

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: BIG TROUBLE: SAPPHIC FRAMEWORKS OF
CONSENT AND COLLABORATION IN DRAG
KING PERFORMANCE

Angela Smith, Master of Fine Arts in Dance, 2026

Thesis directed by: Professor Sara Pearson, School of Theater, Dance,
and Performance Studies

Dancers rise and melt, breath-driven, selfishly internal, and painfully slow. Suddenly one gasps for air, launching an arm that drives their chest upward in a moment of desperate ecstasy before slinking quietly back down to a puddle on the floor. Another dancer throws themselves skyward, twisting and contorting, the sound of rushing air whistling into their lungs. The cacophony builds, bodies and limbs soaring and slipping and catching and seeping with increasing violence as they claw their way back to life. Almost contagious, groans overlap, creating haunting rhythms over the throbbing chaos thrown from the space's speakers. One by one, dancers quiet their breath to settle on their bellies in a defensive line. Looking ahead at the audience with hungry eyes, they crawl and claw their way forward, nearly crashing into the front row of chairs, only to reach their greedy mouths upward. Jaws stretch and warp. Sternum crack open and ribs splay apart. Their insatiable appetite demands attention as it builds to a feverish peak before the lights black out and the space is returned to stillness.

Big Trouble argues for an earnest investigation of the often-toxic norms driving our lives and the ways that we move. Through my choreographed and written research, I seek to question the stasis of tradition and propose queer studies as a catalyst for rethinking how dance is made,

performed, and consumed. In this thesis I analyze how drag king performances destabilize heteropatriarchal masculinity by exposing its choreographies and the arbitrary semiotics of power attributed to masculine ways of moving. I utilize drag king performances as a case study of the power that queer values have in disrupting heteronormative movement conventions, by actively replacing them with sapphic values like consent, self-authorship, and playful rebellion. Ultimately, this thesis argues that queer studies and queer conceptions of identity performance offer vital tools for expansive dance analysis and ethical, consensual co-creation.

BIG TROUBLE: SAPPIC FRAMEWORKS OF CONSENT
AND COLLABORATION IN DRAG KING PERFORMANCE

by
Angela Smith

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
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Advisory Committee:

Professor Sara Pearson, Chair

Associate Professor Kendra Portier, Co-chair

Principal Lecturer Alvin Mayes

Assistant Professor Caitlin Marshall

Performance Credits

BIG TROUBLE! Choreographed by Angela Smith

PerformersJamie Chen, Zachary Frazee, C Macko, Peter
Pattengill, Angela Smith, and Zoe Cushman Walders

Stage ManagerJaylyn Manu
Lighting DesignerMariah Faulkner
Sound DesignerKiefer Cure
Costume DesignerAnna Sorrentino
Scenic DesignerBridgette Tran

Music Credits: *Movin' at Midnight* by Sir Julian Gould; *Dog Dribble* by Getdown Services; *Big Trouble* by Angela Smith; *I Spy* by Earle Hagen; *Mariandl* by Conny Froboess; *Danke Schoen* by Wayne Newton; *Midnight Dipper* by Warmduscher; *Creeque Alley* by The Mamas & The Papas; *Unforgettable* by Nat King Cole; *My Way* sung by Zoe Cushman Walders; *Filth Politics* by Angela Smith

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Dance Theater
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
8270 Alumni Drive, Suite 3800
College Park, MD 20742

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Chapter 1

Mr. Big: Context, Groundwork, and Introductions

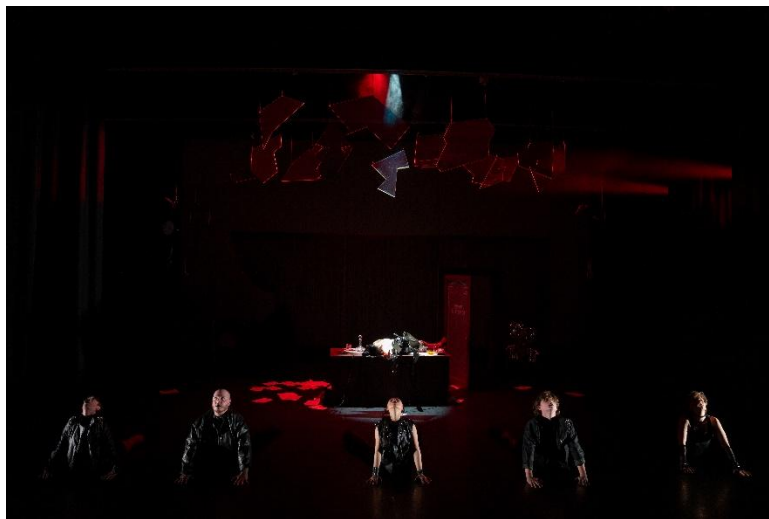
“Plastic Lips!”

-Maxwell Smart, Get Smart

Darkness settles on the stage and a low drone echoes out into the void. A dim sidelight pulses on the heap of bodies cascading over the dumpster’s edges. A wrist twitches. A leg sinks. An arm shifts. And ever so slowly a body drips out of the dumpster onto the cluttered marley floor below. One by one, dancers find their way over the dumpster’s edges; dangling, sliding, reaching, slowly breathing life back into their battered bodies. As the pulsing light reaches the rest of the stage it reveals a lifeless form splayed out across a broad wooden desk. Bob askew, shirt unbuttoned, eyes closed. A twisted ceiling fan traps the body whose arms hang limply just above the mass of crawling bodies consuming the space.

Dancers rise and melt, breath-driven, selfishly internal, and painfully slow. Suddenly one gasps for air, launching an arm that drives their chest upward in a moment of desperate ecstasy before slinking quietly back down to a puddle on the floor. Another dancer throws themselves skyward, twisting and contorting, the sound of rushing air whistling into their lungs. The cacophony builds, bodies and limbs soaring and slipping and catching and seeping with increasing violence as they claw their way back to life. Almost contagious, groans overlap, creating haunting rhythms over the throbbing chaos thrown from the space’s speakers. One by one, dancers quiet their breath to settle on their bellies in a defensive line. Looking ahead at the

audience with hungry eyes, they crawl and claw their way forward. An unstoppable wave, they reach the front of the marley, nearly crashing into the front row of chairs, only to reach their greedy mouths upward. Jaws stretch and warp. Sternums crack open as ribs splay apart. Their insatiable appetite building to a feverish peak, the lights black out and the space is returned to stillness.



In the pilot episode of the hit spy comedy television series *Get Smart*, Maxwell Smart and his partner Agent 99 embark on a mission to capture the elusive villain “Mr. Big.” Mr. Big promises to destroy the Statue of Liberty with the freshly constructed “enthermo ray,” while Max and Agent 99 follow the trail of a mysterious rubber banana peel which eventually leads them to Mr. Big’s secret hideout - a boat covered in rubber trash disguised to look like a garbage scow. Aboard the boat, Max and Agent 99 discover that the great masculine mastermind behind the operation to destroy the Statue of Liberty is actually quite small.

On the creation of the show, Mel Brooks said, “I was sick of looking at all those nice, sensible situation comedies. They were such distortions of life... I wanted to do a crazy, unreal, comic-strip kind of thing about something besides a family. No one had ever done a show about an idiot before.”¹ Airing in 1965, the show was developed by Danny Melnick and David Susskind, two producers eager to comment on the ineptitude of the American government with a James Bond-style parody of the CIA.²

As a young, closeted, Mormon³ queer, I grew up watching *Get Smart* on repeat with my siblings. Owning several seasons of the show on DVD, I had my favorite episodes memorized so that I could impress my family with memorable quotes cited at just the right point of the conversation to get a surprised round of laughter from my small audience. Long before I had words for my queerness, I resonated with the gender play and social commentary of *Get Smart*. I looked up to Barbara Feldon, the female lead playing the deliberately unnamed Agent 99, Maxwell Smart’s witty and gritty counterpart. I resonated with Maxwell Smart; a bumbling idiot whose consistent social blunders and physical comedy allowed his character to make a subtle commentary on male fragility. In comparison to James Bond, whose suave flirtatious personality and physical prowess made him an archetype of male power and supremacy, Maxwell Smart posited a deeply communal and outrageously random vision of masculine success. In *Get Smart*, Max depends not only on the constant support and knowledge of his partner Agent 99, but he also requires assistance from a slew of other spies hidden in lockers, grandfather clocks, and portholes.

¹ "Smart Money". *Time*. October 15, 1965.

² Mel Brooks. (2008) *Get Smart Season 1 DVD commentary [DVD]*. HBO

³ Although current leadership encourages use of the church’s full title, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* or *The LDS Church*, I use the more widely recognized terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* as a rejection of the church’s purported sanctity.

Premiering during hays code-era America⁴ meant that networks had control over the messages and morals of *Get Smart*. ABC networks called the show “un-American” and demanded a “lovable dog to give the show more heart” as well as storylines supporting traditional family dynamics. While the dog entered the show in the form of Agent K9, Brooks rejected their demands to give Maxwell Smart a mother figure, saying, “they wanted to put a print housecoat on the show. Max was to come home to his mother and explain everything. I hate mothers on shows. Max has no mother. He never had one.”⁵ This rejection of an idealized nuclear family reflects queer scholar Jack Halberstam’s⁶ lens of queer analysis that examines how a story’s conception of family and/or community enacts the values of nonnormative family dynamics. For Halberstam this often shows up in characters who exist without clear heterosexual parents who rely on found family for support and connection.

While *Get Smart* was allowed into our Mormon household because of the safety net of hays-code guided morals that aligned with Mormon ideologies, its subtle subversion of gender tropes and humanizing portrayal of rival organization KAOS gave me an early love of satire, physical comedy, and absurd prop design that had a deep influence on my creation of my MFA thesis show *Big Trouble*. While the show refrains from explicit displays of queerness, it subverts traditional family dynamics, positing Maxwell Smart’s coworkers as his family and even displaying a positive attitude towards a cross-dressing KAOS agent. While Maxwell Smart’s stated goal is to take down KAOS, he develops a close friendship with its leader Ziegfried and

⁴ a set of industry guidelines for the censorship of content that was applied to most motion pictures released by major studios in the United States from 1934 to 1968.

⁵ “Smart Money”. *Time*. October 15, 1965.

⁶ “If you are wondering about my pronoun use and would like it resolved once and for all, I cannot help you there... consider my gender improvised at best, uncertain and mispronounced more often than not, irresolvable and ever shifting.” -Jack Halberstam on pronouns

comes to not only see the humanity of its members but even gains respect for their methods. KAOS becomes a metaphor for the “un-American” values that Mel Brooks was seeking to question and disrupt through the campy chaos and destabilizing absurdity of *Get Smart*.

Get Smart operates under the same assumption as *Big Trouble* and my research throughout this paper: that American values and power structures are guided by non-essential heteropatriarchal⁷ norms and biases. While many scholars have written on and researched the construction and implications of heteropatriarchy, American theorist and social critic Bell Hooks (she/her) is often cited as a leading scholar on the subject, introducing the intersectionality of systems of oppression. She discusses specifically the dynamics of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, naming the ways in which heteronormativity interacts with patriarchy, imperialism, and white supremacy within a capitalist economic system.⁸ She first explores these ideas in her 1984 book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* where she critiques white feminism for its exclusion of race and class issues. Throughout this paper, I argue that heteropatriarchal norms are embodied, even when implicit. Because this embodiment is learned in social settings like families and schools, it carries subtle identity coding that creates a physicalized divide between bodies positioned differently within this power matrix. In my work as a queer choreographer, dance scholar, and teacher I aim to disrupt and question this learned embodiment with expansive queer modes of movement making.

Speaking to the role of heteropatriarchal values in scholarship, queer feminist sociologist Rhea Hoskin (she/her) says, “this sterilization of scholarship, and the practice of removing

⁷ A social structure that centers cis-gender heterosexual men over all other gender and sexual identities

⁸ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 25.

subjectivity is at odds with much of femme scholarship...[rather] personal narratives and life-writings are the lifeblood of femme scholarship. Through these works femmes write themselves into existence.”⁹ Rhea Hoskin’s conception of “femme” scholarship is reflected in Leslie Feinberg’s (ze/hir) use of autobiographical narrative to theorize butchness, expanding theoretical conceptions of gender through lived, negotiated, and embodied ways of knowing.¹⁰ Modeling and honoring these modes of queer scholarship, I center personal storytelling and visual descriptions in this paper as a way to root queer theory and dance scholarship in the embodied performances of queer bodies and the complex identities and movement choices informing them.

This methodological approach is particularly important when discussing masculinity, an identity marker often treated as natural, innate, and invisible within heteropatriarchal power matrices. Centering embodied narrative makes visible the ways masculinity is learned, performed, and consumed in everyday life and offers visions of the ways in which it can be contested. I argue that queer choreographies expand current normative understandings of masculinity and unearth how it can be deconstructed and rearranged through physical comedy and embodied storytelling.

First, I examine how masculinity is uplifted, sanctified, and enforced within Mormonism, a religious worldview that informed the gender expectations of my youth through ritual regulation. As a historically American religion founded in the 19th century and guided by the

⁹ Rhea Ashley Hoskin. “Can Femme Be Theory? Exploring the Epistemological and Methodological Possibilities of Femme.” (*Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2021), 6.

