent of, to not related at all. I mostly left what the first dancer was doing up to them, because I was more interested in the translation part of the exercise than what the original mover was doing. In the future, I would like to play more with giving the original mover additional directions, and see how that might change the translation that the second mover came up with. On top of this continuum we added speed (slow to fast) and various spatial prompts. This structure was used for *Way* and then carried over to my thesis rehearsals as well.

### Lineage

From my interest in looking at dancers as translators, came the idea that perhaps one of the factors that affects how movers translate is their dance/movement lineage. I

knew that there are many factors that form a person's aesthetic views and interests, but the way that they were trained to move and look at dance is the one that seemed to settle in me and asked to be looked at. I started with my own dance lineage by mapping out who I considered my most influential teachers to be. This was obviously not a scientific or exhaustive study in any way; I chose teachers mostly by asking myself which ones had methods, ideas, or ways of moving that had stuck with me, and which had traits that I most wanted to emulate. Once I had made these decisions, I created a diagram with myself in the middle, and my teachers spoking out from the center. From there, I contacted the teachers that I had chosen and asked them the same question: who were the movement teachers that had most influenced them? I then added my teachers' teachers spoking out from their names. At this point I was forced to stop because my teachers' teachers were either dead or impossible to reach. I brought this project in to rehearsal and asked my trio dancers to do the same project. Their maps were much smaller because they are about ten years younger than me, and they had a lot of overlaps because they had all studied with the same dance professors at UMD. Once we had our maps, we then used the names as a way to source material, and created "lineage phrases" where we borrowed movement from each of the people on our lineage map. This became another way to source movement and to think about lineage. The visual representation of having it all mapped out helped me to conceive of all of my influences, and having the maps in the room with us in this visual manner kept the idea of lineage present as we worked. I have since thought about other ways that I might have visually represented this where I was not in the center, but at the back or bottom or top of the page, and how that would have changed the way that we

all conceived of ourselves in relation to our teachers. Making lineage phrases was one of the exercises that I carried from my trio rehearsals into my thesis rehearsals.



**Figure 1: Example of lineage diagram shape.**

*Way* was different from almost anything I had choreographed up until that point, in that I did not start with a piece of music. In the past I had almost always started with a piece of music that inspired me or evoked a sense of movement for me. In a choreography class that I took during my first year at UMD, Dance Professors Sara

Pearson and Patrik Widrig suggested that I try not starting with music and see how that might change my process and outcome. *Way* was the first time that I had really put their advice into action, and I felt that it allowed me a certain freedom within the making process that I had not felt before. It opened me up to follow the movement, ideas, and flow of the rehearsal, rather than always needing to follow what I felt the music was telling me. For *Way* I worked with a variety of music in the studio, more as a way to create a flavor in the room than as a blueprint for the piece I was creating. Ultimately I ended up using a piece of music by composer Michael Wall, but I didn't bring it in until the very end of the process. The piece was called "Lucky" and I chose it because I felt that it matched the subtle, psychological tone of the piece I had made.

During my research for *Way*, the cast and I spent a good deal of time trying to tease out our habits as movers with the goal of getting to know ourselves better as dancers and choice-makers. One of the first exercises that we did to this end was to observe each other improvising for long periods of time and try to pinpoint each other's habits. It seemed like the habits were easier to see on each other than on ourselves. I had the cast write down what they had seen, and then we compared notes and searched for similarities in what we had observed. I then had the dancers improvise on their own and when they got to a movement or pathway that felt very familiar to them, they would repeat it a few times in order to underline it and get to know it for themselves. We also did exercises where when one person got to a point where they found a movement that was familiar, we would all repeat it with them so that they could have it emphasized by other bodies other than their own. We would then take



the knowledge that we had gained from that exercise, and improvise on our own either trying not to do any of our habits, or trying to only do our movement habits.

In the beginning of *Way*, the lights came up and Emilie and Adrian simply entered from upstage left and walked to the center of the stage. I worked on this opening moment with them for a long time, and I could have kept at it. I wanted them to acknowledge that they were walking into a clear space and beginning something, I wanted them to sense each other but not need to look at each other, and I also wanted them to walk together without necessarily taking the exact same steps. I was never completely satisfied with the way that they performed this moment, because I felt that they never quite developed the sensitivity that I was looking for. It was after seeing *Way* performed, and working with them on the opening walk, that I realized how important these small moments are to me. This realization greatly influenced the way that I worked with my thesis cast, and the amount of time that I spent on how they were using their eyes, how they were walking, and the quality with which they entered the performance space.

Throughout these descriptions I find myself saying “we” when describing my process even though I was not actually in *Way*. I think that this is because I like to be on the outside when I’m choreographing so that I can craft the piece and see the contours of it, but at the same time I like to participate in all of the movement making and improvisational structures within the piece. In this way I feel that I can track the experience of the piece from the “inside” while keeping an outsider’s perspective.

On October 16<sup>th</sup> 2012 I jotted down this list of interests: Lineage: Who influenced me and my dancers to move in the particular ways that we do? Framing: Choreographically, structurally, and architecturally. Translation: What happens in the moment when movement travels from one body to another? Habit: What are my movement tendencies, and what are the movement tendencies of my dancers? Voice: How can the voice be used in conjunction with the body to tell a story or bring about a mood or flavor?

For the most part, this list of buzzing words and questions carried me through my entire thesis process. Additionally I would later add: Proximity: How does distance affect understanding and feeling? Density: How can a feeling of fullness or emptiness be created with bodies and space? Intimacy: How can an intimate performance setting bring about a sense of inclusion in an audience? Text: How can text mingle with movement to create meaning?

## Chapter 3: The Process

### Casting

Upon finishing and performing *Way*, I knew that I wanted to continue to work with the three dancers with whom I had just been in a process. Not only did I enjoy them as movers, but I felt that it was important to work with dancers with whom I had a personal rapport, and who knew my aesthetic values and style of working. One approach that I was eager to continue with was to work collaboratively with my performers; sourcing movement from them and allowing them to feel ownership and responsibility for the work. For these reasons I asked Ellen Clark, Emilie Davignon, and Adrian Galvin to be in my thesis. Adrian was graduating so he couldn't participate, but Emilie and Ellen were excited to continue working with me in this manner. This was the beginning of my casting for my thesis. At the time I had slight reservations about working with Ellen because starting in the spring of 2013 she would no longer be a dance major. I was concerned that she would not have a physical practice to support her work in rehearsals, but she told me that she would develop a practice on her own and I trusted her to do this. At this time, I also asked Nicole Turchi to be part of my process. Nicole and I had worked on a project together in my first year at school and had a very good working relationship. Additionally I asked Rachael Mucha to be part of my cast. Rachael was a student in my Movement Integration class at that time, and although I hadn't worked with her on any choreographic projects, I felt that she had the maturity to work on a project of this

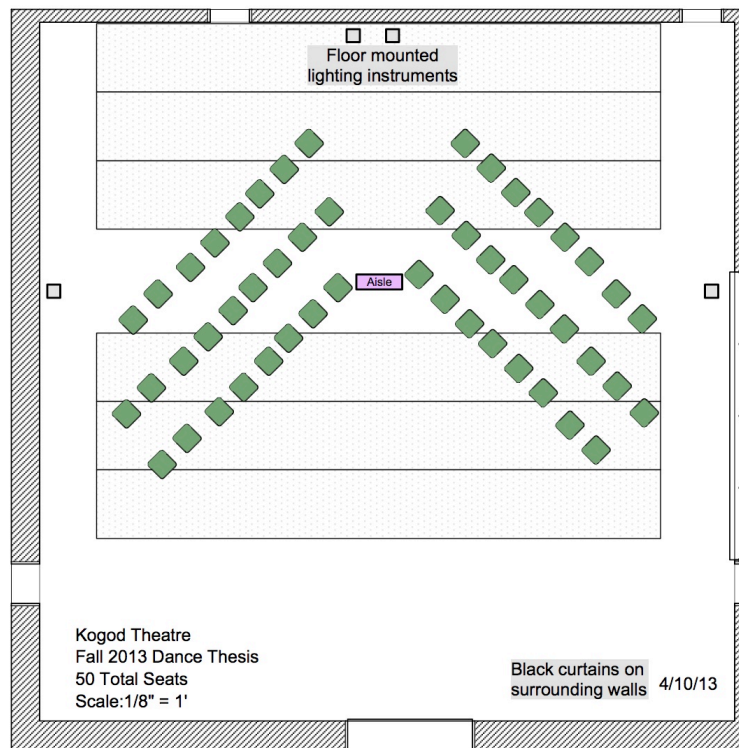
nature. I knew that I wanted to work with five dancers because choreographically uneven numbers are much more interesting to me, and so I asked Patty Mullaney-Loss to be part of the project as well. Patty hadn't been in any of my work either, but we had been in classes and dances together, and I sensed that she would be a good fit, and would be interested in a process that was collaborative and investigative. My five original dancers were all undergraduates studying dance at UMD.

### Space

My surroundings have always been very important to me, and assembling the spaces that I inhabit in ways that feel pleasing has always been a pre-occupation. In particular I tend to look at how objects are organized in a room, the flow of movement that particular organizations present, how objects that are next to each other complement or detract from one another, and how a space feels and looks from different vantage points. As I've reflected on my thesis process and tried to tease out what I did in the making of my concert, I've realized that spatial organization is one of the first aspects of my event that I thought about. This has led me to realize that both in my surroundings and in my work, space is something that I value greatly.

