

## ABSTRACT

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Directed By: Sharon Mansur, Associate Professor, Dance

This paper is a means of documenting my MFA dance thesis project, *Projects for the Living*, including insights into the inception, research phase, choreographic process, design, collaborations, and final performances. Additionally, this document provides a look into the lasting questions this project has brought up for me, as well as thoughts on its place within the context of my full three years as a graduate student of dance at the University of Maryland, and how it has affected me overall as a student, educator, artist, and simply as a human being.

PROJECTS FOR THE LIVING

By

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University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
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## Chapter 1: A Narrative Tapestry of the Event

*I enter a large building, a center for performing arts. The exterior is brick, glass, and metal with clean lines and right angles. I open one of six heavy metal doors to reveal an antechamber, blank and airless with scratchy grey-blue rugs underfoot to encourage tidiness. I cannot wait to get through the next set of heavy doors, to pass through this stale mouth of the building and into its belly. Once inside, the sheer emptiness of space swallows me in the main atrium of the building. The air is cool, pumped from secret, unseen and unheard air conditioners. The ceiling seems a mile away from me, white and laced with pipes and bars with the night sky peeping through slivers of skylights, shining dark against the pristine white of the building's interior. The terrain is outfitted with sets of rolling stairs, brass-colored railings, hard wooden benches, and trash receptacles. This belly of the building branches off to several theater spaces, demarcated with white lettering above doorways along the borders of the space. My ticket points me toward the Kogod Theatre.*

*When my eyes fall upon the bright white letters indicating the correct theatre, I notice other people gathered and nervously chatting in front of the entrance. They seem to be waiting for the same show. An usher sees me from behind the shoulder of another patron. "Do you have a Mason jar?" she asks. Those are certainly not the words one expects to hear from a ticket taker at a dance performance.*

*The usher brings me a jar, not unlike one I would have used to capture lightning bugs as a child. Inside there is an aged, rectangular piece of paper that requests that I pay a toll before entering the performance. It asks for one part of my bluest memory. I scribble with the provided pencil: "My father's eyes, tired, overworked, on the*

*Shenandoah River.” Just as I drop the memory and pencil back into the jar, a loud and excited man comes bounding into the lobby with a microphone to greet us. He is our host, here to give us some guidance through the performance we are about to experience, in which we must help him rebuild the machine he has created for remembering. His nature is kind and welcoming, yet he seemed troubled in a way I cannot quite touch. He looks well put together in his dress shirt, trousers, and suspenders until my eyes reach his bare feet, making for an incomplete outfit, much like his incomplete memory machine. His eyes are desperate and entreating.*

*He directs us to look on the back of our memory paper to find a number 1, 2, or 3 stamped in red ink, which divides our audience into groups to explore separate chambers within the performance space. I follow instructions to enter the theatre with other members of group 2. As soon as the door is opened, I am hit with a smoky, salty fragrance, giving the room a cool and earthy feeling. The theatre is black and dim in comparison to the lobby. The chamber is shaped like a vast “L,” with risers set against two walls and a few trunks littering the space. At one of these trunks sits a male performer, hands trailing through the trunk’s contents, dirt. Soon, he begins to dig, and with such purpose that I imagine he must be searching for something important. A treasure?*

*I hear the next dancer before I see her. She is bending, curving, exploring her body while keys fall from perches on her shoulders, thighs, back, and within her hair. They hit the floor like rainfall with loud clangs and bangs. The host tells us that we are to collect earth and metal to continue. As I move toward the key closest to me, the dancer*

*gets to it first, placing it back in her hair. I take a different key and then line up to collect some dirt.*

*Then the man says to no one in particular, "My creatures are cold. Will you build them each a fire?" While I look around in confusion, some other audience members seem to have found sticks, tucked away in one of the trunks. Gathering sticks and feeling the grit of dirt on my hands, I am reminded of playing outside as a child and of camping trips. Once the sticks are piled high enough in front of their crouching figures, the "creatures" come to life. They move through the space like animals, low to the ground, darting in and out of shadows, freezing, always staying close to each other. I feel sorry for them. There is such desperateness in their movements that they seem trapped.*

*The host speaks again, walking over to a trunk and taking out a stone. He tells us to make a wish, whispering some words into the rock he holds, and then throws it into the well. The well is made out of a hanging sheet with a semicircle cut out of it, a light shining beneath like the reflection of moonlight on water's surface. As we throw our stones, I see feet scuttling across the floor on the other side of the sheer fabric divider, chasing after the rolling rock. Someone in another chamber is gathering our wishing stones. The creatures begin their dance again, melting down the risers like a river that spills onto the floor. They scurry to their fire piles and collect the sticks in their arms. They run wildly through the chamber, scattering the sticks all over the ground as they go. Just when they are down to their last two branches, a bell sounds and we are directed to move on to the next chamber.*

*As I turn to leave this spot of warmth and earth, I see that we are being directed into the wishing well. This area is much darker, and as my eyes adjust our group is*

*directed down a long hallway to a wider opening around the corner. My eyes are immediately drawn to several light bulbs hanging at different heights, some of them at odd heights, way too low to the ground. As they begin to randomly light up and swing with passersby I follow their cones of light to trace the shadows of surrounding objects. I begin lightly swinging them myself to make the shadows move. The darkness and emptiness of the space make it feel like a slightly scary place, eliciting a hollow feeling in my gut. I think to myself that I would not like to be here alone.*

*A woman clad in a decaying black dress stands at the far end of the chamber, tearing long swaths of paper from the surface of a table. Under the table, I see the sprawled forms of two performers. While she tears the paper and the lights flicker on and off around us, the two performers flinch, extending their legs out from under the table and then sucking them back in. The woman in black turns to reveal a sign to us: Find the red key. As I and those around me fish through the contents of our jars in search of our keys collected from the previous chamber, I feel like I am missing something. Our keys are just the color of metal.*

*The woman in black disappears for a short time and then reappears, now holding a key like ours, not red. She places it upon the bare back of one of the now crouched and still dancers. She silently motions for us to do the same. When each dancer has a small patch of keys upon their bare backs, they begin to breathe. I find myself with breath held as I observe the two women's backs slowly rising and falling, their ribcages expanding and contracting. Their exposed backs expand like balloons ready to pop, and then they relax, exhaling a quick and forceful sigh and collapsing back into themselves. The image*

*is oddly inhuman. They come to a seated position with their backs to us still with their heads ducked under the table, appearing almost headless.*

*When they finally emerge from their hiding place, spilling onto the floor back and forth, I notice for the first time that these women are blindfolded. They wear simple dresses that show a lot of skin on the arms, legs, and back. Their skin colors are beautiful next to each other, one light and one dark. They move as one, searching and feeling around in the darkness. It is almost graceful, but also there is something slightly off. Next they are standing and moving the table toward us. I must quickly get up from my seat on the floor and clear the way as they move the table to the opposite wall of the chamber. The two performers then “look” back at us and beckon us to follow them back down the long and dark hallway through which we entered this chamber. As I follow the crowd, I notice an upright piano near the curtains that I had not seen upon my entry. One of the piano keys is painted red.*

*The woman in black has somehow reappeared at the far end of the hallway. She is on the floor in a square of light. Her body weight is giving into the ground so much through her movements, that the ground seems more like water. I see that the light is actually in motion, playing a projection of moving images evoking memories. I imagine her to be swimming through the memories. Soon, stones begin to sprawl into her space from the earth chamber, and she eagerly collects and arranges the wishing stones in the pool of light. It seems as though there is a method to her arrangement, as she deliberately forms lines, filling in the holes when someone from my group takes one. She then rises and beckons us to fill the length of the hallway and line up along the opposing walls, creating a passageway. Some people she directs to move with hand signals, but others*

*she takes by the shoulders and guides them to a new place. I find myself yearning for that connection, but I am not chosen.*

*The blindfolded women resume their dance, darting boldly forward or backward down the passageway. Sometimes, they get very near the audience lined up at the wall and slowly trace their hands up the arm and onto the shoulder of the closest person. The second time this happens, I am the recipient of this touch, and I am struck by the tenderness and femininity of it. As they continue their daring, sightless dance, I find myself concerned for their safety at times. Just as one dancer runs with force and speed from one end of the hallway into the arms of the other, the bell sounds again and we must move to the next chamber.*