¹⁰ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*. (New York: Firebrand Books, 1993), 50.

logics of Manifest Destiny,¹¹ I utilize Mormonism as a case study for understanding broader American conceptions of embodied and gendered morality. I then turn to physical comedy as a choreographic strategy that amplifies the contrived nature of binary gender performance through humorous movement play. I explore how physical comedy exposes the constraints of normative movement codes and argue for the generative potential of embodied failure. Finally, I analyze drag king performances as sites where masculinity is explicitly satirized. I analyze how drag king performances deconstruct and reimagine masculinity in individualized ways to serve queer purposes and empower gender-nonconforming bodies. I explore how the aesthetics and values of drag kings and their audiences offer a powerful alternative to normative movement semiotics, disrupting heteropatriarchy's association of masculine identities and ways of moving with innate social and financial power. Ultimately, I argue that the physical comedy of drag king performance not only exposes the fragility and limitations of hegemonic masculinity but enacts a more expansive framework for making and interpreting performed choreographies by centering sapphic values of consent, collaboration, pleasure, and fluid self-authorship.

¹¹ the expansionist belief in the 19th-century United States that American Settlers were destined to expand westward across North America. A belief that guided many Mormons to travel West and settle in Utah.

Chapter 2

Bearded Prophets: Theocratic Theatrics of Mormon Masculinity

“I shave it with a Bic razor... from the top every day... And then if it’s a little gray or you miss a place you just sketch it in with Maybelline Velvet Black, which is my favorite... And it has to be sharpened every time... It gives me power to have my mustache on right.”

-John Waters, on his mustache

As audience members shuffle to their seats, vibrating organ notes wander above a lazy bass line, and a syncopated rhythm brushes the snare drum. The music fades for the Clarice announcement asking audience members to silence their phones. The lights dim to a lone spotlight hitting the folds of the red curtain concealing the stage. A hand fumbles with the break in the curtain before finding its way to the rhythm, snapping along in time. The hand disappears only to sneak back through and flex for the audience, showing off a light blue tweed sleeve. Disappearing again, this time the curtains are parted by the performer’s wide hind end, a pair of red lips carefully stitched onto the butt of the suit as the performer circles their hips seductively. When the performer finally steps out through the curtain, we see a wide brimmed hat low over his eyes and a long curly silver beard trailing behind.

For the next few minutes, we hear a deep voice speaking into a cassette recorder as our bearded narrator prances back and forth in front of the curtain, pulling on the beard to reveal its momentous length. Suddenly, our performer is pulled violently back through the curtain, limbs shaking helplessly through the folds for a minute before the fight is reduced to a series of punches that ripple through the heavy red fabric. The music shifts to a punk beat as our hero fights his way back out, suit jacket lost in the tussle to reveal a muscular tattooed torso in a tight

white tanktop. He flexes and poses for the audience before being pulled to the right, tumbling along the curtain while two spotlights dance around him. After a series of jumps and falls, the beard eventually wins, snapping his neck and leaving his legs hanging limply out from under the curtain. Two mysterious hands emerge and drag him away as the title of the piece *Big Trouble* appears in bright bold letters on the curtain's folded red fabric. Finally, the curtain parts to reveal an office setting while a bedazzled dumpster slurps the remainder of our narrator's 30-foot-long beard.



After years of staying clean shaven, my brother Nick brazenly grew a fiery bright red beard when he graduated from Brigham Young University. A model Mormon, his rebellious beard was a point of great contention for my outspokenly body-hair-hating grandmother. Nick could barely visit her without violent anti-beard declarations taking over the conversation. The comedy in my grandmother's hatred of my brother's beard has fueled much of my choreographic research throughout graduate school as I unpack my relationship to masculinity. I've explored

the gender euphoria of playing with masculine presentation in drag performances as well as the bodily trauma of growing up in a culture that placed my feminine identity as spiritually adjacent to the men around me. While my research is rooted in my lived experience, this brief history explores how Mormonism's obsession with grooming has long had a clear political, aesthetic, and theocratic agenda written right onto the skins - and hair follicles - of its members. While that agenda is specific to Mormonism's need to survive as a church and a financial/political entity, it also acts as a clear case study of contemporary embodied gender politics throughout the US. This discussion reveals the theatricality of masculine presentation in order to destabilize patriarchy's claim to male neutrality.

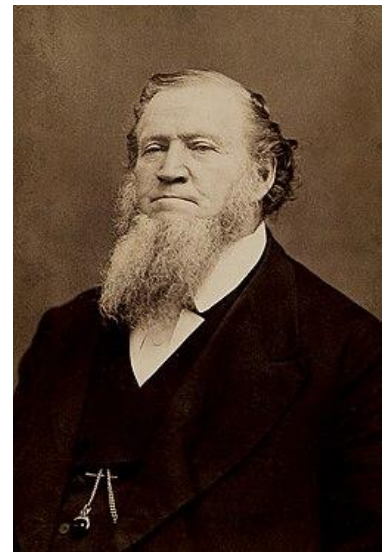
When the ambitious young Joseph Smith was shot by a mob at Carthage Jail in 1844, his fledgling church was thrown into chaos. His charisma had drawn thousands, and his prophetic visions and quick pen made him a god-like figure for his followers. Without the leader who had inspired so many to leave their lives behind, the Mormon church had to begin the massive undertaking of defining itself, its values, and its leadership. The debate lasted for nearly six months as church members struggled to organize themselves. Amidst the deluge of claims to successorship, Brigham Young arrived with a deeply American proposal that spoke to the values of many of Joseph Smith's followers. He suggested not one single leader, but a group of twelve men modeled after Jesus's twelve apostles take the role. Because the group had already existed under Joseph Smith's leadership, Brigham Young's suggestion was easy to implement, spoke to the church's communal values, and subtly hid the gross amount of power he was allotting himself.

While Brigham Young took the majority vote in 1844, I grew up knowing him for his wild temper and propensity for profanity. He had strong opinions that he stuck to, taking a

spiritual pride in standing out and going against the grain. Brigham Young was the one who convinced those early church members to brave long winters crossing the plains to get to Utah, many dying along the way. He also advocated strongly for polygamy and kept at least 56 wives, some as young as 15 years old. My family takes personal issue with Brigham Young as he sent my pioneer ancestor Daniel Wood on an overseas mission for the express purpose of building a railroad across his once pristine farm.

Despite his many despicable actions and my personal family feud with Brigham Young, my SECOND favorite fact about him is the deep spiritual weight and excessive theatrical pageantry he invested into his long and carefully trimmed beard.

While Joseph Smith had been clean-shaven and beards were generally going out of fashion across the United States in the mid-1800s, Brigham Young wanted to create a striking image for himself, one that would tell America he wasn't afraid to stand out and hold to his principles (no matter their legality or lack thereof). Brigham's beard became so distinct that it took on a spiritual nature and inspired many Mormon missionaries to grow thick beards of their own. From John Taylor's short lacy cuff to Joseph F. Smith's



cascading crop extending past the edge of nearly every photo I've seen of him, Mormon prophets continued Brigham Young's bearded tradition for nearly 100 years.

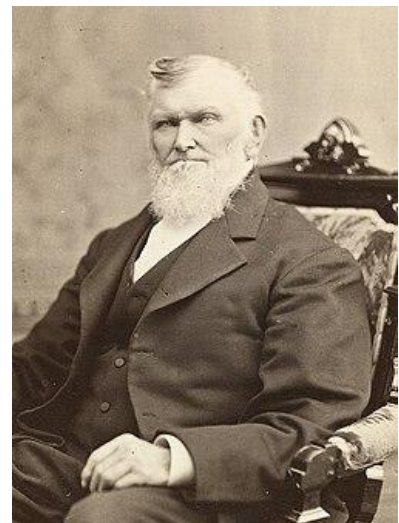
It wasn't until the height of the red scare that this time-honored tradition was abandoned



in favor of the smooth, hairless one we know today and see in parodies like the hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. In 1951 David O. McKay became the ninth president of the Mormon church, and the first since Joseph Smith to leave his chin hairless. After growing up on a farm in rural Utah and attending the University of Utah with plans to pursue a career in education, David's Mormon mission to Scotland abruptly shifted his career

towards leadership in the church. He became an apostle at the young age of 32 where one of his duties was meeting weekly with *The Salt Lake Tribune's* publisher, John F. Fitzpatrick. The two formed a fast friendship, paving the way for the Mormon church's ideologies and agendas to color Salt Lake City's primary news source. Together, they discussed how to make Utah better and how to root out even a hint of communism in their holy American society.

Before Utah became a state in 1896, it operated on a self-titled "theodemocratic" system, with The People's Party supported by *Deseret News* representing Mormon issues and The Liberal Party representing non-Mormon citizens of Utah. However, in order to become a nationally recognized state, Utah needed to conform to the two-party system running the rest of the country. The prophet of the time, Wilford Woodruff, incidentally owner himself of a modestly impressive beard, sent local bishops to randomly assign political parties to Mormon households so that Utah could reflect the political makeup of the rest of the nation. Beyond the pragmatics of conforming to national voting



standards, Utah had an even larger barrier to statehood: polygamy. Throughout its tenuous tenure as a territory, polygamy was a frequent sticking point for Utah. The federal government saw polygamy, though not explicitly forbidden in the constitution, as a threat to American values and Mormons' continued practice of it as flagrant disregard for federal law. Determined to put a stop to Brigham Young's autocratic rule and rapidly growing polygamous society, US president James Buchanan even sent military troops to occupy Salt Lake City in 1857. The Nauvoo Legion, a rag tag militia hastily pulled together by Brigham Young, managed to disrupt the US troops' trek across the West before they reached Salt Lake City and with the civil war breaking out across the US, the federal government allocated its militia elsewhere, leaving the Mormons temporarily to their own devices. By 1890, however, it was clear that the choice was statehood or polygamy. Wilford Woodruff issued a manifesto calling members of the Mormon faith to adhere to federal law and stop practicing polygamy. A few short years later, Utah joined the United States.

While Utah had fought hard to conform to national standards, Mormonism was still haunted by its past practices and skirmishes with the federal government. As prophet during the McCarthy-era witch hunts, it was David O. McKay's job to make sure that America didn't see the Mormon-led state of Utah as a threat to democracy. His anti-communist stance had been firmly established throughout his tenure as an apostle, influenced largely by the right-leaning political affiliations of other leaders in the Mormon church. Even as tensions rose in Germany and the US was on the verge of World War II, McKay stayed focused on communism, writing to a friend in

1940, “communist rats are working here in the United States and are gnawing at the very vitals of our government, and I wish every one of them could be sent to Russia where he belongs.”¹²

Together with John F. Fitzpatrick, McKay disseminated a nearly incessant stream of anti-communist rhetoric to Mormons living in Utah in the middle of the century. In the height of the McCarthy trials, between the years of 1950-1955, Utah’s 4 major newspapers accumulated over 1000 front-page references to senator McCarthy.¹³ McKay held onto his staunchly anti-communist stance throughout his time as president of the Mormon church, saying in a bi-annual meeting for priesthood holding men of the church in 1966, “The position of this Church on the subject of Communism has never changed. We consider it the greatest satanical threat to peace, prosperity, and the spread of God’s work among men that exists on the face of the earth.”¹⁴ And of course what more obvious sign of communism than a heavily bearded chin? Beyond an aesthetic preference, David O. McKay’s bare chin became a political statement and a call for Mormons everywhere to shave their whiskers for democracy.

Mormons love a pamphlet almost as much as they love a potato casserole. Much of my 18-month Mormon mission was spent finding ways to disseminate the hundreds of pamphlets carefully stacked and organized on bookshelves in our apartment. We had one for every situation and circumstance so that we could pull them out mid-conversation and work them into every interaction we had. One of the first pamphlets I ever received (as an impressionable young 12-

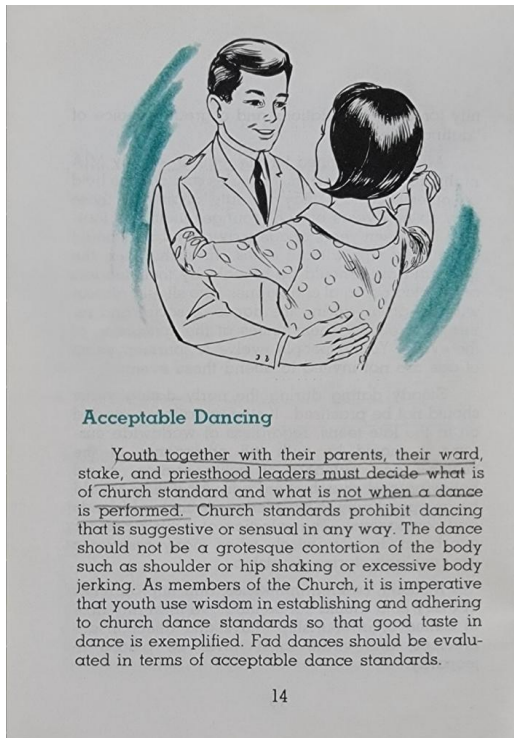
¹² Gregory A. Prince, “The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle: David O. McKay’s Confrontation with Communism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 2 (2004).