During my first year at UMD, my cohort and I spent some time walking around to all of the different theatres in The Center. When I walked into the Dance Theatre I felt very little inspiration, but when I walked into the Kogod Theatre I felt an immediate affinity for the space. I liked the rawness of it and I felt that because of the black box nature of the space, it did not immediately suggest a direction for front. This lack of

front was intriguing to me, and suggested a use of space that would be multi-sided, in the round, or sectioned off. The load-in door on one wall of the Kogod was also intriguing because of the possibility of entrances and exits and the frame that it created. A few days later as I was walking from one side of The Center to the other (trying to find the dance program) I walked passed the load-in door to the Kogod while it was open. As I retreated down the backstage hallway away from the door, I had a spark of excitement as I saw the frame that the load-in door created, and noticed the shift in perspective that I was experiencing as I traveled farther and farther away from the doorframe. It was for all of these reasons that I decided that I wanted to try to do my thesis concert in the Kogod Theatre. For my concert, I knew that I wanted the structure of the show to mimic the ideas behind it, so that the container referenced the contents. After sifting through many different ideas about how to make this happen, I settled on a set up that would bring into question the habits that audience members have when viewing concert dance. I did this by shifting the audience's perspective from one section of the piece to the next, and by playing with audience and performer proximity and intimacy.



**Figure 2: Kogod Theatre floor plan.**

It was with the idea of the experience or container matching the content that I decided to make my thesis proposal an immersive experience for the dance faculty. I created a proposal that was told in the first person from the perspective of an imagined audience member. I had the dance faculty close their eyes while I told the story so that they could better picture the experience that I was talking about. The main questions that my proposal focused on were: where and from whom do physical habits come from? How are physical habits related to emotional patterns? How do we get stuck in patterns that we can't see? Why are habitual patterns often cyclical? Along with my story, I showed the dance faculty my diagram of how I wanted to use

the space and what the flow of the audience might look like. I proposed my thesis on December 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, and was given the green light to proceed soon after. I then had to make a second proposal to the Center Council to receive permission to use the Kogod and the hallway in the way that I wanted. I received permission from the Center Council in late January 2013, but was given many restrictions about what I could do in the hallway and Kogod Theatre. Some of these restrictions were: no sets or projections could be used in the Kogod, absolutely no objects could be put into or taken out of the hallway, no blocking doorways or entryways to and from the hallway, dancers must be in shoes at all times in the hallway, and I could only use the Kogod and hallway during very restricted times.

Although this seemed like a lot of restrictions, it is fairly common when making work in alternative spaces to be given rules as to what you can and cannot do in the space. Additionally, since the hallway that I used as a performance space was an important walkway for people who work in and go to school at The Center, we were not able to stop people from using it during rehearsals or performances. This is also a common part of site-work, and one that I was happy to work with. I realized through this process that I actually enjoy working with the people and restrictions that come with site-work. Working in this way gives me a sense that I'm not working in a bubble, but instead that I'm part of a community that is much larger than my individual artistic needs. After my thesis proposal was accepted by both my committee and The Center, I was ready to set up my rehearsal schedule, my four showing dates, work on a publicity blurb, and start to think about a poster image for my concert.

*Moving forward and beginning work in the studio*

By mid-February 2013 I was ready to start rehearsals with my core dancers: Ellen Clark, Emilie Davignon, Rachael Mucha, Patty Mullaney-Loss, and Nicole Turchi. At the time I felt the excitement and nervousness that one might feel just before diving into water or leaving for a very long trip; I had done all of the preparations that I could do, and now I needed to just launch myself into the work. I found this quote in Jacques Lecoq's *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, "In any process of creation the object made no longer belongs to the creator. The aim of this act of creation is to bear fruit which then separates from the tree." (17). I found this idea very useful because it made me feel that the work that I was making was already alive, and that along with my performers and collaborators, I just needed to uncover it. The piece would be a product of the time and energy spent by all of those involved, and so I vowed to work on my project a little bit every day until the shows on December 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. In this way I could relax with the knowledge that I was going to make something that was the best that I could do at this time, and with these people, and in this place; and really this is all that I could ask for.

On February 25<sup>th</sup> 2013 I had my first rehearsal with my dancers. I wanted to set a tone that was relaxed and collaborative, but still rigorous and full of focus. It was important to me to create a sense of community with my cast because I would be spending a lot of time with them, and we would be going through a very important process together. Some groups that I've danced with take a while to coalesce, but this



group meshed from the very first day. Having a cast that worked so well together made my process with this group have a sense of ease and grace that was truly wonderful.

On that first day we talked about scheduling for the semester and into the summer, and I set up two intensives with them; one at the beginning of the summer and one just before school started in the fall. As I would soon learn, scheduling rehearsals, meetings, and fittings would become a much larger part of my job than I would have ever imagined. Wanting to set up a connection with the performance space from the beginning, I took my cast on a walk down the hallway and into the Kogod so that they could immediately get a feel for the space. Unfortunately we wouldn't get to actually rehearse in the space for some time, but at least they could have a feeling and a picture of what it was. I also showed them my diagram of how I thought I might use the space and where I thought I'd put my audience. On that first rehearsal I told the cast this list of interests, ideas, and questions: physical habits and where or from who do they come from, dancers as translators, dance habits and everyday movement habits, dance lineage, family/social/geographic/institutional/individual factor that affect habit, and connection of physical habits with emotional habits and cycles. I wanted to tell them the general ideas relating to the piece in the beginning so that they could be thinking about them. After all of this talking, we did some Authentic Movement.

During the summer of 2012 I had joined an Authentic Movement group in Charlottesville, VA that was led by Katharine Birdsall and Brad Stoller, both long time teachers and both invested in the practice of Authentic Movement. As discussed in her book, *Offering From The Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement*, Janet Adler explains that Authentic Movement was developed in the 1950's by a dancer, teacher, and psychotherapist named Mary Whitehouse who used it as a tool in group therapy sessions. Authentic Movement is typically done with one mover and one witness. The mover has her eyes closed and is free to move about as she pleases, and the witness has her eyes open and is witnessing the mover. During my limited time practicing Authentic Movement, I had found it to be a successful tool for stripping my inhibitions, noticing my patterns, and getting comfortable with being witnessed in close proximity. Adler writes "In the discipline of authentic movement, the literal force of moving and witnessing the embodiment of sensation, emotion, and spirit infuses relationship with new ways of knowing the self and the other". (XVII) I hoped that by introducing this practice early on in my process, my dancers would begin to see themselves and each other in a deeper way, and get comfortable with being seen.

In the weeks leading up to my first rehearsal, it had become clear to me as I thought about the Kogod, that the number of audience members that I could accommodate would be limited. I also realized that the performers and audience members would be much closer to one another than in normal stage settings, and that because of the close proximity, the dancers and audience members would be able to make eye contact with

one another and see each other in an intimate way. I wanted this type of intimacy for my show, but I also recognized that most of my performers had never danced in such close proximity to their audience.

Slowly I began to layer in tools that I had developed during the making of *Way*. We watched each other do long ten-minute improvisations and tried to tease out our movement habits. I framed this by asking the dancers to look for what they saw in each other rather than what they didn't see, thereby staying away from any feelings of being judged or talked down to on the part of the improviser. I took this exercise a step further by creating assignments for each of them based on what the group felt were their inclinations as movers. For example, if one dancer tended to always begin by initiating from their fingers or toes, part of her "secret assignment" as I called them, would be to start everything from the pelvis or center of the body. This resulted in some very interesting movement vocabulary. Another theme that came back in from *Way* was the idea of the translation continuum. This helped us source material and bring out ideas surrounding the mover as a translator. We also worked with our lineage maps, and I asked the dancers to create lineage phrases borrowing movements from each of their teachers. I then manipulated these phrases in various ways.

During this time I began to choreograph in corners. I had decided that I was interested in corners as a choreographic space; it was a way to organize movers in space, and a way to focus the audience's eye. Additionally, I found that with a corner I was able to play with near and far while still working in a relatively small amount of space. The

other aspect that I enjoyed about the corners was that I could create a sense of fullness by cramming five people into the corner. Having five bodies in a small amount of space created a feeling of density, as opposed to having five bodies in the hallway, which felt very empty and light.

During this first semester of rehearsals I also worked a lot with how the performers might use their eyes and their focus. After about a month, we moved away from Authentic Movement to start rehearsals, and instead started doing personal dances for each other where we would pair off and do short improvised dances for a partner and then switch roles. We played with different ways of seeing; sometimes making direct eye contact, sometimes seeing past our partner, and sometimes having an internal focus. We also practiced this where one person would perform for the entire group so that she could play with the personal dance and focus ideas in a slightly more pressurized setting. Over spring break I asked them to get one of their friends or family members to sit in a chair and then to do a one-minute improvised solo for him or her. In this solo they could play with proximity and different ways of using their eyes. Also during these one-minute dances they could practice embracing their movement habits, or trying to get away from them.

Through these exercises I began to see that some of my dancers needed more work standing up in front of people and allowing themselves to be seen without feeling self-conscious, and so we started working with taking the movement away since that was something they seemed to want to hide behind. I had many variations on this

idea, but the one that we did most often was where everyone would be in a line, and one person would stand facing the group about 7-10 feet away from them. The person standing in front of the group would stand still for about two minutes in silence and then at the end make one small gesture of their choosing. We also did variations that involved the dancers talking in a stream of consciousness way while they stood in front of the group and not doing a gesture. This exercise came to me from UMD dance professor Sharon Mansur, who had learned it from independent artist Nicole Bindler. Bindler's inspiration came from experimental choreographer and former Judson Dance Theatre member, Deborah Hay.