*The last chamber has an immediately familiar yet indistinguishable smell and taste for me. Books upon books litter the floor and shelves as well as other old trinkets and furniture that seem to have escaped past centuries. This place feels lived in, a place where I would have loved to play as a child. While I rummage through the drawers and shelves, my mind recalls small details of my grandmother and the antique shop she used to own. Within the center of the array of scattered books lies a female performer on the floor, on her belly with body bent and limbs splayed, her figure outlined by stones. Other performers enter the space and bring us one-by-one to stand upon a book. Once we are all arranged on our book islands, the dancer on the floor begins to move the rocks, first softly and then with large violent sweeps that fling the rocks across the floor. The sound is chunky.*

*Next another female performer begins walking around the room with an open cigar box, offering audience members rocks in exchange for our memory papers that we*

*filled out in the lobby. I pick a smooth, round, grey rock and she shakes her head at me. Instead she indicates a small, dark, and irregularly shaped rock with a stark white stripe running diagonally through it. We are directed to stand around an old baby grand piano, where another performer has a collection of our memories. She picks through them fastidiously like she would a hand of cards in a game of poker. She arranges them on the piano's surface with a sense of particularity, just like the woman with the wishing stones. She forcefully pushes one memory aside that she does not like, ducking under the piano to hide from its contents. She finishes by trying to grasp all of the memories at once but cannot. There are too many.*

*Next, a male and female performer burst through the space, wielding their bodies in whipping, flying, swirling movements across the space of the chamber and out through the curtains. The remaining two performers beckon us to follow them into this much smaller area where we crowd around a curtain. Two pairs of feet show from the small gap left at the bottom of the curtain, one male, one female. The moment between them begins softly and then quickly shifts into a struggle. The feet tell me that the two bodies are pushing and knocking into one another in an attempt to gain ground. Then, suddenly, her feet are arrested in midair, her whole body lifted from the ground. The bell sounds, and the two dancers crumple to the floor behind the curtain, their upper bodies spilling out from under the curtain toward us.*

*Next we are all directed wordlessly by the performers to take a spot at one of the hanging curtains. We all get a grip on the fabric and with one satisfying yank, the dividers come down revealing an open and more connected space. The host and the woman in black are seated at the baby grand piano together, talking, laughing, and*

*playing a song. The space seems to have changed, the air shifted. I hear genuine laughs and mistakes in playful tones. The music triggers a sense of bond, family, and home. This is a happy moment in a sea of dark, cold, and deep sadness. The feeling of the whole audience forming a circle around and spying into this living room is like a chance to peek into the past, gratefully.*

*Over time a dance for two unfolds in familiar places throughout the chambers I have already visited. We all shift through the space with the story. When the story rises and falls, so do we, holding onto our Mason jars throughout, never letting go of that container where memory and substance reside, just as he can never let go. The man speaks about memories while the movements of their life together spill out into the darkness of the space, lighting it up. The connections between their bodies, every curve, every placement of hand or foot in movement and stillness feels like it is trying to capture the fleeting beauty of living, breathing, being.*

*Soon there is a shift, and the man speaks of a darkness. That darkness builds in momentum while she retreats into the far reaches of the space and soon fades away altogether. He reaches into the darkness, and then he is alone again. He says, "That's it. She's gone. I can't remember anymore." And then there is stillness. That weight of failure, that I failed to help him, has a power over me for a moment. I am overcome with sadness. I feel empty like him. He says, "We'll try again tomorrow," and leaves the room, leaving his failed machine, and one by one the lights in the space go out until darkness swallows us.*

This description of my thesis performance, *Projects for the Living*, was woven together from various audience accounts and reactions to create one narrative tapestry. I send my deepest thanks to Emily Ames, Kristin Castaneda, Monique Dalton, Adriane Fang, DeeDee Johnson, Jessie Laurita-Spanglet, Shanna Lim, Nikki Lust, Alison Lynch, David Neveu, Terri Neveu, Cassidy Petrigac, Hillary Templeton, and Gabrielle Welsh. With their kind consent, I chose to present a description of my work through their eyes, ears, hands, minds, and hearts, with some details filled in by me. This somewhat unorthodox approach seemed more appropriate to me than providing only my own description as the creator of the work. I was not interested in using any sort of omnipotent point-of-view to define what *Projects for the Living* was. The work belongs to those who have experienced it, and so I wanted to provide an opportunity for this vital perspective to be heard within my documentation of the project.

## Chapter 2: Why Does Dance Matter?

When I began my second year of graduate studies at the University of Maryland, I was coming back from one of the most magical summers of my life. Whenever my husband, Kevin, and I are fortunate enough to experience a summer like this one, we name it an Awesome Summer, after the inaugural Awesome Summer 2005 in which we started seeing each other. Dating that first Awesome Summer quickly turned into the richest and most intimate friendship I had ever known, as we traveled, created art together, and learned and discovered each other's histories and mysteries with a hungry joy. To be considered for Awesome Summer status, the summer in question must provide multiple opportunities for us to grow as artists and as people, reminding us of what we love about our chosen crafts, and reigniting passion for our lives as individuals and as partners.

Awesome Summer 2013 unquestionably fit the bill, and each priceless experience that summer directly fed into my coming thesis project. The summer's lineup began with a four-day foray into art and music for both Kevin and me, at the Solid Sound Festival on the Massachusetts Contemporary Museum of Art (MASS MoCA) grounds. Here we hungrily gobbled up the work of visual artists new to us and found ourselves caught up in the air of artistic collaboration.

Next, we parted ways as I traveled far south to my alma mater, the University of Florida, to spend an entire month as a student at Swamp Dance Fest, my very first summer dance camp. I danced with and learned from hugely inspirational dance artists Tzveta Kassabova, Joshua Bisset, Laura Quattrocchi, Lisa Race, and David Dorfman. I also reunited with a friend from my days as an undergraduate with whom I had lost

touch, Aisha Alami. She is an old, wise soul, the freest of spirits I have ever known and been fortunate enough to call a friend. Spending a month with her was a precious gift of renewal and a chance to open my horizons, full of impromptu dance explorations and deep discussions on art and its role in life and the world-at-large.

Lastly, I toured to sleepy Chatham, New York, with PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER, where the company spent the days creating site-specific dance in the small but friendly town. I left rehearsals a little dirty and scraped up but with an honest smile on my face, like when I came home from playing outside as a child. To me, these are ideal work conditions, unlike the barren space of an indoor dance studio. I felt truly happy about dancing, excited to go to work every day. (See Figures 1-3.)

I returned to my life as a graduate student at the University of Maryland rejuvenated, reborn, a new person with new zeal. I felt that I had fallen back in love with dancing, or perhaps had truly fallen in love with it for the first time. I brimmed with this love in all of my classes that first week. That is one reason why I find it surprising that I was so befuddled when asked this question in dance faculty Sharon Mansur's *Choreographic Project* course: "Why does dance matter?" In fact, this four-word question halted me in my tracks. It rudely tripped me and sent me sprawling awkwardly to the ground.

Within the first few days of school, Sharon brought in writing by her friend/collaborator, Brooklyn-based dance artist Maré Hieronimus. In a blog post from September 2013, Maré shared her own response to this challenging inquiry, which she encountered as a participant in the Cultivate Dance Festival in New Hampshire. I was deep in admiration of Maré's articulate, multi-layered response which included

meditations on the importance of a shift from the linear/logical mind “to the non-linear, intuitive and non-verbal realm of the dancing body,” and the potential for dance “to help open an internal space” for focus on the group rather than the individual, leading to the sense of an “earth community” (Hieronimus). Then Sharon spun the question on us. I was flummoxed not only by the question but perhaps more deeply by my own baffled reaction to it. What an impossible question to answer! But shouldn’t I be able to answer it?

Here are my first attempts at an answer that I scrawled down that day:

Is this a question I should answer on a personal level? Or on the global level?  
I’m not sure I can answer any way but personally.  
Dance exists for me to connect me to: my body, the ground, joy and pain, the moment of now, others.  
We all have bodies. We all move.  
It connects us with our insides, our guts. With what makes us human.  
Dance does not give answers. Understanding is not a requirement.  
Movement is change. Can movement create change?