¹³ Richard Swanson, “McCarthyism in Utah” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977), pg. 78

¹⁴ David O. McKay, “Statement by President David O. McKay on Position of the Church on Communism (April 1966),” Joseph Smith Foundation.

year-old) was a shiny blue booklet with a sparkling white temple on the cover, titled *For the Strength of Youth*. The pamphlet carefully combines discussions on God's love with strict guidelines like avoiding "grotesque contortion of the body such as shoulder or hip shaking or excessive body jerking."¹⁵

But as I trace the lineages and ideologies that informed the values I lived much of my life



by, it's fascinating that the first *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet was published in 1965 during the tail end of David O. McKay's time as prophet. While *For the Strength of Youth* has gone through many iterations as shifting leadership changes their approach to policing the bodies of Mormon youth, its origins feel deeply significant. It makes me consider how Mormonism uses its members to sell a product; a product that is white and smiling and appealing to the conservative donors keeping Brigham Young University and the Mormon faith afloat. It also makes me consider the subtle anti-communist sentiment that continues

to guide how Mormons dress themselves and present to the world. It is especially interesting to me to consider how those outside of the United States who convert to Mormonism internalize a deeply American brand of anti-communist embodiment through subtle dress and grooming choices and languaging around those choices.

¹⁵ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965).

I'm also deeply interested in how these *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlets reflect Mormonism's specific construction of gender roles, exposing how American protestant morality ideals operate in real time to achieve specific goals. While Mormon men are encouraged to go clean shaven to show their dedication to their divine calling as priesthood holders, those guidelines appear in none of the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlets. Modesty guidelines for Mormon men are choreographed towards agency and spirituality, while those for Mormon women are crafted towards heterosexual marriage and winning an eternal partner. Living in Mormonism, I felt those differences but didn't have the language to describe the injustices that I was noticing and experiencing. My faith and success within Mormonism felt contingent on my ability to conform to the choreographies being taught to me - choreographies that I was never very good at picking up. In some ways, my Mormon mission was liberating because while I was still encouraged to dress and act modestly, I was suddenly free from the association of those standards with marriage. I've found myself drawn to the histories of policing men's bodies within Mormonism because it is adjacent to but distinctly separate from the ways that my own body was policed within Mormonism.

While facial hair doesn't show up in any of the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlets, BYU officially banned beards in 1969 under the anxious and aging president of the University at the time, Ernest L. Wilkinson. Wilkinson firmly believed that the success of "the world's most important university" depended on controlling not only academic and political life, but also the social lives of students. He oversaw aspects of student life as minute as what music could be played on campus, what dances could be danced, what movies could be shown, and, perhaps of

greatest concern, the length of his students' chin hairs.¹⁶ With the Kennedy administration, left-leaning national sentiments, and the growing popularity of campus protests across the nation, Wilkinson was intent on maintaining a clean-shaven, sober, and protest-free campus. To this end, he instated a spy ring to crack down on the "liberal activities" of faculty and students, anything from homosexual activity to inappropriate dancing and drug usage. A lover of pamphlets himself, in 1968 Wilkinson began requiring Wilkinson Center employees to distribute handouts with the slogan "Pardon Me" on the front to female students whose skirts were too short. The 8.5 by 3-inch pamphlet informed violators passive aggressively, "we give you this folder to remind and inform you of dress standards at BYU because we do not want you to feel out of place on our campus."¹⁷

While Wilkinson took personal responsibility for the policing of female bodies on his campus, his greatest fear was the connection between the scraggly beards he saw many of his male students sporting and liberal fashion trends across the nation. In the fall of 1968, he issued a letter to incoming students, saying, "at this institution we must resist even the appearance, not only of evil, but also of the emulation of undesirable contemporary characters. We suggest that being clean shaven and having your hair properly cut is not too great a price for you to pay to further the reputation of this student body."¹⁸ His fear, then, rather than the students themselves, was the reputation the campus might get as a "liberal institution." He worked actively to snuff out anything on campus that might encourage "the emulation of undesirable contemporary characters."¹⁹ Beards were signs of communism and queerness and otherness and revolution-

¹⁶ Prince, "The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle," 37-94.

¹⁷ Prince, "The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle," 45.

¹⁸ Prince, "The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle," 93.

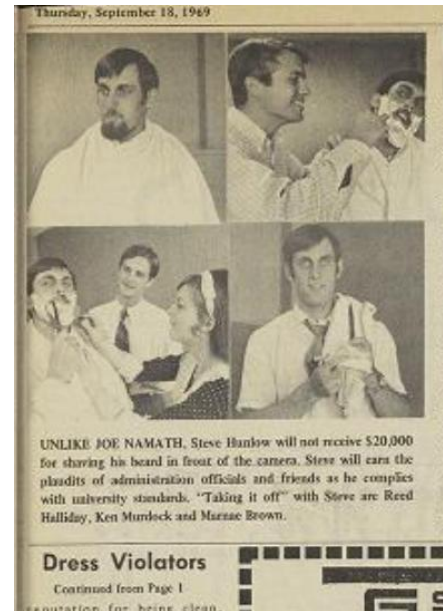
¹⁹ Prince, "The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle," 46.

everything that might upset the authority of the Mormon church over the thoughts and bodies and actions of its members.

During my time at Brigham Young University, I felt my otherness even before I left the Mormon church. I saw that my liberal political opinions were enough to label me as scary and different within a deeply homogenous culture. The drastic shift from my liberal small-town upbringing to BYU's hyper-surveillance and hyper-regulation made me deeply aware of the McCarthy-era suspicion culture that continued to permeate the campus. Leaving Mormonism and discovering my sexuality raised those stakes, adding the harsh reality that I could lose my degree if my queerness and shifting beliefs were discovered.

The scrappiness and youthful rebellion of other soon-to-be-ex-Mormons were my lifeline during that time when I felt isolated and villainized by the community around me. We kept a giant suitcase of beer hidden under a bed and often after a visit to the beer suitcase found ourselves creeping drunkenly onto campus under cover of night to cause chaos and reclaim the space that during the day was so hostile to our most honest selves. We were thirsty for change in an environment that was dead set on staying the same.

Having grown up with heterosexuality as not only the norm but a sacred requirement for our eternal salvation, those friends and I were beginning to unravel together the carefully curated rituals that had kept us from questioning a system that profited off of our conformity. My first explorations into cross-dressing came from that time as we haphazardly drew on mustaches, wore our hats backwards, and critiqued each other on our ability to "walk like a boy." These



gender explorations came from a place of restlessness, a desire to try everything that Mormonism had made us scared of, but I wonder how similarly McCarthy-era queer youth felt across the US in their own explorations of gender and sexuality. We weren't kicked out of our parents' homes, but we were living together as a group of queers that didn't fit into the society around them, helping each other experiment and discover ourselves. We took pictures of each other for dating profiles, encouraged each other's sexuality after years of ingrained sexual repression, and it was my friends Robin and Miriam who first suggested to me that I might be a lesbian. That sense of identity born out of friendship, play, and rebellion has been a recurring theme in much of my choreographic work and particularly in *Big Trouble*.

Choreographically, I wanted to build a world that mirrored the friendships in my life that helped me discover and love my queerness and the delightful blurriness between friends and family that many queers call found family. Although the characters in *Big Trouble* fight and are suspicious of each other throughout the chaos and violence of the piece, it was important to me that they also felt familiar to one another. I wanted the audience to feel that these weren't random strangers thrown into a situation together, but that they had had close relationships long before the beginning of the show. Their connections to one another and the trust that they had built were an essential setting for the testing of that trust and ultimately their communal transformation. I wanted them both to feel like powerful individuals with unique stories as well as a closely connected cohort going through an experience that would change them in disparate but deeply related ways.

That feeling of intimacy was carefully crafted during the rehearsal process, not explicitly or artificially but organically through the genuine friendships that already existed and were cultivated throughout the process. While casting, queer identity was a priority as well as dancers'

ability to contribute to a playful energy in rehearsal. I was lucky enough to cast many of my close friends and just as lucky to grow closer to those I didn't already know well. I wanted to cast people who I knew would make each other feel safe to take risks and make jokes as we developed a language of physical comedy uniquely our own and rooted in the physical quirks of the people in the room.

While found family and community are important elements of my work, I also wanted *Big Trouble* to make space for a transformative rebellion that mirrored my experiences seeing queer community come together in defense of our existence while at BYU. My friends and I were already rebelliously and chaotically straying from our Mormon upbringing when protests broke out across BYU campus in 2020. The year before, in 2019, Matt Easton used his valedictorian speech at BYU graduation to publicly come out. A sweet sentiment anywhere else, Matt Easton's daring act shook the Mormon community and polarized members. Some, like me, were excited for the change it might bring to the church while others felt that Matt Easton had used his platform to attack the sanctity of the *heterosexual* family.

In the midst of the Matt Easton dialogue, the BYU honor code office updated the wording of its honor code. Instead of explicitly banning homosexual behavior on campus, the new honor code encouraged students to follow their intuition as they made personal decisions about how to best live their lives in line with Mormon values. Many BYU students took these changes as permission to embrace their queerness and finally come out without risk of losing their degrees. In the week following the change, campus erupted with celebrations of queerness. However, seeing the sheer volume of queer students on campus shocked the honor code office (who had presumed we were few and far between) and within the week they released a statement that expressions of homosexuality were still forbidden on campus and could lead to expulsion. This

meant that many of the queer students who came out in the few days after the honor code change were then expelled because they had “misinterpreted” what had been written.

It was in this heightened and anxious environment that Mormon apostle Dallin H. Oaks gave a rousing response to Matt Easton’s coming out story calling Mormons to defend the sanctity of the family with musket fire. An English teacher who was known to “wax poetic” and frequently spoke on mental health issues, Dallin H. Oaks was the unofficial champion of queer Mormon youth. Oaks’ response felt like a deep betrayal, a clear choice to abandon the needs of queer Mormon youth desperately trying to reconcile their faith and culture with their sexuality. We felt like we were losing on all fronts. And we found ourselves desperate for community in an environment that was taking drastic measures to isolate us. Every day for months BYU students took to the sidewalks, covering them in rainbows, jokes, and queer affirmations. Every morning, the cleaning crew would wash all of the chalk off and every afternoon we’d return to draw back what had been erased that morning.

There was a specific choreography to our resistance. I knew that by the time I was walking back from my afternoon class around 4 or 5 pm, I’d see a gaggle of people standing around eager to chat, complain about the situation, and fill the sidewalk with art. It was a safety that I didn’t feel anywhere else on campus, a sudden reminder that no honor code office could erase my sexuality or identity. It also reminded me of the powerful ties between queerness and rebellion and connected me to historical queer choreographies of resistance. In a religion that had told me to find belonging in my blood relatives, I was beginning to experience a new kind of belonging and understand why BYU was so afraid of our power as a community.

As I grew into my queerness, those sites of resistance became essential to my survival and introduced me to people who would teach me essential survival strategies as a queer person living in Utah. I had a mental map of every safe place for me to be within Provo. Those spaces included coffee shops, where no devout Mormon would dare set foot, the gay bars of downtown Salt Lake City that we had to take an hour-long train to get to, and events hosted by BYU's unofficial gay club, BYU Cougar Pride where I learned the untold stories of my undercover queer Mormon ancestors. Those spaces felt like a secret underground network, everybody in them sharing the same trauma and eagerness to heal together. It felt exciting to finally discuss everything that was bubbling up for us and the complicated nuances of the hyper-specific experience of growing up Mormon and queer. Inevitably we all had related traumas living in our bodies and found deep solace in sharing space, migrating together, and engaging in expressions of queer joy.

Cross-dressing as a man holds a sweet liberation for me. It allows me to process my frustration through a brand of aggressive comedy that has long lived in my body but rarely found a space to express itself. Drag lets me be mad and sexy and strong and seductive and a whole host of things that I struggle connecting to in my day-to-day life. Through drag I'm able to distort the rituals of masculinity that once diminished me in order to serve my own radically queer purposes. Drag connects me to my lesbian ancestors who playfully explored their transness and commented on sexist gender roles through outrageous costumes and raunchy comedy acts.

Within the red scare coded religious culture that I grew up in, beards served both as a rebellious act and as a spiritual manifestation. In my choreography whimsically long beards serve as comedic relief and easily identifiable gender commentary. The beard solo that opens *Big Trouble* is a playful grappling with the weightiness and meaning embedded into masculine

pageantry within a patriarchal (and specifically Mormon) society. The beard is a growing record of the narrator's wisdom and power and authority, but ultimately the fabulous beard (and status symbol) is the very thing that causes our narrator's demise when he gets too close to uncovering the power structures governing the world of *Big Trouble*. This sets an expectation of comedic violence for the audience and introduces the campy 60s chaos of the piece, but it also grounds the work in the solo drag king acts that have been an essential part of my research and the lineages of queer performance art that informed how I designed *Big Trouble*. The beard solo sets a tone of gender deviance that makes space for the audience to read queerness and gender play throughout the show. And ultimately, simply, and most significantly, that sparkly silver curly 30-foot-long beard reveals the pageantry and silliness of masculinity.

Chapter 3

Pratfalls and Bubble Guns: Weaponizing the Physical Comedy of Camp

“The idea of drag is camp because we’re saying, I’m not this body — I’m actually God in drag playing humanity.”