Throughout that spring I was committed to running my rehearsals in a very particular way. I wanted to create an atmosphere of informal inquisition, where the dancers cultivated their curiosity but also felt comfortable in the studio. I wanted my dancers to feel comfortable enough to talk about the ideas openly and dialogue with me about their experiences without any pressure of having to say something every time or even needing to say something profound every time, basically I just wanted them to be involved. On the other hand I wanted them to work hard, be on time, and conduct themselves in a professional manner. For the most part, I felt successful in this. I was also committed to always giving them some kind of physical warm-up. Some of them were coming to rehearsals from a dance class, but some were coming from a lecture class where they had been sitting for over an hour. I wanted to make sure that they got a good amount of time to get into their bodies, and I also felt that this was a good way to mark the beginning of our time together. I would usually save any scheduling or

“business” for the last five minutes of rehearsal. With this group I found that this method worked well, and I found myself growing very close with these five dancers, and really valuing their input, humor, and beautiful movement.

Towards the end of the Spring 2013 semester one of my core dancers, Ellen Clark, decided that she could no longer be part of my piece. Ellen’s life had been slowly shifting away from dance and towards other priorities, and she had reached a point in her college career where she had to make a decision about where to put her energy and time. After many weeks of approaching people, and trying to find the right fit, I cast undergraduate dance major Ashley David in Ellen’s role. Ashley had a broken foot at the time, but I had been an assistant teacher in a class that she was in, and had seen her perform before she broke her foot and so I felt confident that she would be able to step in and carry the part well. Towards the end of April Ashley started to sit in and watch rehearsals. She was then able to be part of my end of semester intensive, and immediately felt like a great fit both in her dancing and in her ability to connect with the rest of the cast.

### *Solo*

During the Spring 2013 semester I began to try to wrap my head around the entire show and figure out how it was all going to fit together. Through working with the Kogod and hallway space, and thinking about the perspective and possible shift of the audience, I had devised that I would make four distinct sections that would all be

connected through content, space, lighting, and sound. I was struggling to try to find a sense of clear connection between all of the sections. One of the sections would be the corner section with the five core dancers that I was already working on, one would be the story section that I was just beginning to conceive of, one would be my solo, and the last section would be in the hallway. How to connect text and movement was a big question and area of exploration for me. Also during this time I started thinking of the solo as the center of the piece; not only would it take place in the center of the space and in the middle of the show, but it would have elements from both the corner and the story sections. Then the hallway would be the recapitulation section at the end. Towards the end of the spring semester, habit became the central theme of the entire piece. It seemed to be the idea that held the most interest for me choreographically, intellectually, and physically, and it was the idea that everything else seemed to center around. I hoped that if I worked from this central topic on all four sections, then they would feel connected.

Although I knew that most of the work for my solo would happen during the summer when my cast would be gone, I did start doing some work on the solo during the spring semester. Solo rehearsals that spring, summer, and fall proved to be challenging. Being alone in the studio, without energy from anyone else to feed off of or be inspired by, and forcing myself to concentrate on the solo that I was making and not think about other aspects of the piece, proved to be one of the hardest parts of my thesis process. I did set up times throughout my solo process to have faculty and peers

come in and see my progress, and this proved to be very helpful in moving my work forward.

I began rehearsals for this section by thinking about the emotional side of habit. I thought a lot about how my physical habits are tied in to my emotional habits, like when I feel anxiety coming on by realizing that my trapezius muscles are going into spasms and my left sacro-iliac joint is hurting. Somehow my stress becomes physical discomfort, and addressing the physical discomfort helps me feel less stressed. I also thought about the tension that is created when I struggle against habits that are no longer useful. One habit that held me back in the creative process was being overly critical of myself. I can watch myself do it, and know that it is stopping my flow of creativity, but it is still hard to make that critical voice go away. I wanted to show how hard it can be to see my own habits, and how liberating it can feel when I can finally see them.

It was from the idea of being held back by habits that I started looking for a possible prop to use to literally hold myself back. I thought about jugs of water tied to my arms, string wrapped around my body, and cloth tied tightly around my legs, but none of these seemed quite right. I developed a structure where I would try to complete a simple task and was unaware of why I couldn't. Then my focus would shift, I would see what was holding me back, I would take off the jugs of water (or whatever it ended up being), and would be able to complete the task with ease.



After a few rehearsals like this, I decided that what I was doing felt flat and wasn't holding a lot of interest for me. I decided to take myself on what Julia Cameron from the *Artist's Way* calls an artist date, whereby one takes oneself on a little delightful and frivolous outing. And so I went to Target and wandered through the sock aisle and the kitchen aisle, and then I came to the camping aisle and my eyes spotted a shiny silvery little package. My artist date had brought me to an aisle where they sell life blankets for camping or wrapping oneself in at the end of marathons. I peeled open the little bag and unfolded just a small corner of the blanket. It was silvery and shiny and made a fantastic noise as I unwrapped it. It also seemed to be fairly sturdy and when you scrunched it up it kept a memory made of creases of wherever your hands had been. For some reason these traits compelled me to buy five life blankets and feel inspired enough to get back into the studio.

As I worked with the life blankets I realized that one of the things that I really loved about them was how they amplified almost anything I did with a lovely crackling noise. I developed a solo score that utilized the sound of the blankets and parts of my original score. In this score I had many blankets tied around me in various ways, and I would begin crouched and hiding under the blankets. The blankets would amplify my breath, and I would notice the limitation and frustration of not being able to breathe without this thing being affected. I would try to move without making a sound with the blankets, they would slip off me, I would become hyper self-aware of my relative nakedness without the security of the blanket, then I would wind the blankets around my ankles and shuffle off with freedom to move in my upper body but still clearly

held back in the lower. Over the course of the spring and summer I developed many versions of this score with the blankets. In some of the later versions I used words that people had written down about the solo from a showing that I had done to try to make myself conscious of what I was already doing, and then do more of it. Some of the words were: tremor, crinkle, exposed, revealing, inflation and nakedness. This was one strategy that I used to bring the solo more into what it was, or what it was trying to be, and to fold feedback back into the piece since I didn't have the natural feedback loop of having other dancers in the studio with me.

As the solo and the piece as a whole developed, I began to feel that the actual blankets were no longer necessary. I felt that they had been an important part of the building process, and had helped me find a movement quality that I was happy with, but having them as a visual element no longer felt necessary or connected with what had developed in the rest of the piece. One day I decided to do the same solo that I had developed using the blankets, and just leave the blankets out. I kept the same quality of tension and struggle that the blankets had given me, but took the blankets away. It felt much better this way, and I liked the sense of mystery and openness that was added when the audience couldn't see what was holding me back, and instead needed to use their imaginations about what it might be.

As the text developed, and the rest of the piece started to take shape, I felt an even greater need to make connections between sections. One way that I did this was by taking anecdotes from the text and injecting them into the solo. For example, there

was an anecdote in the text about a retired police officer who would hear a noise and reach for his gun even though he no longer carried one. I took this idea and created a movement where I would turn my head around quickly and at the same time reach my right hand to my hip like I was grabbing for something. I made a few of these gestures based on the text, and they ended up staying in my solo as part of what I presented in December.

### *Storytellers*

At the end of the spring semester I sent out a call to the entire School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at UMD to say that I was looking for some performers to join my cast. I did interviews with each person that responded. I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable making eye contact while in close proximity with someone, and wanted to be sure that they could speak clearly. An additional and very important factor was whether or not they could actually come to most of my rehearsals. I learned very quickly that negotiating schedules between the Dance and Theatre programs would be very challenging. In part this seemed to be because the theatre productions operate on such a different time line than the dance productions; they start rehearsing closer to the date of the performances but then their rehearsals are very long and very frequent. Additionally, many of the theatre students that I talked to had been cast in shows but had no idea about what the rehearsal schedule might be for those shows. By the end of the semester I had cast: Naomi Cohen, Tiziano D’Affuso, Nelly Diaz, and Jess Plaskon. I knew that I wanted more

storytellers, but the semester had officially ended and people had already begun to disperse for the summer. I decided that I would continue looking for storytellers when school resumed in the fall.

At this point in my process I had a lot of questions about what exactly the storytellers would do. I knew that my work with the storytellers would be very different than the process that I was having with the dancers, but I wasn't exactly sure what that meant. This was problematic because I needed to make a rehearsal schedule so that I could tell the cast what my expectations were. I ended up making a rehearsal schedule that I later realized would not give me nearly the amount of time that I needed.

Some of my ideas concerning the storytellers were as follows: that I wanted to use text to help get my ideas across, that I was curious about how text and movement could work together, and that I wanted to have a large cast that I could later use to create bigger choreographic moments. Additionally, I was curious about how I could use text both as a way of communicating meaning, but also as a sound score. I devised a plan where I wanted each storyteller to take one or two audience members out of their seats and bring them to a different part of the space. The storytellers would then tell their small group of audience members a story and then return them to their seats. I liked the idea of this very intimate interaction between the audience and the performers, and I wanted the audience members to have some kind of active role in the performance.