At the time, I was dissatisfied with these mere seedlings of ideas. Hindsight has now allowed me the chance to recognize in each of those seeds the different strands of my thesis project into which they eventually grew. My performance project was multi-layered and complex, but underneath that complexity lies the skeletal structure formed by my first attempt to answer the question: “Why does dance matter?”

In Fall 2013, this question began to haunt me. It somehow shook me from the dreamy honeymoon of my newfound love for dancing. The question of dance mattering quickly mutated for me into a concern for making dance matter to everyone. I began to try to solve the question in a way that I thought might satisfy people who had little to no connection to the world of dance. Why would dance matter to my father or my sister, both engineers?

I decided to ask a group of students who were not majoring in dance, signed up for fellow dance graduate student Stephanie Miracle's *Introduction to Dance* course. As their substitute teacher, I asked them to jot down some thoughts on the subject to turn in to me in the last few minutes on their first day of class. The results were mostly devastating to me in my fragile state of existential crisis. Perhaps it was a poor time to pose the question to them. One student's response stood out to me among the rest. He proffered that perhaps dance does not matter, but that it had the potential to matter more. I was inspired by this intriguing and intelligent answer and excitedly brought it up in conversation with other dance graduate students, dance faculty, and my husband that week.

Alas, upon Stephanie's return I learned that this student had dropped the class a few days later. He gave up on dance. I was profoundly impacted by this student's choice to leave a class that I did not even teach. It stung because this promising student decided to drop it based on the two classes that I taught. It hurt even more because I saw the potential for his perspective to shift throughout the course of the class. It prompted in me somewhat of a desperate experiment, in which I began to ask this question and gather the answers of almost everyone I met. Each and every guest artist that passed through the Clarice heard the question from me. I asked fellow graduate and doctoral students, undergraduate dance majors, and faculty. I even expanded into theatre, asking actors and directors why they felt theatre mattered.

I made a sort of collection of these answers, strewn across several notebooks, as the opportunity to ask the question often presented itself when I had differing materials at hand. I am not entirely sure if there was ever an explicit purpose for this collection. I

would occasionally revisit it when asked to develop an artist statement, but I would not say that my life was changed by the content of individual responses. Perhaps the actual act of sharing the weight of this difficult question was the purpose. I found it reassuring when other dance artists, some far more seasoned than myself, were momentarily stumped by the question as well. And I found further comfort in the fact that everyone eventually had some reply to offer, and while most answers shared some basic similarities, there was also great diversity among them. I feel now that endeavoring to collect these personal stories of why dance matters served to give me courage to embark upon my thesis journey, developing my own diverse reasons that dance matters to me.

## Chapter 3: The Stew Pot

Throughout Fall 2013, the semester in which I was to craft and present my thesis proposal, it was clear to me that my cohorts had relatively stronger or more developed ideas about their projects than I did for mine. Sometimes I felt like I was behind (behind schedule, behind the pack, left behind), making me slightly nervous, but it was important to me that I allow myself to remain open. I did not want to simply pick a topic and make a dance about it.

I began to think of my thesis project as a sort of catchall container for my numerous interests and passions at the time. Some of the contents of this creativity bucket were consciously gathered, analyzed, and placed within, while others slipped from my subconscious and fell in when I was not paying close attention. I gather that this is the way most creative journeys begin, but it was a revolutionary idea for me. I had spent my entire creative career until then believing that all of my work was supposed to be an original manifestation. Of course, I recognize now that this thought that somehow solidified in my mind into a law of creativity is ludicrous.

I voraciously read author and artist Austin Kleon's *Steal Like an Artist* that semester, introduced to me by cohort Nicole McClam. In his book, Kleon assured me that not only was it merely acceptable for me to "steal" from other artists, but that, in truth, this is what all artists do and this is the way art is made! What a relief! I found great comfort in his recounting of writer Jonathan Lethem's take on the reality of originality: "...when people call something original, nine out of ten times they just don't know the references or the original sources involved" (Kleon 7). I was given a free pass to allow myself to be inspired, to open the floodgates and let the influences come flowing in. The

art would come in the way that this collection of influences would mix around inside of me, break down into smaller parts, combine here and there, and then reconstruct new whole ideas. I was in for my first messy creative process, and it was exhilarating!

#### Sol LeWitt

The works of visual artist Sol LeWitt, especially his wall drawings, were an unconscious addition to my thesis stew pot. I discovered his work during Awesome Summer 2013 at MASS MoCA, where several of his wall drawings filled a massive maze of a gallery. These works are, at the most basic level, explorations of lines in 2-dimensional space, geometrical organization, and repeating patterns. While I am sure I would not have been able to put words to it at the time, I believe I was drawn to the ways in which simplicity builds upon simplicity exponentially in his work. Eventually, this process raises what appear to be entire structures of complexity, but if one takes the time to look closely enough, the first threads, the simplest patterns are right there. And then they cannot be unseen. (See Figures 4-7.)

#### Mark Dion

Although it took some time to recognize, the work of conceptual artist Mark Dion, which I also discovered at MASS MoCA, was an influence of which I was more cognizant later in the process. Whenever I visit museums, I am accustomed to being told to step back away from the artwork, even when I am not touching it. That is how close I like to get. Even after I saw other patrons handling the pieces within Dion's *The Octagon Room*, I made sure to ask a docent if touching was truly permitted. I was quite giddy at his affirmative response. *The Octagon Room* is a *kunstkammer*, the German word for a cabinet of curiosities, a room that the art-goer literally enters and is free to explore.

The room was full of objects that had been collected and set to Dion's designed system of organization. These artifacts were mostly mundane, but were made to be of interest or beautiful simply by the artist's act of gathering, organizing, displaying, and sharing. These pieces had a history with Dion, and a history before that even, before he even acquired them. I dug through a drawer of broken and faded china washed up from an ocean on the other side of the world. There were matchboxes from hotels and bars all over the globe, water-stained postcards, and well-loved articles of clothing. There were two drawers labeled "shells," one above the other. The first was filled to the brim with seashells, the next with bullet casings. I laughed about that for days afterward. I enjoyed opening drawers, opening boxes within boxes, and feeling like I had uncovered secrets. Did anyone else dig deep enough to find this? Over time, I began to connect Dion's work with my old love of archaeology. There was something special for me in the studying of artifacts, the remnants, or what is left behind from a life lived, imbued with history and stories. (See Figures 8-11.)

### My Mother's Spiders, Birds, and Trees

Early in the fall, I learned that my mother had a lump in her breast and was being tested for cancer. This led to an emotionally challenging couple of weeks for me, when I was reeling in the unknown. As assignments came up in choreography class, I could not keep my mother out of my mind, and so I stayed open to it in my peculiar way of looking at the world. I was revisited over and over by the image of my mom standing at the windows of her house out in the country of Virginia, observing her spiders, birds, and trees.

These are three entities my mother is utterly fascinated by. She watches them live their lives over time the way that some women watch soap operas or spy on neighbors. When I come to visit, I get to learn about the latest episode with the spider that lives at the kitchen window including the unnerving details of her last meal. Later in the sleepy afternoon, my mother's voice excitedly calls me into her bedroom, where I find her standing at the window with her binoculars. She directs my eye to the cowbirds at the back of their property, which she has clearly been observing for weeks now. She comments on their curious dances and songs, the difference in coloring between males and females, and how amusing it is that the dogs bark at them from a safe distance, from under the tree I named Dog Tree.

We take a walk around their land while she points out how Dog Tree has sprouted odd fruits, how much the tree I planted as a child has grown since I was last there. I note the sadness in her pitch and lurking within the thoughtful pauses she takes when she speaks about the cherry blossom tree that is dying.

To someone who does not know this woman, it all might seem rather trivial, like she should find something more productive to do with her time. But that is precisely why I find it so beautiful, and so important. I was interested in bringing these worlds, the tiny world of spiders and birds, the timeless world of trees, into my dances. How could a dance invite the audience to pay the same sort of rapt and curious attention to these worlds as my mother pays to hers?