-Rupaul

As the dust settles on the chaos and excitement of the first group number, the cast freezes, posed mid gestural sentence. The cassette rewinds and clicks “play” as the lush violins of Conny Froboess’s *Mariandl* flutter Peter awake amidst his coworkers’ motionless slumber. He prances forward to reveal a glittering bedazzled bottle of poison. He sniffs it and shudders delightfully, reminiscing on poppers-filled nights of gay delights. He then flits gracefully back to the table, emptying the contents of the poison bottle into one of the abandoned glasses sitting there before swapping it around randomly with the other glasses strewn about for a dangerous game of Russian Roulette. Tapping his friends on the shoulder, he brings them all back to life for a revelatory toast, playfully waiting to see which coworker will collapse to the ground. Instead, however, a cough takes *him* over, Peter stumbles forward to collapse into a spotlight, and the music abruptly cuts out leaving the rest of the cast leaning worriedly over the desk to catch a glimpse of the confusing situation before them. After a beat, Wayne Newton’s jazzy tune, *Danke Schoen*, whines out into the space. Suddenly Peter sits up gasping for air and checking his pulse, the rest of the cast heave a sigh of relief and return to their drinks. For the rest of the song, Peter slowly deteriorates, angrily accusing the group colluding around the table before collapsing again in a new part of the stage. As chaos erupts and the dancers turn on one another, Peter

crawls slowly toward the red rotary phone sitting on the table, hoping desperately to call for help. Before he can reach anyone, though, a seizure takes him over and he crumbles slowly against the front of the table, the rest of the dancers unaware as they accuse each other, fight over bubble guns, and dance frantically.



In a desperate attempt to help us learn German, my Swiss mother had a collection of German films on VHS that her mother had recorded live from her small boxy television. One of those films was *Mariandl*, a barely colorized romantic comedy from 1961 full of misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and chaotic family dynamics. Conny Froboess plays the lead role in the film and her free-spirited performance of the titular song *Mariandl* helped popularize the tune throughout Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. I had originally choreographed Peter's poison solo to the John Buzon Trio's *Caravan*, an upbeat drum-driven jazz tune that led us to explore the flailing dance style of Ann-Margret (if you haven't seen, you

should look up a video). Within the larger scope of the piece, however, *Mariandl* contrasted the drive of the music before it with a sweetness and romanticism that added a delicious irony to Peter's poison solo. The physical language that we had built off of the rhythms and wildness of *Caravan* took on a satirical tone when paired with Conny Froboess's lilting vocals. It also reconnected me to those early German comedies that I grew up watching. And while I never learned German fluently, watching those films without understanding the language allowed me to hone in on the physical comedy on the screen and the elements of storytelling that I could understand and connect to without knowing the language.

Many of those moments of comedy that I searched for hungrily amid the unintelligible dialogue were rooted in failure, awkwardness, and rebellion. Before I had words for my queerness, those moments of physical comedy resonated with my own body that never seemed capable of moving in normative ways. As I've begun exploring physical comedy within my choreography, I've also been able to name the queer campiness that has subtly coded my sense of humor long before I had words to name myself as queer. While my Mormon parents were censoring explicitly queer media, my young queer brain was reading gender play in the physical comedy that I was consuming. Men in colorful tights and glittering hunting caps, a devoted butler on a runaway pair of skis, a drunken uncle on a squeaky misaligned bike, my brain was able to flag these characters as interesting because they were different and important because they didn't fit into the worldview I was being fed by my church and community. Though I didn't know it at the time, the humor of these scenes relied on camp, a queer aesthetic that revels in exaggeration, theatricality, and failure. In this chapter I argue that physical comedy, such as that born out of camp aesthetics, subtly destabilizes heteropatriarchy through playfully embodied

deviance. I explore how the comedic body, rather than necessarily resisting gender norms, fails to reproduce them correctly and in that failure, exposes its fragility.

In 1964 American writer and philosopher Susan Sontag (she/her) wrote an essay entitled “Notes on Camp,” where she details her thoughts on the sensibilities that inform camp aesthetics. Though written over 60 years ago, Sontag’s essay is some of the most in-depth writing we have on what makes camp camp. She says astutely, “to talk about camp is therefore to betray it,”²⁰ before launching into a lengthy discussion on the topic. But her nod to the irony of writing seriously and theoretically about an aesthetic as elusive and unserious as camp gives her writing a certain amount of queer credibility. In her essay Sontag makes a long list of things that describe or define “camp,” often talking herself in circles as she searches for concrete markers of camp aesthetics. Most significant to me, though, is her comment that “what it [camp taste] does is find the success in certain passionate failures.”²¹ She’s noting that the comedy of camp relies on social and gendered failures as well as the refusal of queer camp practitioners to view them as such.

She continues on to make a claim that reads like a precursor to Judith Butler’s writings on gender performativity, saying, “camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand being-as-playing-a-role.”²² She’s exploring how camp aesthetics reveal the contrived nature of gender roles, how they enact Judith Butler’s ideas of gender performativity in unserious ways and reveal the comedy and artifice of heteropatriarchy. Rather than striving to perfectly

²⁰ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 1.

²¹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 13

²² Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 4

recreate heteronormativity, embodied camp performance art seeks to revel in its inability to replicate the binary structures of gender and sexuality that govern much of mainstream culture.

In *Big Trouble* camp aesthetics served as a way for me to bring levity to subjects that felt weighty and serious as well as critique power systems in abstract and humorous ways. Camp showed up in exaggerated physicalities and over-acted storytelling, in gestures that we knew would read to our queer audience even if they were illegible to straight audience members, in weapons that were bedazzled and subverted to carry comedy and irony instead of tragedy. It also showed up in jarring sonic shifts, transitioning from grandiose big band music to chaotic dumpster noises erupting out of silence as we found frivolity in an otherwise drab office setting.

Working with queer cast members was an essential part of building camp into the physical vocabulary of the piece as we let our lived interactions - informed by lives filled with queer choreographies, references, and memories - inform the gestures that we brought into our show. Throughout the rehearsal process I watched as dancers began to trust their campy comedic intuitions, trying things out to see what reaction they could get from me and from each other. This call and response method of choreography made *Big Trouble* feel honest and alive and it prepped my cast of collaborators to fully live within the setting of the piece and bring new insights to it with every run.

This skill proved especially useful for our Saturday matinee run when an issue with the sound system brought the show to a screeching halt in the middle of Peter's poison solo. He paused and looked with fear at the audience in a moment of comedic timing I would never have known how to craft. While I wasn't able to see much of what transpired in the 10 or so minutes that the sound system was down, I heard from many audience members that it was their favorite run of the weekend. The failure of the sound system while the dancers were living deeply within

the world allowed them to improvise on the spot and interact with the chaotic attempts to restart the show in humorous ways. From backstage I heard uproarious laughter and assumed the show was going on as normal, but instead the comedy of failure drove the piece forward, adding a layer of depth and nuance that was powerful because it was real and the dancers were experiencing the same delight as the audience as they tried things and fed off of the audience's energy. I heard from a few audience members that at first they thought the sound system failures were planned and just another gag amidst the rest of the chaos happening onstage.

Camp aesthetics reveal the theatricality and silliness of gender performance, but they also reveal the generative potential of failure. Camp opens doors that normative ways of moving and performing have long kept locked. And it often does so unintentionally or unbeknownst to the campy performer. Before I created *Big Trouble*, I made a short six minute dance called *The Thing That Might Have Happened Over There*. I made *TTTMHHOT* during my undergraduate degree while freshly out of covid. I was given a large cast to work with from *DancEnsemble*, the dance company facilitating the piece. While some of the dancers in the cast were trained and skilled dancers, many were new to modern dance and had more experience with theater and ballroom dance. While I had planned on making an athletic and abstract postmodern dance to music that involved sound bites from the classic Audrey Hepburn thriller *Charade*, I quickly realized that my visions weren't engaging my dancers and I decided to shift gears in order to make something that was fun for them to rehearse and perform while showcasing their unique talents. Over many a candlelit discussion late into the night, I hatched a zany, winding tale based on every murder mystery trope that I could think of. It involved classic characters like a butler and two detectives and a wealthy heiress and centered around a newspaper containing a mysterious secret.

TTTMHHOT was my first exploration into physical comedy as well as my first experiments with narrative and specific character work. I used my tools as a choreographer and dancer to craft improvisation scores that allowed dancers to build gestural sentences that encapsulated their character. Of great significance is that in that process was a good friend of mine, Nick Fife, a skilled choreographer and dance scholar currently getting a degree in deaf studies as they explore merging deaf studies with their love of dance. Nick Fife introduced me to *Bratz: The Musical* and became a queer lifeline at a time when I felt deeply alone and isolated. Nick responded in queer ways to the queer choreography that I was providing and brought to life a campy, wrist-flopping butler-narrator. As the piece was restaged and the cast shifted, the queerness baked into that character specifically and throughout the rest of the piece remained. While I was freshly discovering my sexuality at the time that I choreographed *TTTMHHOT*, my queerness and the queer friendship that facilitated the creation of explicitly queer choreography shone through and resonated with queer audience members. I was able to show *TTTMHHOT* at the American College Dance Association's gala performance where it was viewed by someone who is now a good friend and collaborator of mine, Peter Pattengill. Discussing *TTTMHHOT* with Peter Pattengill revealed that he read a deep campiness throughout the piece and that it felt deeply queer even though I had created it before I was even aware of my queerness or my desire to make choreography about my queerness. It was in my failure to produce the postmodern dance of my dreams that I was able to discover a unique brand of choreography that allows me to express my queerness in odd, unsettling, and ultimately silly and campy ways.

Jack Halberstam wrote an entire book on the subject of "Queer Failure." So the failure of the sound system during Saturday's matinee show felt perfectly apt for the queer subject matter of *Big Trouble*. Jack Halberstam digs deep into the relationships between queerness and failure,

investigating alternative family and gender models that show up in animated television shows like *Sponge Bob Square Pants* and *Finding Nemo*. But most striking to me is how Jack discusses the intersections of failure and economics, discussing how queer ways of living under capitalism become “other” ways of living and thus exist outside of normative political and economic spaces. Jack says, “failure is the map of political paths not taken... failure’s byways are all the spaces in between the superhighways of capital.”²³ He is discussing how the paths that queer communities have carved out, particularly in places ruled by heteropatriarchal capitalism like the United States, are also roadmaps of counterculture, of subversion, and ultimately of rebellion. Jack explores how heteropatriarchy is baked into capitalism and that economic “success” in the US is also deeply tied to heterosexual “success.” Jack goes through the labor of these investigations to make a proposition for alternative ways of living. In the introduction to *Queer Failure*, he says, “but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which... no one gets left behind.”²⁴

This sentiment was ever present in my creation of *Big Trouble* as I crafted a community that was (though often at violent odds with one another) deeply interconnected. Where one person’s failure meant connecting with and being reborn with an entire community of similarly disenfranchised friends. Hugh Ryan explores this idea with a case study of the Women’s House of Detention (affectionately called the House of D), a historical women’s prison in Greenwich Village in New York City. Ryan traces the lives of the queer women and gender non-conforming people who ended up in the House of D and the crimes and “failures” that landed them there. Prostitution charges were handed out like candy to anybody who presented a gender that wasn’t

²³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 19

²⁴ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 25

seen as normative enough for the time, causing a large community of queer sapphics to end up in one place together. Ryan tells beautiful love stories of queer couples passing letters through prison bars and inmates holding up lighters to communicate with their lovers on the other side. Ryan also discusses how the location of the House of D, just down the street from the famous Stonewall Inn, meant that inmates of the House of D participated in the riots at Stonewall as well as staging their own prison riot and tossing bricks over the walls of the prison.

While my circumstances at BYU were very different from those of the inmates of the House of D, I related to the feeling of subversion and otherness, of being villainized for my identity, of a counterculture born out of necessity and loneliness, of revolt fueled by shared frustrations. In making *Big Trouble*, it felt deeply poetic to use choreographies of failure to create a joyous comedy. After the first showing of *Big Trouble*, UMD dance professor Alvin Mayes said that the piece felt surprisingly hopeful and joyous amidst the chaos and violence. That dissonance felt deeply important to me as I crafted a choreographic world that mirrored my lived experiences where we found hope and community amidst trauma and mistreatment.

Although my grandmother wasn't a particularly funny person, she had a much deeper impact on the media that I consumed as a child than I realized for a long time. She's the reason that I grew up watching so many old German comedies as well as black and white tv shows of the 1960s like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and television personalities like Dick van Dyke and Laurence Welk. She deeply shaped the strange and contradictory media landscape that formed my earliest understanding of comedy. She's also a large part of the reason that much of my relationship to Mormonism was and is the way it is.

My grandmother Frieda (or Grossi as we lovingly called her) found the Mormon church not among the cattle ranches and dusty desert lakes of Utah, but on the industrial cobbled streets of 1950s Winterthur, Switzerland. She was struggling to care for her two young daughters and elusive husband, barely keeping her small family alive by washing laundry in a damp, coal-warmed basement washroom. Eternally open-hearted and welcoming, when two young Americans knocked on her door, she immediately invited them inside. Her husband joined the Mormon church with Frieda, but after a few short years alcohol pulled him away from both Mormonism and his young family. Adding insult to injury, when Frieda's family heard of her religious shift, they cut her off as well.

Completely alone and penniless, Frieda moved into the basement of The Villa, a beautiful old building that had been bought by the Mormon church in Winterthur and served as the meetinghouse my mother attended as a young girl. While living there Frieda met my Grosspapi Walter Gysler, a short and cheerful man with one arm shorter than the other from a childhood bout with polio. An artist and a romantic, he proposed to her in the woods behind the Mormon temple in Bern with an old gramophone playing grainy Beethoven recordings.

More than an ideology, Mormonism had supported and kept Frieda alive. To a woman who had never found solace in her community, her family, or even her husband, Mormonism had a tantalizing appeal for Frieda. Every good thing that happened to her after joining the Mormon church was further proof of its truth and reason to follow its codes even more closely. Mormonism allowed Frieda to feel educated after a life of being denied the education she wanted, it helped her find financial stability, and it made her feel special, important, and needed when she was abandoned on every front.