I knew that during the summer of 2013 I would be conducting some workshops to play with ideas about text and movement. I also knew that I would be taking a Joe Goode workshop in San Francisco that would help me devise ways of working with text that would be new and hopefully useful for my project. Joe Goode is a San Francisco based choreographer who is known for blending modern dance, text, and song. The workshop that I took with Joe focused on sharing his creative methods, exploring how to bring writing into a movement oriented creative process, and learning to verbalize while dancing and performing. There were a few exercises of Joe's that I used in my creative process, but more than anything taking his workshop helped me to just get comfortable with using my voice in front of people.

Also in the summer of 2013, I took a short workshop with Meredith Monk's company in New York City. Unfortunately, Monk herself was not able to be there, but her company members were able to pass on many of Monk's methods for using the voice in performance. Meredith Monk is a longtime maker of films, dances, site-specific work and vocal compositions, and in the 1960s she was a pioneer in bridging the gap between dance and vocal work. Like Joe's workshop, spending a few days immersed in Meredith Monk's incredible landscape of sound and movement, inspired me to create a thesis concert that could blend movement and text into one cohesive world.

Alisa Kurbatova was a student who had recently graduated from the UMD Theatre program and she participated in two of my summer workshops. Alisa had a well developed connection to her body and was able to express herself well both

physically and verbally. Despite Alisa no longer being a student at UMD, I asked her to join my storyteller cast, and by the fall she was coming to regular weekly rehearsals.

## Chapter 4: Collaborators

### Anjna Swaminathan/Dramaturge

In the spring of 2013 as I was gathering my cast and thesis committee, I decided that I wanted to try working with a dramaturge. UMD undergraduate theatre major Anjna Swaminathan, or Anj, was recommended to me by UMD Theatre Professor and dramaturge Faedra Carpenter when I went to her inquiring about dramaturges that might be interested in working with choreographers. I had never worked with a dramaturge before (except on one small exercise in my first year choreography class with Dance Professors Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig) and I was curious to see how it would work and how it would inform my creative process. Anj and I began meeting and sending e-mails back and forth immediately, and it seemed like a really good fit. She had almost no experience working with modern dance, which turned out to be a valuable attribute. Anj came to a few of my rehearsals, but most of our communication happened sitting around a table at the Center's Applause Café.

The way in which Anj was most helpful to me was as someone who could help me track and hold the piece as a whole. As I became more and more entrenched in the details of various aspects of the piece, including my own performance in it, it became harder and harder for me to step back and look at the big picture. Anj helped me do this, and also helped me remember the ideas that I started with and asked me if I still wanted to stick with them. Anj helped me imagine what my non-dancer audience members might take away from my show. For example, when I was thinking about not having a bow, Anj encouraged me to think about the audience members who

might feel alienated by the fact that they did not get to have that type of closure with the cast.

When Anj and I first started working together, she sent me a few research articles on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his ideas about habitus. As explained in an article called *Varieties of Habitus and the Embodiment of Ballet*, habitus is a term used for the values that individuals and social groups acquire based on their experiences and memories and expressed in their posture, body carriage, and gate (536). The reason that my work made her think of habitus, was that habitus not only refers to a social group's way of thinking, but also how their shared and individual experiences and memories affect their ways of moving and being in their bodies. These ideas were very interesting, but I quickly realized that the work I was making was centered on my time in the studio rather than on research that could be done by reading. After that initial month, all of our time together was spent talking about the work itself rather than written research. One down side to working with Anj was that she was extremely busy with her own work and touring schedule. By the last two months of my process Anj was almost never around, and I ended up wishing that I could have her in rehearsals and meetings more often. Overall, I'm so glad that I worked with her, and would definitely work with a dramaturge in the future.



Reed Johnson/Text

Reed is my fiancé so I was a little wary about asking him to work with me. We had never worked with each other on a creative project, and it seemed like a bit of a risk to start now. However, I realized that my thesis would be spilling over into all parts of my life, and if Reed and I were going to be talking about it at home, then I might as well ask him to play an official role in the making of it. I knew that I wanted to work with text that sounded well put together and sincere, and since I didn't feel prepared to create the text on my own and since Reed is a writer, it felt like the right decision to ask him to play a role in my project. I think that this collaboration went well, although as I expected there were some small issues that arose. Reed had never before worked with a topic that was not of his choosing, and physical habit is not something that is particularly interesting to him, so I think that he struggled a bit to spend time on something that he didn't feel particularly passionate about. During the spring of 2013 he wrote a short story for the project that was in the style of a fable, and got at the idea of physical habit betraying a person's true self. We tried this story out in a showing and felt that it wasn't quite right.

During the summer of 2013 I spent some time working with and taking classes at the Dance Exchange. The Dance Exchange is a DC based company and arts organization that was founded by dance pioneer, Liz Lerman. The company is intergenerational and often works with text and song in their creative work. The work that I did with them was learning a small section of current artistic director Cassie Meador's *How To*

*Lose A Mountain.* This work explores the distance that energy and material goods travel to get to consumers, and the price that is paid to move them. I found that the Dance Exchange did not shy away from explicitly saying what their work was about, and their clarity and candor inspired me. I realized through working with them, that it was okay to just go ahead and say what I wanted to say without skirting around the issue.

At this point, Reed and I went back to the drawing board and began to talk about physical habit and when and where we had seen it in our own lives. We came up with a number of short anecdotes that he then formed into a cohesive whole. Our process went something like this: we would talk through ideas mostly from his personal history, then he would go off on his own and form the ideas that we had talked about into something that sounded good, then I would read what he wrote and perhaps try it out in the studio, we would talk about it some more, and the cycle would start again. Through the rehearsal process we continued to refine and change the wording and order of the anecdotes, but mostly stuck with the basic structure of what he had written that summer (see appendix A). I ended up becoming very attached to the text, and loved the way it wove in and out of very personal stories to create a rich, imagistic, landscape that was both personal and universal. In the fall, Reed attended a few showings and continued to contribute ideas surrounding the text, but for the most part we wanted to keep the text the way that it was once the storytellers had started working with their lines.

Jeffrey Dorfman/Sound

When I first started my thesis project, I wanted to work with a composer named John Pratt. I liked the samples of his work that I had heard, and so I contacted him about possibility of collaborating on my thesis project. He was immediately interested in the project, however once I told him what my budget was he was discouraged. At this point I should have told John that it wasn't going to work, but instead we kept communicating back and forth about different possibilities. Our communication became very bad; his tone changed to one that felt pushy and aggressive and we kept missing each other's phone calls, which resulted in weeks of not actually speaking to one another. Finally after months of this, and after speaking with committee members and UMD School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies production manager Cary Gillett, I decided that collaborating with this particular composer was not going to work. What I learned from this experience, was that in the future I need to be very careful when choosing and negotiating with my collaborators.

I began to search for a new composer, and so Cary Gillett introduced me to DC area sound designer Jeff Dorfman. Jeff and I had a very successful collaboration in the sense that we communicated well and often, we were both able to take constructive criticism, and we listened well to each other. The way that Jeff and I communicated was that he would work on a section, and then post it online for me to listen to. Then I'd listen a few times and come up with some ideas and we'd have a Skype meeting to discuss further steps. Then he'd go back to work and the process would start again.

Jeff and I had a great collaboration, but ultimately I found our aesthetic interests to be so far apart that the final product, while being a successful process, did not turn out to be what I had hoped. Throughout our collaboration, I asked Jeff to tone down what felt to me like very dramatic music. There were parts where the sound would swell, there was a lot of reverberation, and it sounded to me like a movie soundtrack. While I felt that Jeff heard me and made adjustments in the sound, I never felt that the music was truly appropriate for the dance that I was making. After going back and forth with him many times, and after going past the deadline that we had set for ourselves to have a completed version of the music, I concluded that the music had reached a place that I felt comfortable going forward with. In any collaboration, I feel that both parties need to compromise to a certain extent. Although this was my project, I wanted both Jeff and I to feel comfortable with the product that we were presenting, and I think that we both did. In future collaborations, I will try to do a better job expressing my aesthetic interests sooner in the process of collaboration so that the product is more closely aligned with the dance that I'm creating.

#### Robert Croghan/Costumes

UMD Masters of Fine Arts candidate Robert Croghan was the costume designer that I worked with for my thesis. Robert came onto my project towards the end of fall 2012, and he and I worked well together. When we began working together I expressed to him that I really had no costume ideas of my own at that time. I wanted this to be a collaboration between the two of us where we could share ideas and develop images

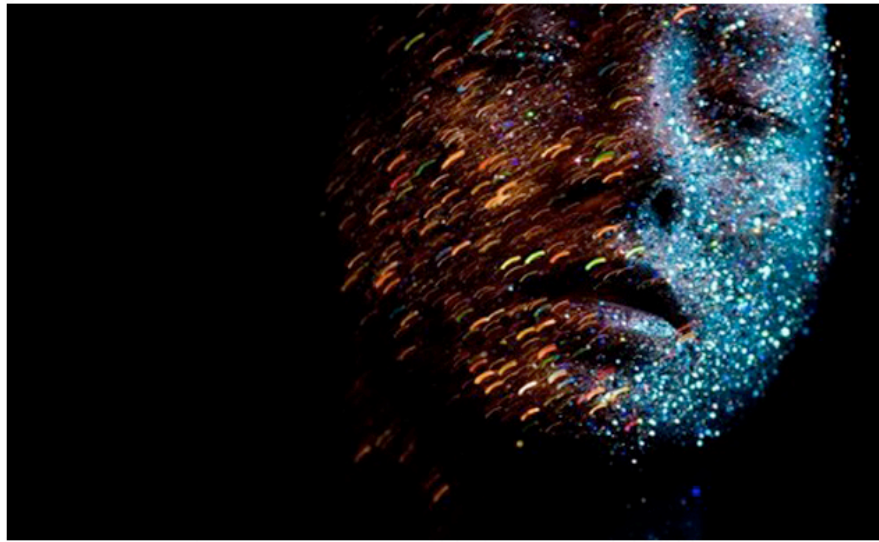
through talking about the work. We communicated at design meetings and through email, but I think our best work together happened in our office. Robert and I happened to be sharing an office this semester (along with many others) and it was the casual conversations during lunch that really cultivated a strong dialogue between the two of us, and that allowed us to swap ideas back and forth in an easy manner. This type of encounter really fostered an ease between us that I believe is useful to my creative process. I wish that I could have that type of everyday communication with all of my collaborators.