### Waldeinsamkeit

Just about the same time I received the glorious news that the lump was benign, I stumbled upon the word *Waldeinsamkeit*. It was from an online list of eleven words in

other languages for which there was no single word to describe in English, the untranslatable (Sanders). The very first word was the German *Waldeinsamkeit*, which roughly translates to the feeling of being alone in the woods. This mysterious fantasy became an obsession of mine. I was intrigued that one word might evoke the myriad possibilities of sensations from this experience. Wouldn't it depend on the person too? If one were to collect descriptions of *Waldeinsamkeit* experiences, perhaps there would be a sense of uniformity to them, as though nature creates a set of standard sensations, but these accounts would surely be dappled with unique and personal differences. These differences were what excited me about the idea, the way that everyone tastes food differently or sees color in a unique way.

As my mother was still often on my mind, I decided to interview my parents to gather these *Waldeinsamkeit* files. My father had just been alone in the woods days before, while my mother was recalling details from memories of her childhood in which she had spent a great deal of time alone in the woods. I specifically asked them to share sensory information with me and notated the details that stood out to me as unique between the two of them:

- breathing in light
- the sound of just one leaf falling in a whole forest of leaves
- the scent of trees, dormant yet alive
- the sense that the trees were moving
- the image of roots coiling through the rock of a mountain
- glittery sound of wind
- smell of green, wood, dirt, water
- Earth silence

There was so much richness to be experienced through the senses with these images, and it was an experiment of mine to bring these sensations into a sort of embodied sensory fantasy. I also believed there was something greater to be experienced

through this reconnection to nature and rediscovery of aloneness. I stumbled upon some of the writings of environmentalist and writer Paul Kingsnorth at this time. I believe he described this suspicion I had best: “Wild loneliness, ringing like a bell. A sense of connection to something far greater than me in a place which is not controlled by my kind and is not in thrall to us. A sense of smallness, from which can come greatness” (Kingsnorth).

Here Kingsnorth touched on two elements that were already important components of what would be my thesis work: scale (the sense of relative smallness or greatness like the spiders, birds, and trees) and giving up control.

Much later, in Fall 2014, I was introduced to Mary Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese*. I was immediately absorbed in its treatment of time, space, and humanness. (For my thoughts on time and space, see Chapter 4: The Proposal Phase – Shaping a Project.) Oliver’s poem felt like the kind of dances I wanted to be making.

*Wild Geese*  
by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.  
(Oliver)

There was something about the juxtaposition of humanness and nature in both the idea of *Waldeinsamkeit* and Oliver's poem. In seeing human and nature side by side, I am reminded that they are of the same world, and made from the same stock. As astrophysicist Carl Sagan said, "We are made of star-stuff," as is the rock, the dirt, the tree, and the animal. And yet, there is such distance. This is what I was striving for, just the simplicity of juxtaposition, putting one in the context of the other, without having to say much about it. I suspected that it would say it all itself.

### Geologic Time

The next evolution of my obsessions was the overlap of the worlds of human and nature, in which the world made by humans was reclaimed by nature. I was haunted by eerie images of another time and place: abandoned dwellings overgrown with gnarled roots and lush greenery; pieces of furniture coated in a thick, undisturbed layer of sooty earth; small metal keys encased in rust, dangling from tattered strings. I was not necessarily interested in post-apocalyptic stories detailing how this imagined world came to this end. All I needed was the feeling of empty loneliness embedded in these artifacts of history and memory, surrounded by the quiet but wild aliveness of nature.

When trying to translate these sensations to human movement in choreography class, I found myself drawn to the ideas of decay and growth. I discovered that the physicalizing of these concepts required a substantial amount of time. I called this glacial time and sometimes even geologic time, referring not only to duration but also the quality of this sort of passing of time. In Sharon's class, we worked with her collaborator, Irish dance artist Nick Bryson on their version of this concept from their performance project *INSERT [ ] HERE*, what they together termed the "just noticeable difference." I

experimented with how much time an audience would allow me to take for one moment of decay or regrowth, daring the audience to see something in a moment where they may normally notice nothing.

In Fall 2013, I was in the midst of Module II of the Laban/Bartenieff Institute for Movement Studies (LIMS) certification program<sup>1</sup>. Developed by German dance and theatre artist Rudolf Von Laban, the Laban Movement Analysis system<sup>2</sup> is a framework from which to observe, experience, and analyze human movement. The basis of the system is pattern recognition, however minute or large-scale that pattern may be. Movement characteristics are observed and described through the four categories of Body, Space, Effort, and Shape. Body descriptors detail what the body is doing. Language related to the Space category is used to describe where the body moves within its container, either abstract or literal. The Effort category details the qualitative characteristics of the movement. Finally, aspects of Shape delineate relationship within the movement.

As a student of both the University of Maryland MFA dance program and LIMS concurrently, I believe that simply saying there has been overlap would be an understatement. The growth and development that I have experienced throughout the past three years is so strongly interwoven between these two programs that separation of the experience of one from the other is impossible. My Laban studies have deeply permeated all that I have seen and experienced as a human being, let alone as a student of dance. Movement is change, over time and through space, and we are all surrounded by it

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the LIMS certification program, refer to their website at <http://www.limsonline.org/>, also listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the parts and applications of Laban Movement Analysis, see *Everybody is a Body*, written by Certified Movement Analysts and my Laban teachers Karen Studd and Laura Cox. Details are listed in the Bibliography.

constantly. It is like my experience with visual artist Sol LeWitt's underlying simple patterns of lines: once my eyes were opened to the ubiquity of change, of movement, of pattern, it could not be unseen.

At the point in the process when I was testing the boundaries of viewer attention span with geologic time, my Laban training asserted its presence in my thesis process for the first time. I was learning about the different ways in which movement qualities or Efforts could combine to create richer, more complex movements. In the Laban system, in order to describe, name, classify, and better understand movement qualities, Effort is broken down into four Factors: Weight, Time, Space, and Flow. Each Factor is further defined by a spectrum between two Elements, one more Indulging, in which the body's energy has more ease, and the other more Condensing, in which the body's energy is constricted, controlled, or built up. (See Appendix A.)

In Effort theory, when two Effort Elements combine within one movement, it forms an Effort State, and when three Effort Elements combine, it creates an Effort Drive. In reality, most movements are indeed combinations of more than one Effort Element, as human movement is complex and rarely occurs with purely one quality. During my study of decay, growth, and geologic time, I gravitated toward Spell Drive, a combination of movements with Weight, Space, and Flow, but with no particular attitude toward Time. A movement in Spell Drive is neither Quick or Sustained, as it has been occurring with no change or accent for so long that one's perception of Time sort of drops off. It conjures images of ghosts floating, people in trances or possessed by spirits, a sense of timelessness. I basically lived in Spell Drive that whole semester. Later in my creative process, I would finally discover my limits for which I was searching in this

timeless state, and I began to incorporate Quick Time as well as more variation in the overall phrasing.

### Andy Goldsworthy

At this point my inspirations and influences began to flow into one another like water. From *Waldeinsamkeit*, I rediscovered visual artist Andy Goldsworthy, to whom dance faculty Sara Pearson introduced me in my first year of graduate studies. In revisiting the documentary *Rivers and Tides* as well as browsing his body of work I was struck by the importance of time, time as growth, as change, as flow. Like me, he also worked in patterns, what he called “obsessive forms.” He spoke about the impermanence of his work, stating that “the very thing that brings the work to life is the thing that will cause its death.” I was drawn to the close relationship between creation and death in his work, and how calmly accepting he was of the inevitably short life span of his pieces.

I was deeply affected by one moment in *Rivers and Tides* in which Goldsworthy had spent hours joining together thistles to create an entire tapestry hanging from a tree. In the span of a few seconds, the whole sheet of thistles shifted in the breeze, shuddered, and then collapsed, raining thistles down upon the artist. I felt a deep and guttural connection to that sense of failure from years and miles away in my office, watching on my laptop screen. It made me wonder if that was a sensation I could recreate in an audience, and how would they react to that failure? I speculated that it would bring a group of people together in empathy. What if I made a work that rode a fine line of failure and ruin, like Goldsworthy? He made work with the intention of taking “it to the very edge of its collapse,” believing this risk was “a very beautiful balance”

(Goldsworthy). Along with this risk, he believed in the darker side of nature, the shadows that I was also interested in invoking in my work.