After moving to Bountiful, Utah to be closer to her two daughters, she worked in the church headquarters cafeteria, serving sandwiches to and chatting with Mormon apostles, general authorities, and even the prophet. When I'd visit my Grossi in her tiny one-bedroom home, my mom and I would sleep on the lumpy pull-out couch that barely fit next to her dining table where she would serve us tangy red cabbage and boiled potatoes with small Lindor chocolates carefully laid out on lacy Swiss napkins. She had a tiny boxy television where she religiously kept up with her favorite American TV personalities including Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball, Laurence Welk, and Dick van Dyke, all of whom she recorded on VHS and carefully catalogued to watch again later. Like many her age, she kept up with their lives in order to gossip with my mother about them.

Frieda rarely talked about her life before Mormonism. It sometimes felt like her life started when she was baptized into the Mormon church. Growing up under her legacy I felt a deep pressure to "stay faithful," believing that I was honoring her hard work and life's successes by living according to the same codes that she did. While Mormonism was her liberation, it was my closet, keeping me from spending time with the queer friends I was drawn to and handing me endless "service" tasks to keep me too busy to question the morals of the system guiding my every decision and action. Whether or not I believed in Mormonism, I had my grandmother's expectations and therefore my mother's expectations to live up to.

Big Trouble builds off of this concept of generational expectations like those I experienced through my Swiss family's deep investment in the Mormon church. The group's sharp, carefully-timed unison choreography reflects the strictness and black and white thinking that governed my time as a Mormon. The opening image as the red curtain opens, Zoe in her latex old man mask, seducing the dancers who gasp for air around her reminded me of attending

church on Sundays and looking up to see a row of old, white men leading our congregation. Those men were my close family friends and sometimes my actual family. They were people I trusted, had close relationships with, and that I genuinely believe wanted the best for me. But they were also people who told my friends they weren't worthy of God's blessings because they had been sexually assaulted. They were people who would comment on my appearance if my shoes were too tall and flashy or my skirt was too short. They were people waiting to pair me off with one of their sons, people emptying a full diaper onto a pristine cake before a room full of preteens as a metaphor for the sanctity of virginity.

Growing up in Mormonism, the media that I consumed was outwardly the most censored aspect of my life. While most Mormons agree that R-rated movies are off the table, my parents shied away from anything with nudity, swearing, or even violence that they deemed as "extreme." This meant that the media available for my consumption involved largely BBC adaptations of classic romance novels, Hays code-era films and shows, and comedies that were made specifically for Mormon audiences. In the early 2000s there was a plethora of these, including the widely known film *Napoleon Dynamite*, shot in small-town Southern Idaho by a group of BYU graduates. While *Napoleon Dynamite* doesn't specifically name its ties to Mormonism, others of the time intentionally marketed themselves to Mormons and centered church activities with a clear motive to uplift the values of the Mormon church.

One of these explicitly Mormon comedies was *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter-day Comedy* (2003) and is set in Provo, Utah. *The Pink Pride and Prejudice* (as I grew up calling it) follows a group of roommates navigating Mormon social norms and expectations. A foppish Collins is overly eager for an eternal companion and makes a fool of himself by proposing to almost every woman he lays his eyes on. In a pivotal scene he shows up at Elizabeth's door with

a bouquet of colorful flowers and quotes *The Book of Mormon* to her, saying, “Elizabeth, we are commanded to multiply and replenish the earth.” In response to his passionate declaration, however, Elizabeth snaps the ring box shut and informs him that “it’s still a no.” As Collins is leaving, he accidentally traps his bouquet of artificially colored flowers in the door, before leaving Elizabeth in peace before her roommates burst out from behind the corner in uproarious laughter. While in many ways Collins embodies the ideal Mormon, he plays the fool in *The Pink Pride and Prejudice*, satirizing the ways that Mormon men blindly chase women in pursuit of the “eternal companion” who will be their ticket into the highest level of heaven. Though subtle enough to bypass any Mormon alarm bells, *The Pink Pride and Prejudice* makes a brilliant critique of Mormon marriage culture with its goofy Mormon interpretation of Jane Austen’s character, *Mr. Collins*.

In *The Singles’ Ward* (2002) the social critique is delivered straight to camera, quite literally. Jonathan Jordan, the main character of *The Singles’ Ward*, frequently delivers monologues on his distaste for Mormon culture to cameras inside of candy dispensers and mailboxes. He makes fun of Mormons’ love of casseroles and their bizarrely intense dating culture as well as their insider outsider biases and the judgement he faced for getting a divorce. While ultimately love brings Jonathan Jordan back to the Mormon church, his journey opened my sheltered Mormon brain as a young and impressionable girl. Jonathan Jordan drinks alcohol and goes to parties, he shows up to the ward potluck with store bought fried chicken and sulks moodily in the back of church when he is convinced to attend. *The Singles’ Ward* was some of the earliest exposure that I had to the possibility of life outside of Mormonism and most importantly, it showed easy normal friendships between those outside of Mormonism with those inside of it. Jonathan Jordan’s punk roommates help him chase the girl of his dreams without any

effort on Jonathan Jordan's part to convince them to get baptized into the church. Jonathan moves easily between Mormon and non-Mormon spaces, eventually joining it not necessarily because he believed it to be the most true church but because he found home and community with the members there. This subtle shift is a huge departure from much other Mormon media which encourages Mormon youth to seek out other Mormon friends and convert those non-Mormon friends that they end up making.

The R.M. (2003) stands for *The Returned Missionary*, an acronym Mormons use to describe the social awkwardness many experience when they return from their 18–24-month missions. Jared Phelps, or Elder Phelps as he was called on his Mormon mission, returns from his 24 months away from normal life to find that his family has moved without telling him and his girlfriend is getting married to someone else in two weeks. Similar to *The Singles' Ward*, the story of *The R.M.* is ultimately in favor of the Mormon church and its values but takes a winding path of chaos and experimentation before it gets there.

What each of these films has in common is that despite their target audience, moral coding, and subject matter, they all manage to sneak in subtle critiques of Mormonism. While comedies critiquing Mormonism from outside of the church often center their jokes around Mormon lore and theology (rightfully so, it's rich with comedic content), these Mormon comedies of the early 2000s played an important role in my personal ability to dissect the goals and norms of Mormonism and empowered me to disagree with and make fun of parts of the church. They also offered me a powerful tool for navigating the awkwardness that I felt while navigating the cultural differences between Mormonism and my non-Mormon peers: comedy.

I could list countless more inspirations for the style of comedy that ended up in *Big Trouble* from the childhood videos I made with my brothers to the raunchy comedy thrillers of

Baltimore native John Waters. I could dig into the comedic influences on my dancer-collaborators and follow the lineages that defined each of their unique brands of physical comedy. The otherness and failure depicted in comedic, theatrical, and extravagant ways across 1960s German slapstick comedies, 1960s American comedic television personalities, and early 2000s Mormon comedies have clear traceable lineages and leave their marks in both the physical and gestural choices being made onstage as well as the meaning we were infusing into those gestures. Those early 2000s Mormon comedies gave me a love of subtle critique and taught me how to fly under the radar while still pushing boundaries. Those German comedies gave me a dry situational sense of humor and taught me how to build a scenario that requires a comedic solution from the dancer-actor, and those 1960s American television personalities taught me not only how to perform American heterosexuality but how to over-perform those norms of heteropatriarchy until they become a kind of unintentional camp.

Many audience members were surprised by the comedy of *Big Trouble*. They were expecting a dance thesis concert to feature “serious” abstract work with “virtuosic” presentations of moves they were familiar with. I received the feedback from some audience members that even though they enjoyed the show immensely they weren’t sure that I showcased the abilities of my dancer-collaborators enough. While I’m always looking for ways to deepen my choreographic practice, I would argue that the physical comedy of *Big Trouble* opens up space to question our definition of and biases around virtuosity as well as destabilize the boundaries between theater and dance. I wonder if those same audience members had viewed *Big Trouble* in the context of a theater show, would they then have viewed the dancers’ performance as virtuosic? Why does comedy feel so culturally separate from “serious” and “virtuosic” art, particularly in dance contexts?

Ultimately, *Big Trouble* offers comedy as a salve for the intensity and hopelessness of a capitalist culture that prioritizes pristinely categorized and financially quantifiable “success.” Comedy not only kept me alive at a time when Mormonism was desperate to erase my existence as a queer person, but also served as a choreographic catalyst for my creative voice, empowering me to explore physicalities that existed in my body but failed to fit neatly into a codified genre.

Big Trouble situates comedy next to social commentary, amplifying vacuous silences where the harmful underbelly of heteropatriarchal power structures is laid bare. The players of *Big Trouble* revel in interruption, awkwardness, and exaggeration, exposing the instability of the very systems they appear to mimic. Comedy, then, is not a detour from seriousness, but a choreographic strategy that uses failure to fracture hegemonic norms from within. In falling apart, both literally and figuratively, the dancers reveal just how fragile those structures have always been. Failure becomes not an absence of virtuosity, but its redefinition.

Chapter 4

Masks for Mases: Sapphic Semiotics and Performed Masculinity

“When she talks, I hear the revolution

In her hips, there's revolution

When she walks, the revolution's coming

In her kiss, I taste the revolution!”

- “Rebel Girl,” Bikini Kill

An uncomfortable green light bathes the stage as dancers in beige suits exhale and melt around a broad wooden table. A dancer lays on top of the table in a wrinkly silicone old man mask and rolls with sultry decadence amidst the papers strewn there. At the greedy behest of the masked performer, a stagehand dressed in all black scuttles out from the wings to help him walk down the backs of the other dancers waiting patiently on all fours. As he reaches the last dancer and steps carefully down, the music shifts into *I Spy* by Earle Hagen, a bouncing brass-driven tune with a driving snare beat. Moving in time with the beat, the dancers shift between accusatory and aggressively masculine poses; sharp hip thrusts, pointing fingers, muscle poses, and finger guns. Suddenly the music pulls the group back to the table where they flail hips and heads in tight unison before slowly turning to pose seductively for the audience. The dancers march forward to form a v with the masked dancer at its point, before scattering to form a line from which each dancer is pulled one by one into a heap on the floor. As the dancers lay in their pile on the floor, the masked power figure reveals two bedazzled bubble guns sparkling in the

stage lights. He places them strategically on the table for the other dancers to find, raising a silencing finger to his lips to pull the audience in on his secret.

As the dancers attempt to pull each other back to life, they stumble stage left before bumping into one another and finally ending up in front of the masked man. He pushes them to the floor once again, pointing to the guns on the table and miming a scream as a dramatic spotlight casts his shadow across the stage. The dancers scramble for the guns, turning on one another and wrestling to reach the table first. As the dancers chase each other back and forth across the stage, bubble guns held high and waving furiously, the masked overlord pours himself a glass from the decanter waiting on the table. Then he turns and lifts his butt cheeks to plop onto the table, swiping them along its edge to play a campy butt piano matching the glissandos of a nasally organ solo. Two of the dancers slip away from the chaos and join their masked friend for drinks at the table while one of the remaining dancers chases the other with both bubble guns, landing the grand finish of the song with a shower of bubbles.



Across my practices as a choreographer, teacher, scholar, and performer, it's important to me to center queer perspectives and stories. In our current culture that centering of queerness also necessitates the decentralizing/deconstructing of heteropatriarchal constructions of reality. This process of deconstructing heteropatriarchal worldviews in order to reconstruct queer ones is influenced both by my own lived experiences within queer communities and by the written work of queer theorists and queer dance scholars. In this chapter I will discuss how drag king performances destabilize heteropatriarchal masculinity by exposing it as a choreographed fiction. Through camp, parody, and femme-centered aesthetics, I will argue that drag kings reassemble masculinity into a queer movement vocabulary that prioritizes community, play, and embodied resistance. I will discuss how drag aesthetics showed up in my thesis as well as how the values that govern sites of lesbian performance art, like drag king performances, guided how I thought about this work and the creation of it.

Queer dance scholar Clare Croft (she/her) states the values that guide her conception of queer dance, saying, "I am not interested in queer dance as definable category, but rather... queer dance as a challenge or an aspiration."²⁵ While I am curious about how specific queer art forms like drag can influence my work, I'm also interested in queer dance as a set of embodied values that deconstruct other often more normative embodied values. I wonder about dance as riot and revolution, as a ritual rejection of performative conformity. Amidst the distinctions and categorizations that I evaluate in this chapter, ultimately, I see these boundaries as fluid and shifting modes of being that served past queers and inform how present queers think about the work that they make. While *Big Trouble* satirized masculinity through drag king performances, it

²⁵ Clare Croft, *Dancing toward Queer Horizons: Race, Body, and Affect in Modern Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57

also drew inspiration from burlesque, vaudeville, and broader drag tropes utilized by both kings and queens. Queer dance, rather than a specific genre or set of gestures we could pull from, was the aspiration of our research in the rehearsal room as our queer bodies and minds collided to make the campy chaos that became *Big Trouble*.

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam's seminal book "The Queer Art of Failure" explores alternative (queer) forms of knowledge production and the heteronormative implications of success within a capitalist economy. The book beautifully details, through mostly animated children's films, how queer modes of existence find ways to flourish in the sidewalk crack of our heteronormative society. Halberstam discusses this distinction between heteronormative values and queer values, saying, "heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common-sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique."²⁶

This conception of "queer failure" lays a theoretical foundation for much of how I think about dance as a site for queer identity formation. It encompasses the failures in my own body as I struggled to navigate embodied heterosexual coding and the sites of safety that were created when I found community with other queers whose identities had been labeled as "failures." Queer failure is ever-present in *Big Trouble* from the first pratfall in the opening solo to the dumpster dance party of the closing number. Each trash-bound body was a symbol of the metamorphosis of failure. The dancers' resurrection as punk zombies became their rebirth into a

²⁶ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 89

queer world, and a queer value system completely separate from the heteronormative one that had rejected them.