During our conversations, Robert latched onto the idea of habits as movements that are cultivated through other people, like a sharing of traits that can be layered one on top of the other. Through this idea, came the idea of layering garments.



**Figure 3: costume research images from Robert Croghan.**

Once we had hit on the layering idea, Robert and I began talking about color. Robert felt that this was a decision that could be made fairly late in the process because garments could be dyed after they were bought. However, after seeing a showing of my solo, Robert found an image of a face that was half rusty orange and half blue. Then he found another image of old pennies that had rusted and had a similar palette to the face image. These images struck both of us as fitting for my piece. There was something in the psychological nature of my solo that really fit with the face image that looked like it was half in the light and half in the dark. Also, we both found these colors to be aesthetically pleasing, and so we were drawn to them on a gut level too.



Way In  
Fall Dance Thesis  
Inspirational

**Figure 4: color research image from Robert Croghan.**

It was fascinating for me to work with Robert because I had never worked with a costume designer on such an extended process. I got to see his renderings of the costumes and then see them accumulate as he went out and bought garment after garment. I was surprised to learn that the majority of the garments for my show would be store bought, rather than constructed by the costume shop. Since the costumes were bought in the store and then altered by the costume shop, this meant that even after Robert's final drawings had been approved, it was up to him to go out and search for clothes that matched what he had drawn and were within the limited budget that he had been given. While he came very close on most of the outfits, he was not

able to find everything that he had drawn, and so there was a continual re-negotiation about the costumes as we both saw what he was able to find in the stores, and as the dance shifted and changed. In the end, I was very happy with how the costumes turned out, and felt that Robert did a fantastic job connecting the costumes to the dance and making each dancer feel comfortable and look good in what they were wearing.

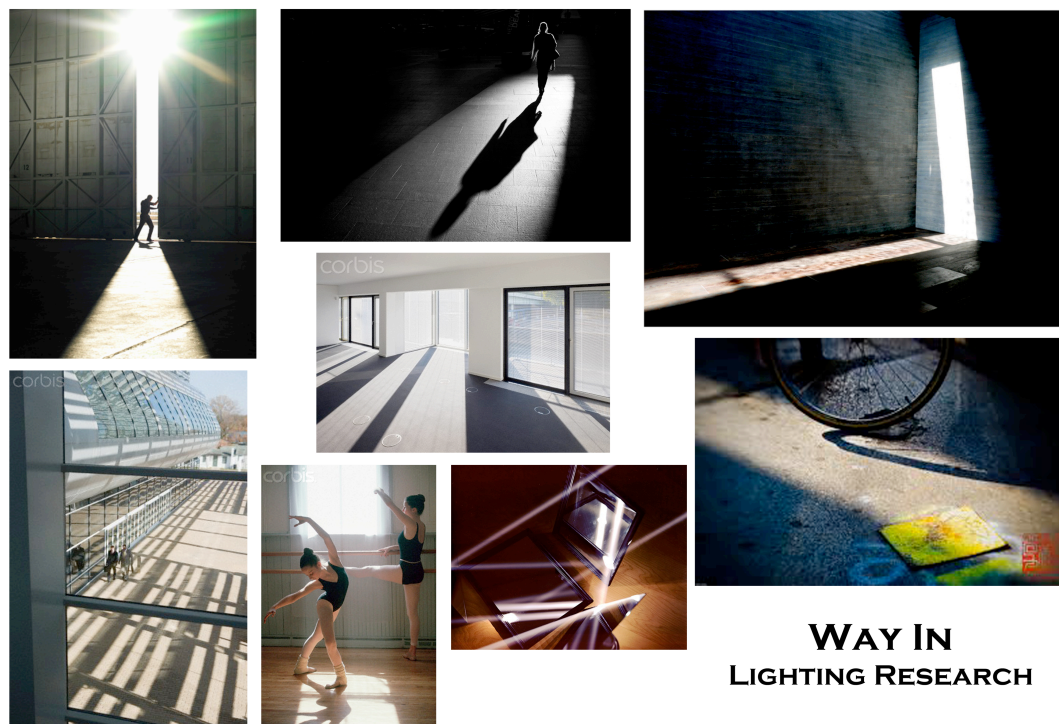
When I had received permission to use the backstage hallway, one of the stipulations from the center council was that the performers needed to be wearing shoes at all times in the hallway. Although Robert and I were aware of this, it was not until the last couple of weeks that we really started talking about shoes. The performers needed to wear shoes in the hallway, but I didn't want them wearing shoes in the Kogod, so they needed to slip them on between sections. I also needed to wear shoes in the hallway, which created an issue because I had no way of hiding this action since my transition from the theater to the hallway was seen. After trying a few ideas, I ended up putting the shoes on after I stepped through the threshold of the door and while the audience was re-positioning themselves for the next section. I decided that I was fine with the audience seeing me do this because it became part of the transition that the whole space was making into the next section.

#### Brittany Chemuga/Lighting

Brittany was the MFA candidate in lighting design that was assigned to *Way In*, and she and I had a nice working relationship. Brittany and I talked at design meetings



and through emails about lighting ideas. She loved the moment in the work when the door to the Kogod slid open and the light from the bright hallway cast a beam into the dark Kogod. She took this idea, and brought in images of beams or shafts of light. We used this idea not only in the solo, but in the corners for the dance section as well. We wanted the lights to help create a visual connection between the solo and the sections that came before it. Brittany was also able to purchase a circular frame that could be put on top of a light to create either a circular path of light or darkness. She had this idea because of the circular pattern that I walked during my solo.



## WAY IN LIGHTING RESEARCH

Figure 5: lighting research images from Brittany Chemuga.

One issue that came up during tech for my solo was that at a certain point in the work I wanted to be able to see the audience. This was a moment in the piece that I wanted to feel very vulnerable, and so I wanted to be able to actually see the audience and have them look me in the eyes to create a sense of openness and exchange between us. In order to make this happen, Brittany had to turn the house lights up a little more than she was comfortable with because it took away from the design and from the feeling of being cloaked in darkness that audiences are used to having. For that moment, Brittany was more concerned with how the lighting looked, and I was more concerned with the experience that the audience was having. In the end we both compromised and we settled on something in between what we had each originally wanted.

Although we talked a fair amount leading up to tech week, our most intense work together happened during the tech process. Brittany was constrained by the fact that she had to turn a light plot in that would satisfy her lighting needs for both my show and the Molière show that happened right before mine in the Kogod Theatre. She was also constrained by the fact that I was using corners of the Kogod that were not traditionally used as performance spaces. This meant that Brittany had to figure out how to get light into places that were usually kept dark. Much of our tech time was taken up with this task, and with trying to get light on the floor of the corners but not on the walls, which proved to be very difficult. There was also complication during tech because after the dance and the storyteller section happened once, they then

switched corners and repeated that section. This meant that Brittany had to essentially create a set of cues and then transpose them onto the other corner, which created extra work for her, and a complicated job for the person actually running the light board during the shows.

Designing lights for the hallway became a bit of a challenge. Brittany had the idea of bringing in one light to cast a beam down from the very end of the hallway, but we had been told from the beginning that we weren't allowed to add anything to the hallway space. We tried to gain special permission, but we were told that the original stipulations still held. Brittany had to use just the one wall mounted light that was already in the hallway, and the overhead florescent lights to shape and design her lighting for this section. The wall mounted light created a very nice beam of light for the dancers to step in and out of, but unfortunately it also blinded certain audience members who were seated on the floor for that section. We adjusted the lamp a little bit so it wouldn't be quite so blinding, but I decided to keep it even if it was slightly uncomfortable for a few people because it felt important to be able to shape the lighting to some extent. I think that Brittany did a great job, and our communication during tech and throughout the process went very smoothly.

#### Tarythe Albrecht/ Stage Manager

In late August 2013 Tarythe and I started working together. Tarythe is a DC based stage manager who has worked primarily in theatre, but in recent years had worked on some dance shows as well. I had never worked with a stage manager prior to tech

time before, so when I found out that I would be given a stage manager as well as two assistant stage managers to work on my project for three months, I was excited and perplexed. What would they do? How would I work with them? Would it be awkward to have them in the studio? I wanted to put Tarythe in the collaborator chapter, because Tarythe really did become an additional voice in my project both in a technical as well as artistic sense. Tarythe also became an invaluable outside eye and person to talk to about everything from rehearsal scheduling, to challenges with working with certain cast members, to what might be the best way to bow at the end of my piece. In short, I cannot imagine that I could have pulled this project off without her.