### *Wabi-Sabi*

As Sharon observed the trajectory of my research interests in our choreography class, she introduced me to *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic notion recognizing the beauty in things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. There was a simplicity or minimalism to *wabi-sabi* that I responded to, as it encompassed a beauty of things modest and humble. Sharon allowed me to borrow her book *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* by Leonard Koren, which became a sort of bible for me in organizing my ideas for the look and feel of my thesis project. The book attempted to define the term, which is no small feat considering the layers of complexity in meaning and context in the Japanese language. *Wabi* means “chill, lean, withered,” while *sabi* translates to “the misery of living alone in nature” (Koren 21). Behold! An overlap with *Waldeinsamkeit*, confirmation that I was on the right track!

My understanding of *wabi-sabi* was predicated on a comparison to modernism, as this exact juxtaposition was offered as a chart in the book and also because the latter is an aesthetic form I am used to seeing in art, décor, and architecture in the United States. The comparison between the two forms was vital in my crafting of my guiding aesthetic principles for the choreography and the design of my work. (See Appendix B.)

I was intrigued by how almost every sentence describing *wabi-sabi* in Koren’s guide struck a nerve in me, no matter how fundamental or incidental the detail. One of these smaller details was that “objects and people are treated similarly in *wabi-sabi*” (Koren 82). I was not concerned with defining a performer as a type of person or

character, as I knew the audience would be keen on doing so themselves. What fun it would be instead to explore person as object or creature!

Koren also stated that ‘greatness’ lives within the “inconspicuous and overlooked details” (50). This is precisely the essence of my interest in my mother’s fascinations with spiders, birds, and trees. *Wabi-sabi* also proves that “beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness,” (Koren 51) which spoke to my own fascination with things awkward, askew, and dark. One of my strongest connections to *wabi-sabi* was through its metaphysical basis in the idea that “things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness” (Koren 42). Here was my connection to decay and regrowth as well as Andy Goldsworthy’s impermanence and risk of collapse.

## Chapter 4: The Proposal Phase – Shaping a Project

During the proposal phase I made a list of priorities for my thesis project:

1. A nontraditional experience for the audience:
  - a. Site-situated performance: an immersive performance environment, in which the audience might feel transported
  - b. A mobile audience experience: for the audience to feel that they had gone on a literal, physical journey, not just sitting in seats
  - c. A participatory performance: for the audience to be physically involved with building the work and by extension to build a sense of community around the performance event
2. A collaborative process and final work: a chance for me to let go of the need to control/micromanage every moment within the process and within the final product
3. Theme of nature: to reconnect with the earth and to feel reclaimed by the earth, to feel that I have reclaimed my place within nature

Overall, it was most important to me that this be a nontraditional performance event that was immersive and site-specific. Secondly, it felt vital for me to engage in a healthy creative process, collaborating with people, forming a community around the work. I had to remind myself almost on a daily basis that this was not my life's work but just a work, a gem of insight from the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies' production manager Cary Gillett. One of my earliest ideas for my thesis process was to create a work that felt like a quilt sewn together from several smaller pieces. I imagined an evening of vignettes, rather than forcing myself to create a cohesive whole from start to finish. This early goal stayed with me until the end.

I took all of these priorities and loose ideas and tried to see if I could imagine the final work. This was difficult for me to do and felt antithetical to my new healthy, process-based method. While I had plenty to feed into my thesis proposal about my goals for the process, I knew that I still needed some sort of backbone for the product. One day, I boldly said to myself, if I am so interested in all of these elements of nature, why not set the work in the heart of nature? I began to dream up a site-specific installation in a wooded area, perhaps along a series of hiking trails. While some faculty members expressed their concern for the achievability of such a project, I seemed to only hear those few who encouraged my ambitions. They said, “Dream big and propose it. Let us worry about the feasibility of it.” I heard what I wanted to hear, causing the words of those repeatedly urging me to create a plan B to fall only on deaf ears.

In the interest of not derailing the entire story of my thesis process and leading it down a road that was never travelled, I will not dispatch all of the specifics of this first proposed project. I will let it suffice to say that I was very excited about this project and someday I will dust it off and give it another try. That being said, the real story is that my proposal was unofficially turned down. The last day of Fall 2013, just before winter break, I had an informal meeting with Karen Bradley in which she strongly suggested to me that I reconsider creating my work for one of the performance spaces inside the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. I was told that the production office did not possess the resources to support such a project as I proposed. This unofficial decision from on high dealt me a devastating blow.

The most challenging part for me was that I was never actually told, “NO.” The decision to either move forward or revise the plan was left entirely up to me, which

somehow seemed more challenging than receiving a hard and fast “NO.” If I chose to forge ahead, I could expect extremely limited support from the School, both financially and technically. However, if I changed my mind, I had the promise of a higher budget than I had ever seen in my entire life and full production support. I was urged to consider sharing my evening with my cohort Megan Morse Jans in the Kogod Theatre in Spring 2015.

There was a rebellious side of me that considered driving forward with my proposed project as it was, without any help. I took the School’s decision somewhat personally. I felt abandoned, that my creativity was being squelched. I also felt as though I had been led on by everyone’s enthusiasm for my ideas, by their continued encouragement to “dream big.” This thought always stirred up huffy indignation in me.

It took me almost all of winter break to gain enough emotional distance to take my personal feelings out of the equation. In reality, it did not matter how I felt, and there was nothing I could do about it anyway. I try to live my life by the principles set forth in 12-step programs, most specifically Al-Anon. I recognize that I cannot change the way that people act or the things that happen in life, but I can change the way I react to them. In fact, it is the only thing I can change.

After much advice and guidance from fellow artists both inside the UMD community and out, I decided to revise my proposal to a stage performance. In reality, one of my strongest motivators in changing my mind was Sharon Mansur. She was the faculty member whom I was most eager to have as my thesis committee chairperson, and shifting to the spring semester from my proposed outdoor Fall thesis would allow her schedule to accommodate me and my project.

During winter break, I had space to remember that one of the reasons I came to graduate school was to alleviate the burdens of self-producing. When I say this, it means more to me than just having the manpower of a production team available to me, as invaluable as that is. I came to school to learn about the ways and means of building a collaborative community around my process. Pushing through with the “I-don’t-need-anyone-anyway” mindset felt like an unhealthy path to take. Or maybe I was just too afraid to go it alone. If so, then I believe that this is one time that fear led me in the right direction.

When I self-produced in New York, I was like a weary single mother to my needy performance project babies. I was overworked, overprotective, and had no ability to delegate. I was distrustful of those who might offer help: other dancer/choreographers, designers, composers, and theatre artists. Instead I chose to hide my creations until their dramatic unveilings. I was always playing poker with my work, concealing my hand until the climactic showdown at high noon.

Predictably, the performances were always letdowns. They could never live up to the weighty expectations I placed upon them. At the time, I felt that the fault lay in the New York dance community with its elitist and insular nature, a club of cool kids to which I could never belong. Now I realize that at least half of the blame is on me, with my lone warrior mindset. I had to break the cycle, and so I escaped New York, self-producing, and fruitless solo struggles and came to graduate school.

Over my first two years at UMD, I traded in my lone warrior, poker showdown, single mother ways for community, collaboration, and shared meaning-making. To me, collaboration is about relationships and I was truly thriving on the ones I had cultivated

within and across disciplines here. To move forward with my original proposal of an installation in the woods without help would be to throw away the resources for the healthy, collaborative creative process I had been dreaming of and building toward. While changing my proposal may have felt like throwing away my first priority (to create a nontraditional performance event that was immersive and site-specific), it allowed me to shift my perspective and recognize the true value and personal significance of the second priority: to engage in a healthy creative process, collaborating with people, forming a community around the work.

Of course, old habits die hard. Instead of diving in on the process level, I returned to school in the spring of 2014 with eyes directed on the product again. This was partly because I needed to turn in a new proposal almost immediately. This meant I had to convert my original imagined performance from one setting to another. What would stay and what needed to go? It was often suggested to me to just turn the Kogod Theatre into a forest. I was vehemently against this idea. In my original proposal, the draw of the woods was its authenticity. The audience would be immersed in the real thing. I did not want to make the performance about the spectacle, shocking and awing the audience with our ability to make a room feel like a forest. How could I transfer that feeling of being transported and immersed to the blank space of a black box theatre?