Continuing Halberstam's discussion of queer failure, queer performance scholar José Muñoz (he/him/él) counters, "queer utopia is not just a failure to achieve normative virtuosity; it is also a virtuosity that is born in the face of failure within straight time's measure."²⁷ Muñoz's emphasis on straight time failure feels especially relevant to my own failure to meet Mormonism's heteronormative timeline for my life. I'm curious about time failure within dance and how dance can question and distort audience members' relationships to time. While I explored this with jarring shifts in pacing and sudden silences that seemed to last forever, the failure of the sound system during the Saturday matinee performance brought time failure to the forefront. The linear timing of the show fell apart with the sound system, but dancers that were ready to react turned that failure into one of the best runs of the weekend, finding comedy and liberation in the disruption. But perhaps even more important is Muñoz's addition of "virtuosity." I'm curious about the intersections of failure and virtuosity within queer value systems and communities- how physical limits can be pushed in pursuit of queer metrics of success rather than heteronormative ones. While the reflections from several students at University of Maryland professor Patrik Widrig noted that the choreography seemed "too simple for the talented cast of dancers," I watched as my dancer-collaborators found new ways to push themselves in each run of the show. On Friday evening's performance during one of his many deaths, Peter, while pushing the limits of how long he could hold a shape before adjusting to fall safely, bruised several of his ribs. While safety is very important to me and I strive to build a rehearsal and

²⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 177-178

performance environment where dancers can avoid injury, Peter's dedication to a movement that might not have looked "virtuosic" to a traditional dance audience, became a deeper and far queerer kind of virtuosity. He found ways to push himself physically that made the movement increasingly haunting and emotionally moving.

Queer performance artist and scholar B. J. Wray (they/them) brings this discussion of queer alterity and dissent into the social dynamics of the lesbian bar, a site that has been fading but once played an active role in lesbian community-building and remains a deeply significant site for the construction and analysis of lesbian ideals and how those ideals interact with embodiment and desire. She says, "in an act of resistance, butch/femme dance partners infiltrate existing discourses on femininity, potentially offering a re-articulation of desire that reworks the (hetero)normative regulation of bodies."²⁸ Here Wray is specifically discussing the historical ways that lesbians, failing to successfully reproduce normative genders, constructed their own genders and their own gendered interactions. While this coding interacted with the symbols of heterosexuality, it also intentionally disavowed normative gender presentations and reconstructed gendered physicalities within the context of lesbian desire. It was important to me that *Big Trouble* included lesbian desire in a way that audiences couldn't assume was familial or platonic. I often prioritize abstraction, even in narrative work like *Big Trouble*, for the ways that it facilitates nuanced and personalized interpretations. However, amidst the compulsive heterosexuality that biases audiences towards straightwashing, especially with female or presumed-female bodies, I learned that what I view as explicitly queer doesn't always read as such to audience members. I created a duet at the University of Maryland which involved a

²⁸ B. J. Wray, "Choreographing Queer: Nationalism, Citizenship, and Lesbian Dance Clubs," in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories*, ed. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 37

lesbian couple fighting over blankets and pillows before slow dancing together and pulling each other offstage. What I had thought was a tender, obviously lesbian duet read to many audience members as two friends or sisters at a sleep over. Anxious not to make the same mistake again, I dedicated a large portion of the show to the romantic story of the lesbian lovers, allowing the audience to sit with the complexities of their dynamic and process the yearning and seduction being played out in front of them. The second half of the romantic duet when Zoe Cushman Walders dances with the limp body of C Macko came from a desire to be overly explicit but became one of my favorite parts of the show.

Wray goes on to discuss the police raids of lesbian bars in the 1950s and 1960s and the history of real legal ramifications for gender non-conforming individuals. She names the historical stakes of gender failure in the United States, rooting queer theory and futurity in the lived experiences and migrations of lesbian bodies. Wray contrasts these lived experiences and embodied identities with the ways that lesbians, particularly in the 90s and early 2000s, showed up in film: white, skinny, affluent, and feminine without explicitly adhering to queer butch/femme coding. *Big Trouble* rides a careful line between tragedy and comedy, finding a campy humor in subverted violence. From the bricks thrown at Stonewall to the sapphic haven carved out amidst the terrors of the Women's House of Detention, queer and gender-nonconforming individuals have long found themselves in dangerous and violent circumstances and have long subverted those spaces of violence into joyous celebrations of queer community.

During my sophomore year at Brigham Young University when I had just returned from serving a Mormon mission, I was living in a tiny apartment with my childhood friend, Robin and three other recently returned missionaries. According to the Mormon celestial timeline I'd grown

up adhering to, I was supposed to have my eye single to the glory of heterosexual marriage.²⁹ I'd put off addressing my sexuality for 21 years and it felt like the whole world was waiting with bated breath for me to finally find a man.

Seeking any distraction that we could get, my friend Robin and I turned to the one thing that could pull us out of our anxiety and back into our bodies: dancing. It was a time when the pieces were starting to come together for us both, even if only subconsciously. I would change my Tinder settings to women then blush and change them back and deny any allegations. Robin knew she was queer but diligently "kept the door open," hoping that the right man would pop up with a heterosexual ticket to heaven. As diligent Mormons, we didn't drink alcohol or go clubbing but found ourselves desperately needing spaces to move our bodies. By Friday night, Robin and I would scour Facebook for news of a nearby party that we could anonymously crash. It was a gut reaction at the time. We didn't think about it too much, but every weekend would roll around, and we'd find ourselves desperate to be dancing somewhere crowded where nobody knew us.

Since then, we've talked about the safety of the ambiguity of those parties. We rarely made friends at them but rather found the crowds a freeing space to move in ways we never would have dared otherwise. We danced to make each other laugh, to defy what was expected of our bodies and poke fun at the couples around us, and mostly we danced to feel like ourselves. Perhaps the most freeing part: our dance moves didn't draw conservative Mormon men toward us. With so much anxiety around performing our heterosexuality, we found it immensely freeing to suddenly be invisible to it. I still think about those bizarrely euphoric parties that we went to

²⁹ Joseph Smith, Doctrine & Covenants 4:5

and the delight of dancing purely for my own pleasure at a time when I understood so little about myself.

Before but especially during my mission, I was taught to view my body as a vessel for something higher than myself. But the more glimpses I got of other ways of moving, the more trapped I felt. I'd trained myself to value selflessness, hiding my own desires under layer after layer of conservative religious embodied ideologies. But somehow, in those dimly lit carpeted basement rooms surrounded by strangers I had no interest in getting to know, I found my subjectivity shifting. I began forgetting about the "vessel" and began living and dancing in my body just for me. There was a safety in having the space, energy, and social permission to move and be however I wanted. The expectant eyes were suddenly turned elsewhere, and I could be as ridiculously raunchy, silly, and sexy as I wanted.

These kinds of self-made movement codes that carry personal identity markers are at the crux of Rhea Hoskin's argument in her paper "Can Femme be Theory? Exploring the epistemological and methodological possibilities of femme." As a femme-presenting queer, Hoskin explores femme identity as a set of values at direct odds with heteropatriarchy. She says, "my goal is to conceptualize femme as a process of 'inviting in' – an open invitation to DIY femininity."³⁰ And I would add that in the context of drag kings, femme can also include an open invitation to DIY *masculinity*. Hoskin might find my use of her work to discuss drag kings odd. She makes it clear that she supports expressions of femininity and honors the word "femme" for its origins in butch/femme lesbian relationships.³¹ However her expansive redefining of what

³⁰ Rhea Ashley Hoskin, "Can Femme Be Theory? Exploring the Epistemological and Methodological Possibilities of Femme," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2021), 8

³¹ Hoskin, "Can Femme Be Theory?," 7

femme can mean and who it can relate to feels extremely relevant for discussing the value systems that govern what shapes drag king choreographies. She says, “femme has many features, as an affect, as a way of relating and nurturing one another, as an esthetic, an erotic, and a politic; it can be a matter of acting feminine or dressing feminine, both or neither.”³² Hoskin is exploring how sapphic spaces uplift the parts of femininity that heteropatriarchy rejects, allowing femme lesbians to express a femininity that caters to other lesbians and their values, rather than straight men and their values.

Hoskin’s “femme value system” stands in interesting conversation with Leslie Feinberg and Jack Halberstam’s definitions of “butch values.” Feinberg says, “a butch’s power, sexuality, and vulnerability are all experienced in the eyes of others. Butch is constructed as much through social interaction as through internal identity.”³³ Feinberg is discussing the individuality and self-made nature of butch masculinity in much the same way that Hoskin discusses DIY femininity. Hoskin writes about her femininity not fitting into heterosexual expectations, that she wore too many sequins and felt that her extravagant love of femininity unsettled the men around her. Feinberg chronicles how choosing to visibly enact butchness immediately signaled her queerness to the world around them and made her a target for violence and discrimination. As Hoskin found herself dressing femme for the gazes of other women and queer sapphics, Feinberg understood her butchness as socially shaped through queer desire and gender regulation within straight spaces. Jack Halberstam adds to Feinberg’s definition of butchness, saying, “female masculinity can take a variety of forms, and can be expressed in multiple ways, none of which are dependent upon male bodies or the reproduction of patriarchal power.”³⁴ Halberstam is eager to separate

³² Hoskin, “Can Femme Be Theory?,” 8

³³ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993).

³⁴ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

butchness or “female masculinity” from the social and financial power inherent in male masculinity. The difference is far deeper than a desire to “pass” as a man or not, rather Halberstam and Feinberg are defining butchness, much like Rhea Hoskin defines femmeness, as a unique set of values that are separate from the patriarchal values guiding normative presentations of masculinity.

Rather than striving for legible or “convincing” masculinity, *Big Trouble* embraced a fluid, DIY approach to gender presentation that aligns with Hoskin’s invitation toward self-defined femininity and Feinberg’s socially-constructed butchness. I was interested in staging masculinity as something seductive, excessive, and unstable. It was important to me that as we constructed the characterized embodiment of the piece that dancers’ gender was not fixed or easily categorized but rather revealed the ways in which it was performed, exchanged, and exaggerated. In the opening beard solo, the dancer moved between traditionally masculine poses and traditionally feminine gestures, playing on masculine tropes while subverting them into comedy with wild and reckless tumbles as the beard ultimately won out over the dancer’s attempts at masculine control. Zoe’s short slender frame took the role of the show’s villainous authority, disrupting expectations of scale, power, and gender coherence. Peter’s whimsical and ballet-trained body added a queerly feminine flair to his sinister poison solo. C’s athletic movement style brought a natural butchness to their submissively yearning character. Zach’s flamboyant personality coded their physical comedy with decadence and sass. Jamie’s flailing limbs brought a carefree looseness to otherwise strict and intense choreography. In this way, *Big Trouble* was crafted through casting, choreography, and physical research to enact a value system guided by queer desire and binary-bending constructions of embodied gender.

While gender scholars generally separate drag kings and queens into disparate discussions,³⁵ dance scholars tend to opt instead to combine the two into a discussion on drag as a whole. This approach reveals important connections between the somatic interests of kings and queens. However, it neglects a deeper analysis of how gendered power dynamics impact the movement interests and practical possibilities of the dances of drag kings and queens and glosses over the social dynamics of heteropatriarchy that favor queens and their dances over kings and theirs.

Performance scholar Stephen Farrier (he/him) discusses how both kings and queens use drag to explore their queer identities. Using personal experience and interviews, he lays out how kings and queens train and the role that the club and communities at the club play in supporting that training, saying “the acts look different.. and arouse diverse energies; yet despite the performance work appearing different in many ways, at some level it speaks a similar lexicon.”³⁶ While this categorical coupling of kings and queens supports his argument that kings and queens train in similar ways and share movement motifs, the idealistic image he paints of a diverse drag show is only part of the picture of the dynamic drag scene that I’ve witnessed across Salt Lake City, Utah, Washington, DC, and New York City. While I have attended drag shows that involved both queens and kings, the vast majority separate themselves according to their respective audiences. This distinction has a practical purpose and often makes sense, but it also encourages the silencing of drag king voices as gay clubs predominantly book drag queens on busy weekends, relegating drag kings to a sparsely attended Wednesday night “Dyke Night.”

³⁵ Farrier, Stephen. “International Influences and Drag: Just a Case of Tucking or Binding?” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 8, no. 2 (2017), 173

³⁶ Farrier, “International Influences,” 172

I love drag queens and their performances make me laugh and cry and revel in queer joy. But drag kings make me feel seen in my lesbian identity in a way that queens do not. Bodies who have been trained to act as small as their stature gain a swaggering authority in drag, exploring dances and gestures that short-circuit the minds of a society hardwired to equate masculinity with serious non-frivolous objectivity.

Choosing to honor drag king lineages in *Big Trouble* was therefore an aesthetic, political, and deeply personal decision. The work centers the specific movement qualities, humor, and gender play that emerge from lesbian and sapphic performance traditions. The exaggerated masculinity of the suited ensemble, the burlesque-inflected beard solo, and the persistent slippage between dominance and absurdity all draw from drag king vocabularies that resist the seriousness and authority typically associated with masculinity. In foregrounding these aesthetics, *Big Trouble* not only challenges the marginalization of drag kings within performance spaces but also insists on their importance as sites of choreographic innovation, where masculinity can become something collectively built, tested, and undone.