When she joined my project, and throughout the rehearsal process, Tarythe and her team: helped deal with the schedule, helped keep track of time and when the performers might need breaks within rehearsals, taped the floor and set up chairs to accurately represent the space we would be in for the performance, helped with video taping rehearsals, sent out nightly reports detailing rehearsals, came to most of my design meetings, and I'm sure a whole host of other tasks that I never even thought of because they were taken care of with such grace and ease. When we finally did get into tech, Tarythe knew the piece so well that we were able to seamlessly transition from rehearsals to tech to performance without her skipping a beat.

Although I appreciated Tarythe and the assistant stage managers, there were moments of frustration, not with the stage managers themselves, but with working in this

particular way with stage managers. When Tarythe came into my process I had already developed a relationship with my core dancers that was working; they came to me with scheduling issues, we worked hard in rehearsals but I also left room for some catching up at the beginning of our time together, and there was a good dynamic in the studio. I felt comfortable with what I had established with them. When the stage manager team came into my process, the dynamic in the studio shifted. The dancers and I no longer felt comfortable speaking and playing in the way that we had established because suddenly there were three people in the room whose role in the piece was unclear. Also, although Tarythe was taking over the scheduling portion of the work, the dancers were so used to communicating with me that they still included me on most of their scheduling correspondence. This made my job harder, and Tarythe's job much harder. By the end of the rehearsal process, there were days when neither Tarythe nor I knew who was going to be there because there were so many conflicts and we never knew who was communicating with whom. I think that if dance moves in a direction where dancers are used to stage managers being in the studio for such an extended period of time, then these issues would work themselves out. In the future, I hope that I might be able to more accurately communicate with the stage manager about what I needed from her and what her role might be in the beginning of the process.

## Chapter 5: Final Months and Performing

### Hallway

Towards the end of August 2013, I had a number of long rehearsals in the hallway behind the Kogod. As I discussed earlier and as is often the case with site work, I had very limited time to make this section and many parameters surrounding what I could and could not do in the space. All told I had seven rehearsals to develop movement vocabulary, craft it, and connect it to the rest of the piece. However, I decided that I would take the first two rehearsals to just experiment with no pressure on myself to land on anything or make decisions about what I would keep. I felt it was important to give myself the space to just try ideas out, especially since I had been coming up with images and scoping things out for about six months without being able to actually see how my ideas would work.

We started the hallway process by just spending a little time being quiet in the space. We all did a sensory exercise where we sat in the middle of the hallway and took five to ten minutes to explore how each sense was stimulated in this particular place. We also took time to explore the entire hallway and Kogod; looking in nooks and crannies, observing from different angles, touching the walls, exploring the floors, feeling out what the corners felt like, looking at the ceiling etc. It felt so good to take the time to do this after so many months of just passing through, and it was the first time that I really felt a connection to the space. After I warmed the dancers up, I tried a whole host of simple choreographic ideas in the hallway: jumping in and out of

entryways, running up and down the hall, crawling backwards, accumulating, de-accumulating, mirroring, doing movements in canon, coming very close and then very far away, moving as a wave across the hall, framing, and the list went on and on. In those first two rehearsals we also tried putting some of the movement vocabulary that we had developed for the corner, in the hallway. I wanted to connect the hallway to the rest of the piece, and I felt that recapitulating some of the movement from earlier was a good way to do this. Also during this time we developed our gesture phrases that ended up playing a large role in the piece as a whole. These came from a writing exercise that I had them do about physical, everyday habits that they had and when they did them. From the writing they created short gesture phrases, taught them to each other, and then I made slight modifications to them.

During the first few hallway rehearsals, I realized how satisfying it would be to have even more bodies in the hallway, and so I started to scheme about how I might use some of the storyteller rehearsals to work on some large simple hallway sections that the entire cast would be in. I wanted to do some duet material in the hallway since this was an organization that I had not previously tried with this cast. I used a simple structure that I had learned from Joe Goode where partners take turns initiating one movement by either collapsing or pushing/instigating. I wanted to play with depth by having three duets happening all at once down the hallway and stopping and starting them at different points to draw the audience's eye up and down the hallway like a telescoping lens. After all of this generating of material, I found a tentative order to use at my second thesis showing which was on September 19<sup>th</sup>. After the showing, I

had a few more long hallway rehearsals where I integrated feedback, played with the order of the material, and created an ending that would work for the hallway section and satisfy the rest of the piece.

### Storytellers

That fall, while developing the hallway section, working on my solo, and revisiting the corner dance, I began working with the storytellers. I had cast a few more storytellers at the very beginning of the Fall semester, and so my storyteller cast now consisted of: Naomi Cohen, Tiziano D’Affuso, Nelly Diaz, Maryam Hashyer, Alisa Kurbatova, Christina O’Brien, and Jess Plaskon. Altogether I had a cast of thirteen including myself. I liked that this cast was a mix of dancers and actors, and that they had different body types and different backgrounds. During the summer Reed had been working on the text and I was excited to start working with it. In my first two storyteller rehearsals I started out very general; I needed to get to know the cast better as movers and speakers and I wanted them to get to know one another as well.

I relied heavily on exercises that I had learned from the Meredith Monk and Joe Goode workshops that I had taken the previous summer. Fairly early in the process, I gave them the same assignment that I had recently given the hallway cast; writing about three everyday physical habits that they had and then creating a short phrase out of them. Just like with the dancers, I had them teach one another their phrases and I helped manipulate them. Originally I had them say their text that they had written as



they were doing the gestures, but this quickly fell away as I realized that it was too literal for what I wanted. Even within these first few weeks of rehearsing with the storytellers, it became clear to me that I had not given myself enough rehearsal time with them. In retrospect, I should have tried to shift the schedule as soon as I realized it would not be enough. At the time I felt that I couldn't ask them for more rehearsals because it was already so hard to get them all in the same place at the same time, and they all had so many activities that they were committed to. I did however meet with many of the storytellers one on one to work with the text, and this helped the process tremendously.

Another factor that helped this section along, was having UMD Theatre Professor Leslie Felbain come in to work with the cast. Leslie came in a few times to rehearsals and was invaluable as a resource for me to talk to throughout the process. She and I spent a lot of time talking and reading through the text and figuring out how to verbalize what was written. She talked me through how to help the cast say the text as if it were their own words, and she helped give me confidence in my ability to know what I wanted from the work. When she came into rehearsals, she worked with the storytellers individually to help them with clarity, volume, and intent in their speaking. She also helped me brainstorm ideas to try when I realized that having the storytellers take each audience member out of their seats was not working.

After a few rehearsals with just the storyteller cast, I started having regular Saturday morning rehearsals with my entire cast. In order to maximize the time that I had with

them, I asked the cast to come early to warm themselves up rather than me taking the first fifteen minutes of rehearsal to warm them up. I felt disappointed about letting go of this important time together, but I also felt that I needed every single moment that I had with them to work on the material. A few weeks into the semester I had my first rehearsal with my entire cast in the Kogod, and for the first time tried having the dancers dancing while the storytellers were taking individual audience members out of their seats and bringing them to the places where the story would actually be told. I immediately realized that there were some large problems with this scheme, but I was not ready to let it go just yet and thought I might be able to find a solution.

During this time we started working on what I called “section zero”. I wanted section zero to be happening before the official start time, and while the audience members were filing into the theater, so that there was no clear-cut starting point for the piece. This was also a way to get the entire cast in a section together from the start, so that it felt more like a whole cast rather than two separate groups. Section zero started as a small idea that I thought I could make very quickly, but ended up taking up a lot of rehearsal time. Part of the reason for this was that we were only rehearsing once a week and so the performers often forgot material from week to week, and part of the reason was that I greatly underestimated how long it takes to make anything on a large group with such different backgrounds. I began using some of my Saturday rehearsal time to work on a transition from one corner into the other, and also a transition from the two corners into my solo. Much like section zero, these were sections that used the entire cast and that I thought would be quick and easy but that

turned out to take up a lot of my time with the cast and required intricate timing and sculpting.

Since I had let go of the group warm-up, the two parts of the cast began to feel very separate and this affected how the piece flowed. In warm-ups I had been doing exercises where the cast worked as a whole singing a song, or in small groups on movement and text improvisational scores. Now that I wasn't taking the time to do the warm-up it was really affecting their performance. Because I felt that the cohesion of the group was so important, I began to use some time for these types of exercises again. One device that we worked with quite a bit was having the storytellers stand and watch the corner dancers and say their stories to the dance, as if they were narrating. This put the dancers in the spotlight and forced the storytellers to really watch what they were doing. Then we would switch roles and I would ask the dancers to still do their same steps, but to really listen to what the storytellers were saying and try to dance to their words as if it were their music. This in turn forced the dancers to really pay attention to the storytellers. I hoped that this would help unite the piece even when the two groups were farther apart spatially.

Another exercise that we worked with was having the cast pair off with one storyteller to each dancer. I asked them to have improvised "conversations" where the storytellers could only dance and the dancers could only speak. This was a real challenge for some of the cast, and something that we worked on quite a bit. I felt that it helped them not only have empathy for what each other were working on, but it

helped to blend movement and text so that they could experience that these two ways of expressing were intricately related.