### The Importance of Space and Time

During this time, I began reading a book about the distinctions between the masculine and feminine mind, suggested to me by LIMS faculty Karen Studd. American surgeon and inventor Leonard Shlain's *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* follows the demise of the goddess through history with the concurrent rise of written language.

Within the very first chapter, I became interested in Shlain's distinctions between time, which he associated with the masculine, and space, which he connected with the feminine.

Shlain proposed that time is associated with logic, born from the clean directness of linearity and duration. When we function with our time-sensitive, masculine left-brains, the question continually arises, "What is next?" The hunter's mind calculates, attempting to predict how his prey will move next. Conversely, Shlain noted that the feminine right-brain sees the world holistically through space. The gatherer's eyes sweep the terrain, collecting information about potential food sources, danger, and the whereabouts of offspring. A spacious viewpoint allows for the experience of the whole before the need to analyze, dissect, and break this whole down into its parts (Shlain 24-26).

I thought about this notion of time and space in the way that one might experience a painting. My own viewing of a painting usually begins with getting a feel of the whole gestalt of the work at once before zooming in on details. But with visual art, even the order in which these details are viewed and the amount of time spent exploring each part is entirely up to the whim or personal intuition of each individual. I thought that dance is not as easily translated into this sort of autonomous and deeply personal experience as it is durational and occurs in a certain predetermined order.

While redrafting my proposal, I loosened my grip on the idea of immersion in favor of participation, affording the audience ownership over their individual experience of the performance just like one's viewing of a painting. It seemed the best way to do so would be to create an event that was akin to an installation in a museum or gallery,

allowing the audience to choose their own adventure. Since I could not eliminate the existence of time altogether, I knew I would need to make decisions about my use of it along the way. But I was at least intrigued by the experiment of presenting events that occur in time in a less linear fashion. I hoped to present time as a field or plane rather than a line. This would bring in my interest in geologic time, both in a durational and qualitative sense, as well as present opportunities for the audience to exercise their free will. I began to lightheartedly think of my thesis project as a sort of social experiment. How would an audience direct their own attention if I did not do it for them?

#### Throughline: The Site, The Emcee

The first step after my second proposal was accepted was a meeting with my cohort and concert partner, Megan Morse Jans, and production manager Cary Gillett in early Spring 2014. Within this meeting, it was desired of us to decide upon audience size, number of performances, approximate cast size, and guest artist budget. Additionally it was revealed to us that the School wished for Megan and I to begin to find cohesion between our two works. I remember talk about there being a sense from audiences in previous years that shared thesis concerts were slightly confusing. As I recall, this was both from a marketing and creative perspective, and so we were to use this meeting to brainstorm ways to create a sense of a throughline within the evening.

I must admit that the idea gave me pause at the time. I was truly just beginning my process, and sometimes I felt as if I was not even at step one but instead had taken steps backward with the rejected proposal. I knew very little about what my new thesis project would be at all, and so felt ill-equipped to make decisions about how it would relate to someone else's work. I was worried that my desire to please and perform the

task of creating cohesion well could potentially stunt my project's growth before it even started.

All I really had at this meeting was the idea for an installation-type performance, perhaps still incorporating elements of nature. Without ever having actually seen the show, I was pulling a great deal of inspiration from the theatre company Punchdrunk's wildly famous, immersive performance piece, *Sleep No More*. Through hearsay, I knew that *Sleep No More* audiences were set loose in a multi-story hotel in New York where they could touch and explore anything they wanted and follow around the performers and their dance. Without knowing much more than that, I knew I wanted to make my very own attempts at this sort of performance environment.

During my meeting with Megan and Cary, I had very little idea about what that actual environment would be. This openness, or perhaps my desire to place my work within a site-situated world, led me to a potential connection between our two thesis works. What if I used Megan's imagined world, a cabaret theatre, as my site? Perhaps it could be as if the audience was entering this cabaret theatre decades after its heyday, when humans had abandoned it, darkness and dust had settled upon it, and nature had crept back in. It has been a dream of mine for a while to create a work in an abandoned dwelling. I love the dark mystery presented by such a setting, the decaying remnants of human lives and all the silent stories they beg to tell. If I could not do my site-specific performance project at a site, then the setting of Megan's world within the theatre felt like the next best, and very exciting, scenario.

Also within this early meeting, Megan mentioned her desire to work with an emcee, someone to guide and sometimes jibe the audience. But she was reluctant to cast

an undergraduate theatre major as she imagined she would need a performer with a little more experience to pull off the combination of grit, aplomb, and humor required. Several bells immediately sounded in my head. Kevin! My husband was perfect for the role, and I was itching for an opportunity to bring him into the process of my thesis. If Kevin was a part of her world, perhaps he could literally be a part of the site that carried into my world. He could be in both projects, but more than that, he could be the through line of both projects.

#### Summer 2014, A Decidedly Not Awesome Summer

While my thesis research certainly continued throughout the rest of Spring 2014, it did so in a less rigorous fashion than in the previous semester. I was rehearsing for and performing in two thesis works that semester, an endeavor which proved to be quite distracting from the work of my own thesis. I entered the summer break with grand plans for dancing and reconnecting with my research.

After a tour to Saint Petersburg, Russia, with PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER, I was to experience my very first bit of solo traveling through Italy and Austria. During this solo leg of my journey, I was going to be teaching dance and attending famous Austrian dance festival ImpulsTanz as a student. I also planned on making and filming small, solo site dances along my journey. This would be a part of my thesis research phase, and I also thought they could even be used as projections in the final work. I felt an Awesome Summer was upon me.

On the second to last day in Russia, and only six days into my month-long excursion, I fell during a dress rehearsal and broke my ankle. In one second, or perhaps less, not only did my plans for the summer completely shift, but the next year of my life

would be drastically different from how I had imagined it. The details of the injury and the ensuing drama of navigating Russian healthcare and getting home are for another story, another time. My only task here is to process how this injury affected the ever-changing world of my thesis.

I spent the rest of the summer on my back. Upon returning to the United States, I was cleared for weight bearing, but I did not have much reason to bear weight. I had nowhere to go and no way to get myself there anyway. Kevin was at school all day during the week, learning, growing, and developing as an artist while I melted into the shadows of depression, waiting for bone to regrow. I was alone. I felt disconnected from my identity as a moving human, lying on my back on the couch for hours, every single day. (See Figure 12.)

The quintessence of this time in my life is easily shown in a video I felt inspired to record on my phone one day:

I am lying on my couch again in the sticky July heat, the outline of the sun's rays through the windowpane creeping, dragging across my ceiling, first above me and then past me. The tiny oscillating fan we use to save on energy costs sits on the coffee table by my feet, whirring back and forth, as if ceaselessly shaking its head at me in mocking slow motion. On the coffee table, about six inches in front of the fan, sits a tube of internal Arnica pellets that I take in lieu of the dangerously high dose ibuprofen prescribed to me. With each passing of the fan's winds, the tube just begins to respond with the slightest initiation of a roll and then settles back as the fan turns away, with tiny reverberations of rocking that quickly peter out. This happens over and over and over again.

I tried to make a read/create/move calendar for myself to stay mentally and artistically active and inspired. In fact, this short film was a result of one of my scheduled "create" periods. I read books for thesis research as well as texts on Buddhist principles by meditation teacher Pema Chodron. I meditated somewhat regularly, lying on my back on the hard wooden floor of my apartment, a welcome respite from the give of my couch.

I performed exercises lying down almost daily in order to remember my body and what it felt like. I drew pictures once in a while, using business card-sized paper, enjoying the possibilities that this limited space presented to me.

These thoughts began to lead me down the path of daydreaming about my thesis, but instead of fantasizing about what the finished product might be like, I thought about my dream creative process. What could be the most invigorating, enlightening, exciting creative process? How could I facilitate or lead it? As the end of the summer neared, I was able to downsize from the bulky boot to a svelte air splint, with which came increased mobility. I was not dancing, per say, but I could get around, be active, and be present. I could not wait for school to start, to get my body in a room with my dancers, and start playing.

I believe that my injury had some positive impact on my thesis. Choreographing while unable to dance fully myself meant that I was truly on the outside of my dances looking in, a first for me. I was appreciative of that perspective. I also imagine that experiencing geologic time firsthand through my incapacitation actually helped to place limits on how slow I was willing to allow my dances to be. I believe it helped me to find within my work the edges of time on both extremes, and how I was interested in blending them rhythmically.