Psychologist and gender scholar Elly-Jean Nielsen (she/her) offers a discussion of lesbian camp that contextualizes the aesthetic choices of drag kings and reveals how those choices both explicitly and implicitly enact femme (and butch) values. She says of the importance of camp aesthetics to lesbian expression that, “considering the well-documented history of ‘ghosting’ lesbian women in literature, film, and television, it should come as no surprise that camp - a clever act of subterfuge - would be an essential

mode of expression for lesbian women.”³⁷ Camp is an aesthetic with a history rooted in oppression, acting as a way for queer individuals to communicate with each other in code without risking retaliation from normative heterosexual audiences. Drag kings continue this historical lineage, utilizing lesbian camp to communicate with lesbian audiences already fluent in its semiotics, creating spaces where performers can finally indulge in campy, exaggerated, coded expressions of gender and desire that are immediately legible and affirmed.

But what exactly is “camp”? Nielsen attempts a definition, saying that “camp is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role.”³⁸ Her definition gives a name to the multiplicity of camp. She reveals that it is more than simply a way of looking or behaving but acts as a way of coding performances so that their queer messages are legible primarily to queer audience members. Camp serves then as an almost sacred queer aesthetic that has protected queer performers and allowed them to express themselves in safe ways. As governments continue to criminalize queerness and queer spaces, investigating camp aesthetics is an important tool both for activism and for expanding queer scholarship.

Nielsen organizes lesbian camp into three categories: classic, erotic, and radical. For Nielsen, classic lesbian camp is related to the expression of lesbian butch-femme pairings.³⁹ In particular, she discusses how camp enables expressions of butch-femme identities to move beyond a simple

³⁷ Elly-Jean Nielsen, “Lesbian Camp: An Unearthing,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2016), 118

³⁸ Nielsen, “Lesbian Camp,” 130

³⁹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to define in meaningful depth the significance of butch-femme dynamics, however they played a significant role in lesbian culture in the US in the 1940s and 1950s and color lesbian culture and expression today

mirroring of heterosexual gender roles and power dynamics and into a mutually empowering space “free from... the heterosexist cleavage of sexual difference.”⁴⁰ *Big Trouble* drew deeply on the historical and deeply political roots of classic lesbian butchness, expanding butch presentation to include each dancer’s unique approach to queer embodiment rather than a static category aimed at detailed male impersonation. While working with Zoe Cushman Walders on her “My Way” solo, which she sung live through a copper microphone as she walked flirtatiously through the audience, we developed a language of masculine seduction that resonated with her own quirky, raunchy sense of humor and gritty, athletic gender presentation. One day in rehearsal she approached me with an idea, saying she was exploring how she could bring “big dick energy” to her boobs, a classically feminine body part. This queering of the body, reorganizing the gendered energy of specific body parts exemplifies perfectly our approach to campy masculinity within *Big Trouble*. It captures the confidence, directness, and sexuality of butchness while abandoning any ties to traditionally masculine body parts.

Nielsen defines erotic lesbian camp as how lesbian bodies reclaim and perform their sexuality in exaggerated ways. She describes an image from Australian-based lesbian porn magazine *Slit*, saying, “a femme-tattooed woman... is staring down the camera while flipping the bird. She is clad in jeweled undergarments, wig, a pig nose, and theatrical makeup. Such artifice troubles classic pornographic orientations toward realism and voyeurism.”⁴¹ In the creation of *Big Trouble*, it was important to me that we referenced drag and burlesque traditions while troubling audience expectations and biases towards heterosexist norms. Much of the erotic lesbian camp that ended up in *Big Trouble* came from empowering my collaborators to follow

⁴⁰ Nielsen, “Lesbian Camp,” 127

⁴¹ Nielsen, “Lesbian Camp,” 126

their own desires and inclinations in relation to the work. Once during an improvisation score for the first group number, Jamie Dotti Chen began humping the table amidst the fighting and chaos around her. It added an unexpected campy humor to a moment of tension and violence that perfectly balanced the scene and kept it in the deeply unserious world of the piece. Throughout the rehearsal process we prioritized sexuality that was silly and guided by the comfort of the performer rather than any particular gaze or audience-driven goal, putting sexual power in the hands of the performers rather than the audience.

Finally, Nielsen defines radical lesbian camp as encompassing how lesbians utilize the aesthetic of lesbian camp (i.e. enacting and overacting butch-femme identities and theatrically embracing lesbian sexuality) to make political statements. Nielsen says, “camp’s purpose as a political tactic of social visibility/signification is indispensable for all queer people.”⁴² While camp was born out of oppression and censorship, it has become a powerful tool for political commentary within queer performance art. Camp aesthetics instantly signal queer narratives and bodies, foregrounding queer lineages of expression and rooting otherwise neutral, abstract, or apolitical work in the fundamentally political nature of historical and present-day queer censorship.

During my senior year at Brigham Young University, I choreographed *We Are Numerous* in response to the instability queer students were facing as the honor code shifted its stance around displays of queerness on campus. Though I didn’t yet have the language for it, the piece embodied Nielsen’s concept of radical lesbian camp. It featured explicit references to Stonewall, through sampled speeches from Marsha P. Johnson, flying styrofoam bricks, and breaking glass,

⁴² Nielsen, “Lesbian Camp,” 132

but these cues were largely illegible to a Mormon audience, who instead described the work as “playful” or “goofy.” What they *could* read was its campy gender play and queer energy, even without the cultural framework to specifically name it.

The queerness of *We Are Numerous* became more explicitly legible to straight audiences during its staged performance when a cast member offered to wear his own six-inch velvet heels beneath the corduroy bell bottoms of his costume. Already the tallest member of the cast, in heels he towered over the other dancers, slow dancing with another male-presenting dancer and tossing bricks with a jovial abandon. This exaggerated gender presentation made the work unmistakably queer, confusing some straight audience members while profoundly resonating with other queer viewers. One audience member was moved to tears, having never seen such explicit queerness displayed on a BYU stage, and the piece ultimately inspired a queer talent showcase through The Cougar Pride Center, the unofficial gay club of BYU. In this way, *We Are Numerous* demonstrated Nielsen’s claim that camp operates as a tactic of queer visibility, making queerness perceptible even when its references are not.

While not explicitly a drag king work, *We Are Numerous* relied on the same strategies of gender exaggeration and disidentification that define drag king performance. Through it I developed an understanding of how to bake queerness into performance and use exaggeration and theatricality to resist queer erasure. It was political simply because it was expressing queer joy in a space that was deeply afraid of queerness. *We Are Numerous* resonated with other queer BYU students who were feeling silenced and sidelined because it centered theatrical campy ways of moving, celebrated queer stories and identities, and for a brief moment envisioned a world in which joyous queerness stood uncontested by dominant power structures. While I was interested

in creating a more complex storyline and world in *Big Trouble*, I deeply wanted to maintain the feeling of joyous rebellion that had colored *We Are Numerous*.

Throughout *Big Trouble*, lesbian camp functioned as a strategy for making masculinity visible as performance rather than innate identity. By exaggerating, distorting, and queering its gestures, the work exposed masculinity as something constructed, transferable, and unstable. It shifted power into the hands of performers, allowing them to reconfigure gender through pleasure, humor, and desire. *Big Trouble* did not simply parody masculinity, it rehearsed alternative ways of inhabiting it, suggesting that gender itself can be collectively remade through queer performance, that masculinity can serve queer purposes unimaginable and unintelligible within heteropatriarchy. These values of lesbian camp existed in *Big Trouble* within the context of drag king aesthetics, an essential component of *Big Trouble*'s queerness and political significance. These drag king aesthetics allowed us to detach masculinity from the male body and reveal that it is as easy to put on and take off as Zoe's wrinkly silicone mask.

Chapter 5

Latter-Day Kings: The Vastness of Queer Knowing

*“dream our missing friends forward
burn their reflections into empty chairs
we are less bound by time than the clock maker fears...
you people can’t kill me and
think you can kill me again”
-CAConrad*

As the final crashes, cat meows, and clown horns fade from the dumpster sitting ominously upstage, the masked dancer returns alone to the broad wooden table. He heaves a sigh and pours himself a tall drink from the crystal decanter, loosening his tie before exasperatedly ripping it from his neck and exposing the velcro that has been holding it up throughout the show. He loosens the top few buttons of his white button-down shirt and slowly peels off the now-sweaty silicone mask to reveal a sleek black bob received with shocked gasps and giggles from the audience. After downing a few glasses from the decanter, he poses dramatically against the table, head down and a hand outstretched waiting for the stagehand to scuttle through the door with a copper microphone and a thick coil of cord. The opening notes of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” echo out into the space as magical dots of light dance over the audience, transforming the previously dimly lit room into a welcoming jazz club.

The dancer, our calculating villain/hero, opens his mouth for the opening line “and now” as the audience strains to catch his perfectly timed lip syncing before realizing with “the time is

near” that the powerful voice echoing through the space belongs to the small frame leaning nonchalantly against the table. After a moment, the dancer begins making his way slowly towards the audience, gesturing seductively at audience members willing to make consenting eye contact. He makes his way through the seated crowd, yanking the microphone’s lengthy cord along with him, as silhouetted figures in leather jackets, fishnets, and asymmetrical pleated skirts begin to rise behind the string curtain hanging upstage. The dancers drip up from the floor, performing a slow and seductive backup dance to the moving performance of “My Way” happening amidst the audience. The ghostly backup dancers eventually catch each other’s rhythm, pulled by the beat towards the dumpster where they had met their demise. As they reach the dumpster, lights around them begin pulsing and shifting colors, creating a mini dumpster dance club placed in jarring contrast to the oblivious singer who has returned to the table for the song’s grand finale. He sings the penultimate line “and through it all, I took the fall” and the dumpster dancers drop, returned suddenly to a haunting motionless tableau as their bodies drape haphazardly over the dumpster’s edges. The final line “and did it my way” is cut off as the ceiling fan drops dramatically, silvery streamers flying through the air before a blackout consumes the stage amidst a deluge of crashes and bangs and metallic snapping sounds that bring a grisly death to the once powerful figure.



While *Big Trouble* satirized the capitalist and heteronormative codes of politeness and professionalism in mid-century, post-World War II America, I was equally interested in the subcultures of the time, imagining death as a symbol for transformation, transition, and trans and queer becoming. I wanted the resurrection of the cast, rather than abandoning the masculinity that



structured the show, to push it further, revealing how masculinity was already being questioned and destabilized in the 1960s. This was happening in a plethora of ways, from the birth of disco and underground drag balls to mohawk-clad proto-punks and the burly butches of early leather dyke culture. Masculinity was being stretched, stylized, and reimagined across a range of underground and emerging cultural spaces even as red-scare era paranoia dictated mainstream gender politics and the ways that masculinity was being expressed in popular media.

For the final number of *Big Trouble*, I took specific inspiration from the hyper-



masculinized drawings of Tom of Finland (Touko Valio Laaksonen), where queer eroticism co-opted World War II-era male fitness iconography. First published in 1957 in *Physique Pictorial*, Touko Valio Laaksonen's work stages masculinity as both performance and fantasy, eroticizing the ways men construct their appearance for one another while remaining unmistakably queer at a time of intense surveillance and repression. Tom of Finland's hyper-stylized depictions of queer desire have had a lasting

influence on contemporary queer artists like tattooist and visual artist Mel Perrault who has adopted Finland's art style but rearranged it to portray expansive sapphic identities and desire. As we brought this tough, leather-clad world onto the performers' bodies, we traced its evolution into present-day leatherwear, kinkwear, and alternative queer fashion, where those biker-coded fantasies continue to live, shift, and serve new queer purposes.



In collaboration with costume designer Anna Sorrentino (she/her), we translated these ideas into a visual arc across the show. The opening sections leaned into rigid, legible forms of masculinity with white button-down shirts, neat ties, and stiflingly bland suits that could have been worn by faithful Mormon “priesthood holders,” ladder-climbing corporate executives, or even power-hungry government officials. The final section disrupted and expanded those codes as each dancer drew from their own gender fantasies, assembling looks that blended masculine

and feminine elements into something more fluid, excessive, and personal. Rather than shedding masculinity entirely, the performers transformed into heightened, self-authored figures, each dancer becoming their own personalized Tom of Finland character.

Across all aspects of the design process, though, it was important to me that queerness was not just implied but explicitly named as we sought ways to heighten *Big Trouble's* absurdist brand of campy comedy. From outrageously long beards and tangled microphone cords to cartoonishly drawn-out sound effects and ridiculously bedazzled weapons, many of the most successful design choices emerged when collaborators embraced tackiness and excess to subvert the timing, pacing, and expectations of theatrical realism. These minute shifts, rather than superfluous, expanded and became central to our understanding of the show's unique language as we continuously found new elements to exaggerate and new risks to take.

One way that this campy excess showed up was in scenic designer Bridgette Tran's (she/her) incorporation of silvery tinsel throughout the set. While much of the set leaned into the warm browns and earth tones of mid-century furnishings, Tran offset this predictability with splashes of sparkle. A glittering black fabric covered the dumpster, turning it from trash to centerpiece. Shimmering strands of metallic streamers hung from the ceiling fan and heightened the drama of its fall. And a potted tinsel tree stood in the corner upstage left, breaking up the muted set with a surprising pop of frivolity.