After struggling to keep my storytellers telling their stories in the way that I had originally dreamed, and after a few showings, I came to the conclusion that it just wasn't working. There were spacing and timing issues with getting the audience back to their seats in a reasonable time, and there was the issue of the audience members getting distracted by the other storytellers who were sitting nearby. After much thought, and consultation with committee members, I decided to make a large shift: instead of telling the entire story, I would assign each storyteller a section of the text and they would only say that part. Additionally, I would have the audience stay in their seats and have the storytellers take turns saying their lines so that the entire section of audience would experience the text at the same time. This was a hard change to make, at what felt like a very late stage in the process, but I believe it was the right decision for the work and the performers felt and looked much more comfortable with this new arrangement.

Now that the storytellers only had a short bit of text to work with, they were able to really dig into the material and make it their own. I spent time with each of them exploring how they might relate to the story they were telling; trying to look for personal entry points so that they would say their text like it was really their story. I also worked with them on different ways to say each word and phrase and played with how emphasizing different words created different meaning. I used some of the

information that I was learning in UMD Theater professor Leigh Smiley's Voice For the Actor class to help them use their voices in a way that felt real and authentic. For the performers who were not used to using their voices onstage, I tried to help them relax and use their vocal power by asking them to release their stomachs, unlock their knees, and speak like they needed to instead of like they were being told to. By early November I felt that we were making progress, and for my final showing on November 19<sup>th</sup>, they performed much better than they had in previous showings.

### *Directing the audience*

During November 2013, I began to give thought to and talk with Anj about how to direct my audience. I knew that they would need to move during the show and that some of them might not feel comfortable with this. I also knew that I didn't want to alienate my audience or have them feel awkward about their participation. I wanted to setup a situation where people generally felt guided and taken care of, but not totally passive. I felt that the unconventional way that I was setting up my space would key many of the audience members in right away, but if they had never been to the Kogod before then the set up might not be a cue for them. I decided early on that I wanted to leave a little card on each seat explaining to the audience what might be expected of them. I could have put this information within the program, but I felt that many people don't read their entire program carefully. I thought if there was a note on their seat they would be much more likely to read and understand it. I had received feedback that some of the audience members might worry that they were not going to

get to see all of the sections so I wanted the card to both reassure them that they would get to see everything and key them in to the fact that they would be moving during the show (see appendix B).

In addition to the cards, I decided to have audience plants in each performance. These would be people who were aware of what was coming during the evening and could act quickly and with confidence when instructed. I also decided that I would have the performers direct the audience. This felt like a big decision, but made sense since I was already creating an event where the audience-performer relationship was very intimate. I hoped that since we had already created an atmosphere where the audience and performers were making eye contact and in close physical proximity, then taking the leap to the performers talking to the audience would feel natural and make sense.

### *Finishing touches*

The night before Thanksgiving, I had my final pre-tech rehearsal in the Kogod. Since only four or five of my cast members could come, I only called Nicole Turchi in to help me with some last minute ideas. During that rehearsal we were able to light my entire solo by using Nicole as a stand-in so that I could look from the outside. It also gave me the chance to spend some time in the Kogod and hallway without having to guide the entire cast. It was nice to be there in relative quietness and to just spend a little time in the raw space. Having time in the space allowed me to think through what the audience's experience might be now that I knew what the show was. I had

been thinking a lot about the sightlines for when the audience would view the final hallway section. I knew that everyone wouldn't see everything, but I wanted them to see as much as possible. Up until this point, I had been thinking that the audience would be in the doorframe and spilling out into the hallway, but that night I realized that I had been thinking that they would somehow still be able to see the frame of the door even though they would be standing inside of it. I decided that it was important to me that they see the frame because I had choreographed this section looking through it. That night I decided that for the final section, I would place my audience members inside the Kogod and far enough back so that they could look through the frame of the door for the hallway section.

After my final showing an idea had surfaced through a conversation with Jeff Dorfman about somehow visually incorporating the life blankets that were such an important part of the music. The idea was to make a visual connection to the music and to create a tactile experience for the audience. Like everything in the Kogod and hallway, getting permission from Cary Gillett and the Center to even try ideas took a couple of weeks and came with many restrictions. By the time I had gained permission and understood the constraints it was tech week and my time had all but run out. After a few days of trying ideas and talking with advisors, I settled on simply hanging the blankets in front of the Kogod's entrances into the main performance space. This way there would be a visual element, and as the audience entered they would have to move through the blankets thereby creating the rustling noise that was used in the construction of the music.

After my final showing an additional piece of feedback that surfaced was the question of the bow. I had talked about not bowing at the beginning of my process but had decided against it because I didn't want my audience to feel alienated. After my final showing, when people could get a sense of the entire work, it was suggested to me that I should not do a bow because the ending really felt like an end and people felt that it would ruin the mood that I had set if the performers came back out. I ended up taking this advice and not having a bow as part of my show. I think that this was the right decision to make at the time because I trusted the opinions of those that felt strongly about this, especially because I was in the dance and could see the pros and cons of either decision. The performers and I did come out to greet the audience directly after the show so that people had a chance to connect personally with us if they wanted to.

Another issue that came up after my final showing was the sightline issue in the first two sections. When audience members were seated in the second or third rows they were missing too much of the floor material. I had fixed some of this after an earlier comment, but I had not done enough. I chose to use my last two rehearsals with my corner dancers to work on bringing (Emilie) up off the floor during a particularly hard-to-see section. While the others stayed on the floor, Emilie got up and did a short solo.



Tech for this show ran fairly smoothly. Partially this was because we had teched my solo the week before, and partially I think it was because the lighting designer, stage manager, and I worked very well together. One complication that we encountered in tech was that Tarythe couldn't actually see one of the corners or the hallway from where she needed to be up in the booth. We ended up needing to re-task the camera that was supposed to point down the hallway so that she could see into the corner, and we used one of the assistant stage managers as her eyes and ears in the hallway. This worked, but it did add a bit of anxiety to what is always a hard process.

### Performing

Performing *Way In* was very intense not only because it was my thesis and I was performing in it, but because of the number of performances that we did in such a short amount of time. We had five official shows; two on Friday and three on Saturday, and we had three open dress rehearsals on the two nights leading up to opening night. As is often the case with site work, I had a limited amount of seating per show, and since the box office has certain needs from the thesis concerts, it was necessary for me to provide many opportunities to view the work. While I was happy and honored to have multiple occasions to show my work, I felt that on Saturday the work suffered because the cast was tired from having so many performances. I think that if I had two fewer open dress rehearsals, then the energy from the cast and myself would have lasted through until the end of our run.

In keeping with how I had started my rehearsals, I decided that I wanted to warm my performers up before each show. I gave them a thirty-minute class where we tuned into one another and warmed up our bodies and voices. Again, I relied heavily on the work that I had learned in Leigh Smiley's voice class to figure out how to ready both the bodies and voices of my performers and myself. I knew that what I needed was a warm up that was much more physical than the general one that I was giving my performers, and if that was what I needed then I assumed that some of my cast needed it as well. I encouraged everyone to take additional time to warm themselves up in the particular way that they needed and this seemed to work well.

While the shows were each short, lasting only about thirty-five minutes, there were many moving parts. Not only did we need to get our audience to move, the performers also needed to move from one performance space to another, and there was the issue of needing to wear shoes in the hallway but not wanting to dance in shoes in the Kogod. The shoe issue created complicated shoe choreography where the shoes needed to be transported to the right place at just the right time so that they couldn't be seen but would be waiting when the performers needed them. Then this all needed to be reset to start the next show. Additionally, there was the fact that you can't reserve a hallway at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, so there was always the chance that someone might walk down the hall right in the middle of our show. This element of not knowing is often part of site work, and is part of the excitement and chance that goes along with this type of piece. During one of the performances a man walked through the hallway while we were dancing in it, and I

think this created quite a flustering experience for a few of them. Since all of our rehearsals in the hallway had been late at night, we had never really encountered having people around while we were working or running the hallway section. Even though I had talked to my cast about the possibility of this happening, it was not something that they had any practice with in my rehearsals.

For me, it was a challenge to perform in my own work while still needing to play a directorial role in the event. I struggled to get myself into the quiet and concentrated place that I wanted to be in to perform, although I did relax into it by opening night. I think that in retrospect I could have done a better job preparing myself mentally if I had brought someone else in to lead my pre-show warm-up. Then I could have let go of my directing responsibilities, and could have concentrated more on just being a performer. I did really enjoy the small moment that I had performing with my entire cast in the hallway. In the final moments of the show, the whole cast, including myself, runs forward and stands for a moment looking at the audience. It is the only moment in the show where we are all together and focused on one task. It was very satisfying for me to have this closing experience of being united with my cast, instead of always playing the role of director. I'm glad that I put myself in that moment and allowed myself to feel like I was part of the group.



**Figure 6: Entire cast performing closing moment from *Way In*. Photo by Zachary Handler.**

## Chapter 6: Looking Back

### Reflecting

Looking back on my thesis process, I feel incredibly grateful to my performers, crew and committee members for all of their time and hard work. I am so glad that I challenged myself to make a piece that was different from anything that I had made before, and that I used this process as an opportunity for experimentation. I feel that I grew tremendously as a director and choreographer through the experience of making my thesis project, and I saw great maturity and growth in my cast members as well. I am proud of what everyone involved was able to accomplish, and felt really good about the product that we presented in December.