During my less-than-awesome summer, I also decided upon the title for my work, *Projects for the Living*. It is a line from a song by American songwriter and musician Jim White, whom Kevin introduced me to in our college days. I found his peculiar blend of styles including gospel, folk, and alternative to be intriguing. The particular song is called *Still Waters* and it has a long and rich history for me. Kevin loved this song so much as a

teenager that he used to listen to it every night before going to sleep. For me, it was connected to one of the darkest times in my life in which my nephew was in the hospital for six months and nearly left us.

*Still Waters* is a paradoxical piece: the music itself is soothing, but the lyrics are unsettling. There is almost a beautiful poetry to the words, but overall there is a sense that you are hearing broken shards of an eerie story of someone who has seen much darkness in life but remains unfazed. The bridge to the song says: “There are projects for the dead and there are projects for the living, though I must confess sometimes I get confused by that distinction.” (For full song lyrics, see Appendix C). I chose the title both because of my own associations with the song and also the possibilities for interpretation. The words “the living” imply that there might be room within the work to consider the opposite of the living. Who are the living? The performers? The audience? Lastly, I was drawn to the word “projects.” I knew that my work would be heavily participatory, and I wanted a title that conveyed a sense of that active engagement.

By the end of the summer, I had also gathered around me a small cast. So far, I had Kevin, as well as my cohorts Lynne Price and Nicole McClam. I also cast Matt Reeves and Colette Krogol, new graduate dance students and very old friends of mine whom I have known for 12 years. I invited undergraduate dance major Celeste White to join in the process that summer, without being sure if I would cast her yet. After two rehearsals with her, during which she more than proved her maturity and work ethic, I officially cast her. Later in Fall 2014 I also cast dance graduate students Julia Smith and Sarah Beth Oppenheim as well as undergraduate dance student Justin Le. For more

detailed information about casting and the process of working with this dream of a group of artists please see Chapter 8: The Duet.

## Chapter 5: Lessons in Collaboration

While I gathered trusted performer/collaborators around me late in Summer 2014, I also learned who my collaborative team of graduate student designers would be, assigned to me by the School. I remember feeling initially devastated that among all three designers, I did not know a single one, as they were all first-year students. I was frustrated because I had spent my previous two years at UMD forming relationships with design students through collaborative efforts. In fact, I was repeatedly encouraged by faculty throughout my time here to cultivate these relationships through different classes and projects. I was excited at the prospect of sharing in a fuller creative process with some of these designers, and, therefore, disappointed when I learned that this would not be the case.

I was also concerned that these design appointments would mean that my thesis would serve as training grounds for newer, perhaps less-experienced designers. I have found that many student designers are more accustomed to working in the theatre world and unfamiliar with the feel of a dance creative process. This proved to be true and eventually led me to question the roles I was expected to perform within this process. Was I expected to act as teacher to these first-year design students? For much of the process, I was of the mind that I had too much on my plate to have to also wear this extra hat, one for which I felt under qualified. Over time, much closer to the end of the whole process, I recognized and accepted that education was a natural and necessary part of collaboration. There were times when I was frustrated, or even felt disrespected, but in the end, I deem all of the collaborations of my thesis to have been successes.

My scenic designer was the young first-year design student Dan Patrick Leano. I mention that he was young because I feel that his age and relative amount of experience had an impact on the process. Scenic design was vitally important to this work, as it was a goal of mine to create a sense of immersion within an imagined environment. Dan Patrick had the challenging task of creating the world of the cabaret theatre for Megan's work, and then transforming that world to appear lived in and decayed for me.

The task became even more complicated as the creative process progressed. Dan Patrick would have to provide for two vastly different types of audience experiences, one mobile and one seated, in two disparate types of shows, all in one theatre space. His design had to allow for a short changeover period during intermission. He had to accommodate two different lighting designs by two different designers. He had to deal with my desire for furniture pieces that we could slam against, drag, climb on and in, and other altogether unorthodox practices. I also requested a yard sale's worth of miscellaneous props, various bric-a-brac, but I wanted to be involved in the selection of every object. Lastly, he dealt with my need to be able to change my mind about every detail up until the last possible moment. I am rather certain he received quite a learning opportunity from the whole process. (See Figure 13.)

My costume designer began as first-year design student Sarah Kost, but when she later decided to leave the program in October 2014, I was assigned third-year design student Robert Croghan. When Sarah left the process, we were still in the research phase. I felt a strong connection to the research images and language she provided in design meetings, and so I was concerned with the sudden shift to a new designer with final

designs being due so soon after. However, Robert worked quickly in the research phase and presented wonderfully dark and mysterious imagery that thrilled me.

Due to his busy schedule as a third-year student, Robert's actual designs and costumes came in much later in the process than I had expected. I continually relayed to Robert my desire for simplicity, minimalism even, and in the end, he delivered. He repeatedly told me that I had the right at any point in the process, even performance week, to tell him that a costume did not work for me. I truly appreciated the freedom he gave me to speak my mind and own the look of my work. Even though it came right down to the wire on some of the costumes, he took my interest in raw bareness and even expanded upon it appropriately with small structural details that could only be seen with an interested and curious eye. (See Figure 14.)

My sound designer was Jeffrey Dorfman, a DC area professional sound designer hired by the School. I fully admit that I was not a very helpful collaborator to Jeff during this process. My habit seems to be to choreograph every dance that I make in silence. Then, I keep it in silence for probably too long, working on it, honing it, and perhaps becoming attached to the way it feels in silence. I never had anything to say to Jeff at design meetings because I just was not ready to discuss sound. It took me, in all honesty, until the week of tech to be able to hear sound options and make decisions. Jeff was incredibly accommodating and I will be forever grateful for that. In the end, he understood the importance of textures and layers within the sound design, and that the sound should be atmospherically present but not overbearing. I was pleased with the final product, especially the ways in which sounds travelled through the space to different

speakers and how skilled he was at creating sound that could support the action and emotion of a moment.

My lighting designer was first-year design student Connor Dreibelbis. He understood from the onset of our time together that lighting design for my work would involve designing darkness just as much as light. He had clear, bold ideas about the ways that light could be stark and minimal, but also an integral part of the world. I laugh now when I think back on my initial impression of Connor: that he was mysterious and would be hard to read throughout the process. One of my greatest delights now is reflecting on how our relationship evolved. Now I can almost sense his impression of a situation before he speaks, based on the expression in his eyes while he silently brews, chewing on his blonde ponytail. On closing day of my thesis concert, he sent me a text message that read: “When do we start the next one?” I think my thesis will prove to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. (See Figure 15.)

While design meetings in Fall 2014 were abuzz with the excitement of creativity, production meetings in Spring 2015 felt like a nightmare. My performance project does not conform to the traditional theatre paradigm, in which an audience enters and watches a performance from a safe distance. It was one of my goals from the onset of this work to challenge the audience to engage with a nontraditional performance piece in an unconventional way, and this very fact would require the presenting venue to be able to adapt its routine procedures. While I felt enthusiasm from several people at design meetings, the attitude of most of the production meetings did not match this zeal. I often felt like I was under fire, defending multiple elements of my work at every meeting. I

could feel my autonomic nervous system activating, as I prepared myself mentally and physically for battle. These meetings were emotionally exhausting.

I have no concrete solutions to this conundrum. My best guess is that more open communication both at and, especially, before these meetings would go a long way in relieving some of the tension. There are some elements of my show that I ended up choosing to compromise, or even sacrifice altogether because of the inability for parties involved to see past that tension. Also, I imagine compromise and sacrifice are inevitable in a shared concert scenario. While there were times during the process that I was so angry I thought I might need to write this whole section in capital letters with bold font, it is all water under the bridge now. There is nothing like an overwhelmingly successful and satisfying run of a show to heal the wounds from the process.

#### Collaborating with Sudesh Mantillake

In Fall 2013, I worked with George LaValle, a dramaturg<sup>3</sup> from theatre professor Faedra Carpenter's class who was a part of shaping the world of my first proposal for the woods installation. He introduced me to the term "negative capability," invented by Romantic poet John Keats. George described it as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats). Even though I did not continue working with George and my thesis project went through some drastic shifts, I held to the concept of negative capability. I believe that I intended for my thesis project to both test and celebrate these capacities.