Managing and coordinating the chaos of the show, while daunting at first, became the richest and most collaborative when we were able to find a collective rhythmic understanding of the show's pacing. Before being physically in the theater together, many designers and faculty were confused about the timing and order of events for the climactic fall of the ceiling fan.

However, once we were in the space and working with the actual physical limitations of the fan itself, I was able to work with sound designer Kiefer Cure (he/him) and lighting designer Mariah Faulkner (she/her) to problem solve together how to use the fan's choreographic arc to build the underlying tension and looming violence that we were craving during Zoe's "My Way" solo. We similarly explored these kinds of carefully landed punctuations in the coordination of crashing sound effects with dancers' dramatic dumpster-bound deaths. Once Cure had built a landscape of noises that we were interested in, from traditional bangs and crashes to clown horns and startled cat meows, we began exploring how long those sounds could continue while staying funny and holding the audience's attention. After pushing this exploration to the extreme, we found a deliciously outrageous satisfaction in letting the dumpster noises grow longer and longer with each death until Zoe's final death rang out absurdly longer than the others, the sounds growing more and more ridiculous and traveling farther and farther from realism. This gave a finality and punctuated climax to Zoe's death, but it also gave time for our trusty stagehand to sprint onstage and place the broken fan on top of Zoe before the eerie side-lighting of the final scene illuminated her crushed form. In this way, carefully and specifically exaggerated design choices were essential to the successful delivery of *Big Trouble*'s off-kilter humor and jarringly violent social critique. Rhythmic and visual excess guided sonic, scenic, prop, and lighting choices in order to heighten the show's somatic resonance and transport the audience more viscerally into *Big Trouble*'s world of queerness, subversion, and oddity.

While I worked closely with designers to curate the specific campy excess of *Big Trouble*, some of the show's most exciting additions arose from miscommunication, on-the-fly improvisation, and what often felt like failures. The Einstein-esque mask that Zoe wore throughout the show was far from the Lyndon B. Johnson character I had originally imagined for

her. The first mask that the show's costume designer Anna Sorrentino ordered had protruding chalky white teeth, smooth latex hair, and an eerie grin. We immediately knew that it was too intensely intimidating to ride the careful balance of humor and tragedy guiding the rest of the show. The next mask that Anna ordered mysteriously never arrived, even after emails that it had been shipped and delivered, leaving us uncertain until the very last-minute what kind of mask would make it to the final version of the show. The final mask arrived just in time and though it was similarly marketed as a Lyndon B. Johnson mask, it arrived with fluffy white hair, misaligned eyebrows, and almost zero resemblance to the US President we had been hoping to satirize. However, the mask's ambiguity made it even funnier and more unsettling than I had imagined, the fluffiness of the mask's poorly sewn hair adding a silliness and whimsy to the dark, terrifying actions of Zoe's character. Another generative moment of failure came from the bubble guns' delayed and unreliable output. The bubble guns' "failure to launch" became ideal fodder for situational comedy as improvised reactions and comedic negotiations helped dancers find innovative ways to navigate the bubble guns' shifting temperament with each show. Dancers reimagined struggling bubble guns as hand fans and judicious gavels, miming and overacting their attempts to get the bubble guns working as their unscripted reactions kept the audience laughing and interacting with the show. Although these snafus required creative problem solving and reactive readiness, they brought a lived-in vitality to the show, revealing how camp can transform "failures" into bold choices, risky solutions, and rewarding audience reactions. It reminded me that camp doesn't land *despite* failures but *because* of them, as bodies marked as "failures" in normative social spaces use those so-called failures to create fantastical and deeply resonant performances in subversive underground spaces to audiences full of similarly marginalized failure-marked bodies.

As we began bringing *Big Trouble* from the studio to the stage, it became clear that Zoe's "My Way" solo, while powerful and stunningly delivered, was pulling focus onto her rather than the collective journey of the dancers that I had been aiming to highlight. It made her solo feel completely separate from and unrelated to the queer resurrection of the other dancers. During the long days of tech week, I often found myself joining the rest of the cast in a slow sexy back up dance that contrasted Zoe's solo with such sultry comedy that we found ourselves trying new moves just to get a laugh from one another. As we danced along, we realized that our playful explorations held the missing link between Zoe's solo and the show's finale. The pieces fell easily into place for the addition of our ghostly "dance of the dead" as lighting designer Mariah Faulkner added pulsing side lights that exaggerated our sensual movements. Scenic designer Bridgette Tran had added a string curtain to frame the set which in the context of our zombie dance registered as a symbol for the veil between life and death and helped the dumpster read as our transformative life-changing and life-queering portal. Finally, the added moment became a smooth transition to the next section so that we didn't have to set up in the dark for the finale. In this convergence, the dancers' resurrection became not just a narrative solution, but a visual and choreographic assertion of queer persistence: a refusal to disappear, even in the face of violence and fear. Coming from a stripped-down choreographic practice, often with limited production support, the team behind the realization of *Big Trouble* helped me understand how reciprocal relationships between design elements and physicalized choreography can birth radical discovery and inspiration beyond what I could have created through movement alone. Ultimately, the addition of backup dancers to Zoe's solo allowed the show to flow seamlessly from one section to the next and pushed all involved in the show's creation to find deeper connections, metaphors, and meaning within the piece.

While queerness and queer studies were central to the structuring and rehearsal process of *Big Trouble*, they also offer a catalytic framework for both analyzing specific movement choices within the structural norms influencing them and building choreographic worlds that bend, subvert, and reimagine traditional gender, movement, and even dance norms. Through this lens, movement can be read in relation to its gendered and sociopolitical conditions and improvisation can become a site for personal physicalized storytelling, experimental social critique, and hierarchy-defying collective creation. Even a seemingly simple prompt like “move like yourself” begins to unravel under this framework: How have you been taught to move? Where does that training feel comfortable and where does it produce tension or frustration within your body? Reframing this prompt during the creation of *Big Trouble*, I often asked dancers to pursue pleasure and indulgence while performing a movement, asking them to adapt it in ways that felt good in that current moment and making space for those adaptations to shift. As I’ve settled into my values as a choreographer, I’ve learned that it’s important to me to prioritize sensation, affect, and embodied buy-in over the exact replication of steps. This approach enacts a queer choreographic methodology by privileging pleasure, agency, and flux over discipline and sameness. It unsettles and resists the heteropatriarchal assumptions of repeatability, competition, and abnegation that undergird much of traditional proscenium dance-making. And most of all, this method of making makes me feel like myself by facilitating connection and community with my collaborators instead of tension and a hierarchical sense of governance.

When I began my graduate studies at the University of Maryland, I had an interest in the history of underground ballroom dance forms like voguing and waacking, but I felt a disconnect between my own lived queer experience and the queer modes of moving that I was studying. I was looking fruitlessly for a specific movement style or genre equivalent to voguing and

waacking that represented sapphic subcultures. While drag king performances functioned as a form of sapphic movement that I could study, analyze, and participate in, ultimately my choreographic process was impacted the most by the realization that queerness had long been coloring not only my personal dance journey but the choreographic choices of experimental dance makers and practitioners.

Rather than uncovering a secret sapphic dance genre that I could learn or a single gesture that universally read as “lesbian,” I discovered that queerness, even when suppressed, has existed in the subtle deviations, resistances, and excesses within and alongside dominant movement vocabularies. While heteronormative frameworks often shape how movement is read and valued, they have never been able to fully contain the complex multi-dimensional systems of communication that dance facilitates. Dance’s capacity for abstraction, non-normative embodiment, and relational exchange reveals queerness not as a category imposed onto choreography or a lens through which to read a dance work, but as a system of values that has always animated it, despite the best efforts of tradition-oriented sponsors, arbiters, and institutions. Queerness has facilitated ungovernable stylizations born out of ephemeral performer-audience feedback, it has produced radically intoxicating choreographies that expand the possibilities of how bodies can move, and it has organized the nonlinear grammarless communication of kinesthetic empathy. Queerness lives in scrawling font defiantly crowded along the margins of choreographers’ best attempts at normative choreographies, leaving subtle annotations that imply bodies desiring to move and dance beyond the socially-regulated and politically-motivated scripts of identity performance under heteropatriarchy.

Through my research, queerness has grown beyond a gender identity or a sexual orientation into a broader commitment to unlearning the restrictive values of heteronormative

power structures and to devising creative strategies that undermine those values across dance classes, rehearsals, and performances. One of those strategies that I didn't always have the language to call "queer," is the way that my choreography shifts fluidly between dance and theater, bending the norms and expectations of both genres. While my choreographic process shares clear affinities with devised theater, particularly in its reliance on performer-generated material and collaborative authorship, movement remains my primary site of meaning-making, even as character, narrative, and theatricality emerge alongside and within it. What distinguishes this process for me is not simply that material is devised, but how it is generated: through the lived identities, instincts, and physical vocabularies of the performers themselves. In this way, the work sits in a productive tension between dance and theater, where "character" is neither fully fictional nor entirely autobiographical, but something constructed through exaggeration, indulgence, collaboration, and play.

Within this framework, consent is an essential choreographic value and one that we approached and understood through queer conceptions of identity. Queer performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz (hi/him/él) says, "to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly 'line up.'" In this way the performance of queer identities undermines traditional conceptions of identity and allows us to expand our understanding of how consent can operate within devised performance art to allow for performers' shifting needs, moods, identities, and comfortability in order to build spaces of safe exploration and honest community. While queer studies is not the only or first academic discipline to discuss the importance of consent, queer practices and studies offer a language for thinking more rigorously about how we ask performers to draw from their own

experiences, desires, and identities without collapsing the boundary between self and performance.

Consensual rehearsal environments allow for an ongoing negotiation of comfort, vulnerability, and authorship so that dancers are not only contributors of movement but active agents in shaping how their bodies and stories are represented. This attention to consent rather than limiting the work enables a deeper specificity and trust, allowing for expansive risk-taking and deeply invested performances. The result is a process in which collaboration is grounded in mutual care, shared ownership, and an understanding of performance as a space where agency is continuously asserted and redefined. This consent-driven framework of trust and mutual awareness also allows failure and instability to become sites of possibility rather than exposure, keeping the work alive, responsive, and accountable to the bodies that are creating it. This kind of failure-based vulnerability is a practice that necessitates deep trust and honest communication. It takes time, consistency, and intention. Dancers' ability to fail bravely and fabulously is directly linked to how safe and supported they feel by their collaborators and fellow dancers.

I'm interested in exploring contradiction not only within the work, but within the performers themselves as consent becomes not a one-time agreement but an ongoing negotiation between the diverging opinions, needs, and identities of the bodies in the room. This practice makes room for ambiguity, for not knowing, and for the breakdown of coherence that often accompanies both queer experience and collaborative creation. Rather than smoothing over these moments, I am interested in how they can be held, extended, and made productive. How a failed prop, an awkward interaction, or a fragmented character can open new pathways for meaning and connection. This kind of openness requires clear and intentional communication as performers decide how they want to participate in that messiness, making choices about what

they reveal, exaggerate, and what they withhold. While I was interested in commenting on masculine identities within *Big Trouble*, it was important to me that each dancer had individual control over how they engaged with that masculinity, drawing on their own lived experiences within the gender hierarchies of heteropatriarchy. Rather than clearly assigning a way or method in which masculinity was to be performed, I drew on dancers' individual conceptions of masculinity, allowing them to exaggerate the masculine physicalities that they felt comfortable embodying. There were no strict rules on what could or couldn't be considered "masculine." Instead, we shaped our own uniquely queer construction of masculinity through the identities, interests, and bodies involved in the rehearsal process.

This practice of rooting physicality in individual identity is one that I learned from watching and participating in drag king shows and drag open sets. I've seen drag kings that are flamboyant and outrageous, I've seen drag kings that are aloof and subtly sexy, I've seen raunchy drag kings and prudish drag kings, drag kings that have built their chiseled physiques at the gym, and drag kings in saggy oversized muscle suits. While there are movement styles that drag performers often lean on, like burlesque, musical theater, and clowning, each and every performer is pulling not from some codified vocabulary or strict drag rule book, but from their lived experiences, training, and personal gender fantasies. Drag performances are a fascinating conversation between the performer's identity, their perception of their audience's interests, and the actual real time interactions between performer and audience that give the performer feedback on what elements of their performance their audiences resonate with. In the same way that queer identities take form through felt experience *and* the pleasure of those experiences resonating with other queer individuals, drag personas emerge from the intersections of performer preferences *and* audience reactions. I argue that the physicalities and movement

semiotics of both drag performances and queer identities are impacted not by strict social coding, but by the interactions of internal and external matrices of queer desire.

Ultimately, this thesis asserts the value of drag king performance and the physical comedy they often utilize as a powerful mode of queer expression and critique. By exaggerating, rearranging, and redefining masculinity, drag goes beyond parodying or mimicking dominant structures. Instead, it exposes their limitations and redistributes their power, offering expansive new frameworks for rethinking identity, consent, and collective creation. In *Big Trouble*, masculinity became a site of failure, play, fantasy, and transformation, revealing its permeability rather than its essentialism. Through humor, collaboration, and embodied experimentation, the work offered a vision of queer empowerment grounded not in control or certainty, but in the freedom of self-authorship and the pleasure of inter-personal discovery. Queer studies and queer conceptions of identity performance offer vital tools for expansive dance analysis and ethical, consensual co-creation. And drag king comedy exists not only as a niche experimental form of queer performance art, but as an inherently political practice that reclaims masculinity as a space for queer possibility, collective joy, and collaborative transformation.

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