There were a few challenges that came up in my thesis process that I feel helped me learn more about myself as a director, and helped me understand what kind of leadership a project of this size requires. As I discussed earlier, working in the Kogod Theatre and hallway came with many limitations. The restrictions on the use of props and projections were not a big deal for me because I doubt if I would have used either of these elements anyway. However, the time restrictions that I was given and how that affected the way I put my piece together is something that proved challenging. My time in the hallway was very limited; all of my hallway rehearsals were from 7-10pm and were between late August and mid-October 2013. This meant that by the time I started making the hallway section, I had already finished the corner sections and was well into my solo process. This created a conundrum; how was I supposed to make a final section that was site-specific and authentic, while also having it fit with a

dance that had already mostly been created, and how do I find my creative flow from 7-10pm at night? In retrospect, I believe that the disjointed nature of how I put my work together affected the quality of my work, and the cohesion of the piece as a whole. While space and time restrictions are often part of site work, the next time I make work in this way, I will more closely examine the structure of how the entire piece gets put together, and think more about cohesion at an earlier stage in my making process. Additionally, I will look for spaces that are very similar to my performance space (in this case, other hallways) so that I can begin my process of experimentation at an earlier stage.

I knew from the beginning of my second year of graduate school that I wanted to work with a large cast for my thesis. I had never made a dance with more than five people before, and I wanted to experiment with ideas and spatial formations that could only work with a large amount of bodies. I believe these are good reasons to try to work with a large cast, and I'm glad that I got the choreographic experience of working with a big group. The challenges that resulted from working with a big cast taught me a lot about the determination and organization that is required to make large group work. Some of the challenges that I came up against were the scheduling complications involved in working with thirteen people's schedules, and the realization of how long it takes within rehearsals to mobilize and work through ideas with thirteen people involved. In retrospect, I would have loved to have had an additional month to work with just my storytellers alone, and then another two months with the entire cast together. Or, if I had been working with my storytellers

twice a week rather than just once a week, that might have satisfied my need to spend more time with them. In the future, when working with big groups, I will know to build in extra rehearsal time beyond what I normally need with a smaller cast.

In analyzing how I put my work together, I learned something about one of the habits that I have as a maker. Partially because of the thesis proposal and Center approval process, and partially because of my tendencies as a choreographer, I decided very early on that I would have fifty audience members, that the chairs would be set up in the configuration facing the corners, that the piece would have four sections, and that the final section would happen in the hallway. Then after I determined all of this, I filled in the content. In this way, I first created a structure that I found pleasing and felt fit my site, and then I created the content to go in to that structure. In retrospect, I think the work might have been more successful if I had created and experimented with the content and then allowed the structure to evolve out of the material. As it was, I made decisions about the piece's structure before I had any idea of what the piece was about, and so by the time I figured the piece out, I had to squeeze it into the structure that I had already decided on. It is possible that I could have shifted the structure, and I did change some things later on in the process, but getting permission from the fire marshal and everyone else involved made changing my structure prohibitively difficult. However, from all of this I learned that as a choreographer I tend to look at structure and space first, before I think about ideas and movements. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but rather a tendency that is good for me to be aware of.

One issue that I struggled with during the making of my thesis, was the question of whether to use stories that actually came from my performers lives, or to use pre-written text as a script. I stuck with my early decision to use Reed's script, but I always wondered how my process and performance might have changed if I had used the performers' stories. When I first started rehearsing with my storytellers, I asked them to find one anecdote from their own lives that was similar in nature to those in the text. They did this, and we began working with their stories, but then this aspect fell away as I realized how long it would take to work with the raw material they were bringing in. The next time I work with stories, I will be interested to work more with the stories that my performers have from their own lives, and to see how that will affect their performance quality and the outcome of the piece as a whole.

### Conclusions and further steps

Through directing, choreographing, and performing in *Way In*, I feel that I was able to get more clarity about my habits as a maker, become more skilled at crafting movement and leading my performers into successful choreographic moments, and cultivate a strong sense of myself as a leader in rehearsals and performances. At this time, my barometer for judging the success of my project is: did I learn something? Was this an engaging experience for my cast? And, when I go to make the next project, will I feel the wisdom that I gained from this piece helping me along? The answer to all three of these questions is yes. I learned a huge amount about myself as an artist, I saw my entire cast members grow and become clearer and more articulate



with their instruments, and I certainly feel that I am carrying the lessons I learned from *Way In* into my future and current work. During the making of *Way In* I sometimes felt like a beginner in the sense that after I worked on a new phrase, made a decision, or had a design meeting, I thought to myself, “Oh, that’s what that is, now I know how I should have handled that!” Part of me wishes that I could turn back time to the fall of 2012 and start again with the knowledge that I now possess and the skills that I have gained from the project. But instead of moving backward, I am excited to move forward with the tools that I learned from my thesis experience. Perhaps one of the biggest things that I’m carrying forward is not just the knowledge that I have gained, or the answers to some of my choreographic questions, but more clarity about what my questions still are, and excitement and curiosity about continuing to make dances and learn about the world through making art. I still have questions about blending dance and text; I still want to understand more about where movement habits come from and how they are tied to a person’s emotional and psychological life; I still want to experiment with using ideas, questions and improvisations to generate movement versus my own body; and I’m still learning about the best way to communicate and collaborate with designers and stage managers. With a little space between my project and me, I have realized that the questions are good, my curiosity is imperative, and having more to investigate is part of what being an artist is about.

This spring I am creating a new piece as the local choreographer-in-residence at the Dance Exchange, and I will be taking the solo from *Way In* to Mexico, where I will

perform it at *Performática: International Forum of Contemporary Dance and Arts of Movement*. One of the reasons that I wanted to have a solo in my thesis concert was so that I would have something tangible that I could carry forward, no matter where I end up next. Taking the solo to Performática feels like a good next step. As far as creating something new this semester, I am swinging the pendulum back in the opposite direction in some ways. I've decided to work with only two movers, without any designers working on the project, and I know that I am more interested in movement generation and creating a highly physical moving landscape than I am in working with text and space. I will, however, carry a few aspects forward from my thesis: I will not be working with music until about halfway into the piece; I will be generating most of my material in the studio with the dancers; I will utilize improvised structures to create movement vocabulary; and I will try to work slowly and with the confidence that if I work a little bit every day, the end result will be the sum of all of my and my dancers' time and energy together. The growth and clarity that I found through my thesis process, the questions that were answered and that I still have, and the hunger to continue exploring and creating art, are exactly what I needed from my thesis process, and exactly what I take with me into my future pursuits.

## Appendices

### Appendix A:

#### Storyteller Text

When I was seventeen, my family moved to a house a few streets away from my childhood home. I remember one summer evening not long after we moved, I went home after work, my forearms aching from scooping ice cream all day, and I showed up at the old house by accident. I didn't realize the mistake until after I stepped through the door. The living room was both the same and different; a new furniture arrangement, and strangers staring back at me from the sofa. My feet had carried me to my old home while my mind was thinking of something else.

Habit remains even when the reason for it is gone. When I first got contact lenses, I spent an entire week touching the glasses that were no longer on my face, and I remember once my uncle, a retired cop, heard firecrackers and reached for the holster that was no longer at his belt. Or my little brother, who always used to make chocolate milk for himself when he came home from school—I remember how he would stir it and then drink it with the spoon still in the glass. I'd tell him to take it out, that he was going to poke his eye out with the metal tip of the spoon. And he'd take it out, but when he drank, he'd tilt the glass up, and close his right eye as if the spoon were still there.

Habit is the ghost of things past, take the soles of these shoes. When I'm nervous, I stand on the outsides of my feet. It's like a long-exposure photograph of the night sky: the process has worn my shoes in a pattern as distinct as a fingerprint; these soles have been made into a map of my way of being in the world.

Where do these habits come from? When he was in a good mood at the dinner table, my father would lace his fingers behind his head, elbows pointing out, a grin on his face, and lean back on the two legs of his chair. My mother always hated that. She was afraid the chairs would break on him. And once it really did. Lately, I've caught myself doing the exact same thing, putting my hands behind my head in the same way, leaning back in my chair just as dad did.

We pick up other habits and unconscious postures from people around us, even strangers—the ways of being that are tied to your country and culture. I never thought of this until I went on a trip to Russia. I remember someone on Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg turning to me and talking to me in English. How did you know I was American? I asked. The woman smiled and gestured at my whole body, from head to

toe. It's the way you walk, she said. And the way you stand. Like the world has promised you something. Sometimes I think about that when I'm walking somewhere, and I try to imagine what it looks like, when you're confident that everything will be okay.

I think habits are like an invisible currency, one that can be traded and passed between people. I can always tell when my sister has been spending a lot of time with her friend Rebecca. She adopts Rebecca's mannerisms, certain ways of being that sort of cling to her afterward: a halting way of speaking, a sudden birdlike laugh, the way her shoulders shrug, just the same way as Rebecca's do. But these habits look different on my sister; they're taken in but then expressed as something that has become all her own.

Habit is the body's memory, and it persists even after other memories have faded. My grandmother lost all her memory before she died of Alzheimer's, but even then she could still dance, and still loved to dance, just as she had done so many years before. She was good, too: foxtrot, waltz—she could do it all. I watched her once, in those last years, with my grandfather. After one number, she sat down near me, out of breath and eyes glowing. That man is a damn good dancer, she told me. Don't let him get fresh with you, Grandma, I told her. Don't you worry about me, she said, patting my arm. And I didn't.

## Appendix B:

### Text From Seat Card

Welcome to *Way In*. In order for each of you to experience this work in the most complete way, we ask that you allow yourself to be guided by the performers. Please keep in mind that you will eventually see all of the sections of the piece, that you will be asked to leave your seat, and that you may need to stand for the final section of the performance.

Please place all of your belongings under your chair as the performers will be moving through the seats.

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