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<sup>3</sup> According to *Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas*, the role of a dramaturg is to "work with their other artistic collaborators to hone their vision... to contextualize the world of a play; establish connections among the text, actors, and audience; offer opportunities for playwrights; generate projects and programs; and create conversations about plays in their communities" (The Role of the Dramaturg).

At the end of Spring 2014, I worked up my courage to ask performance studies doctoral student Sudesh Mantillake. During that whole school year, he and I had connected at several performances, lectures, and guest artist classes. We had already shared in several discussions on dance, performance, art, and culture. I chose Sudesh as my dramaturg not because we shared similar opinions or aesthetic tastes, but because I knew that he was always interested and always had something to say. I knew this is exactly what I would need in a dramaturg: an extra eye attached to a curious and inquisitive mind, someone to ask me questions and offer suggestions of connections, references, and source material that I may not know of on my own.

We held somewhat regular meetings in Fall 2014, about one per month. One of the most important roles he played was as collector of all of my ideas and plans. I am not the kind of person who writes down every single idea that I have. Meeting with Sudesh at least meant that I had to put them into language in order to express them to another human. Each meeting he would listen intently and take messy, feverish notes, and when I finished talking, he had a handful of his own impressions and questions for me. The times he attended rehearsal went much the same way. I found it both incredibly challenging and vital to my process to be able to articulate about my work and process while in the midst of it, rather than retreating to a nonverbal state. The dances grew out of the nonverbal realm and then spilled into collaborative conversations. I believe they were made much stronger and specific because of it.

As we continually used language as our tool for honing and clarifying our intentions, Sudesh even approached me about changing his title of dramaturg to the newer and less widely known *danceturg*. To him, it felt important to further define his

role within the process, rather than lumping it in with the field of dramaturgy, which did not necessarily fit our situation.

In Spring 2015, I saw less and less of Sudesh. In a way, I had gotten more experienced with holding the whole of my work on my own. The only times I saw him in the last semester were at showings and production meetings. At the latter, he performed his last invaluable act for me as my collaborator. He sat silently in the meetings and observed and then approached me at the end of each meeting, just the way I had grown accustomed to his presence. He hugged me warmly after each meeting and told me how proud he was of me for my courage and staying true to my vision in the face of adversity. That sort of bolstering is exactly what I needed in those moments. I would say that we had a very fruitful and meaningful collaboration.

#### Collaborating with Ruth Anne Watkins

I began to see less of Sudesh around the time that my stage manager, Ruth, entered the picture. On opening night of my show, when I was expressing my deepest gratitude to her, Ruth recounted for me our very first meeting. I do not recall the occurrence, but apparently I told her that she probably would not have much to do as my stage manager. If this story is true, I fully admit now that I have never before inserted my foot so far into my mouth.

Ruth was a precious gift to me in this process. *Projects for the Living* was a complex performance piece, with a large cast of busy performers, an intricately designed set with a hundred or more props that were necessary to the process, and an intricately involved show order that could more accurately be described as three shows occurring simultaneously. Not only was she always there to pick up the various pieces of this

multilayered work that I happened to drop, which I did every single rehearsal, but she was a vital part of the creative team as well. Ruth offered input whenever I asked for it, especially when I could not figure out the massive puzzle that was fitting all of the distinct components of my work into one structure. (See Figure 16.)

I consider one of Ruth's most important contributions to be her attentiveness and level of engagement. I have been burned in previous creative processes in which the stage management team is disinterested, underestimating the necessity of their active presence. Ruth was supportive, interested, and always paying attention. She was everything I could ever desire in a stage manager and so much more, and I could never fully express the gratitude I feel for all of the time and hard work she dedicated to my project.

#### Test Audiences as Collaborators

Since it was an essential part of my project that the audience was deeply involved in the unfolding of events within the performance, informal showings became vitally important to my process. The typical dance thesis concert holds three in-progress showings. *Projects for the Living* had eight total showings, as well as three dress rehearsals that were open to the public. These showings served as experimental laboratories in which my cast and I could test out different modes of audience interaction. How much poking or prodding did it take to get an audience member to work up the courage to try something new? How could we create an atmosphere of intrigue and invitation, so that viewer/participants were not immobilized by confusion or fear?

The showings were a monumental component of the success of this project. Not only did I learn much that served in the continuing development of the work, but I was also able to create awareness around my performance project well before its premiere.

Students, faculty, and even members of the larger DC/Maryland/Virginia dance community knew about the work. I heard from members of these test audiences that they greatly enjoyed being able to witness the evolution of the project, and were thoroughly stunned by its final rendering brought to its fullest fruition. The showings meant to the most to me as symbols of my commitment to collaboration and community-making. The more I involved others in the process, including audience, the less I felt like I was carrying the whole of the work on my own shoulders. I plan to continue on in this endeavor of showing my work as freely and often as possible in future creative processes.

## Chapter 6: The Issue of Space

When discussing audience size in Spring 2014, Megan and I both expressed interest in smaller, more intimate groups. Somehow, on the day of our meeting with Cary Gillett about a year ago, we decided on a maximum capacity of 100. I remember being concerned at the time that this was actually a much larger crowd than I desired, but also feeling as though my hands were tied because our show was set in the Kogod Theatre. I had heard numerous times in the past from people in the production office that if you chose to perform in the Kogod Theatre, you would get very limited time in the space. Having a smaller audience would potentially require more show days, which were just not available to us. While I was uncomfortable with 100 at the time, I did not share it aloud. Early in the process, I had a fear of asking too much of anyone involved in production. One lesson I learned is to just ask right away, when you first have the question, rather than waiting until it becomes an insurmountable problem.

For a traditional staged performance with seating, this means that there are 100 seats in the house. For my work, in which the audience would be actively moving through the performance space, taking up space along with the performers and set, a capacity of 100 meant something entirely different. And the most difficult challenge was that I had no way of knowing for sure exactly what it did mean. There was no way to gather 100 people to stand in the Kogod for me, and, even if I could accomplish that, I had no dance choreographed or set designed. I had no clue what other elements would take up space.

In Fall 2014 I saw a site-specific performance by dance artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph at UMD's H. J. Patterson Hall. The performance took place within a long hallway

as well as in several classrooms that branched off of this main path. The audience was left to their own devices, as in a gallery type of setting, choosing where to go and how long to remain. Luckily, I attended a performance that had an audience count of about 75. This was an incredibly educational opportunity for me as I was constantly looking for chances to observe large crowds in mobile performance settings. What a gift!

I consider myself to be a bold audience member who is relatively well acquainted with immersive performance environments. While many audience members would gather in the entryway of a room where a duet or small group dance was happening, I felt comfortable wiggling my way through so that I could actually enter the room and share the space with the dancers. Unfortunately, the volume of people was so high, and packed into such confined spaces, that by the time I made it through these crowds, I had missed most of the dancing and the performers would run away to a new room. This happened to me multiple times before all of the dancers gathered together for a large group section. Fortunately for me, this gathering happened in a room I was already inside of and I had a prime spot from which to observe the action. The whole work concluded back out in the hallway with another large group section where, again, I could barely see due to the clogging of the space with spectators.

I left this performance frustrated with my experience as an audience member and fearful for the fate of my piece, which would have 25 more attendees. I immediately contacted my scenic designer, Dan Patrick, about my concerns so that we could begin brainstorming ways to solve this problem. I also approached production manager Cary Gillett about reducing our audience size, after checking with my concert partner, who agreed. The thought of moving an audience of 100 in a confined space while still having

space enough for dancers and for their actual dancing sounded ludicrous to me. I begged Cary to speak with the box office about reducing the audience to the lowest number they were willing to go. We shortly received word back that the audience could be trimmed down to 75, but that we would have to open the dress rehearsals to audiences. I was thrilled by this answer and Megan consented to the changes. Everything felt more manageable with 25 fewer people, and I was already interested in having as many showing opportunities as possible, as the audience was like a group of cast members in my work.

Also in Fall 2014, I took a trip to New York to finally see my research influence *Sleep No More* for myself. There were several elements of the show that I found particularly intriguing and that fed into my thesis project, particularly about the audience experience. First, I found the fact that audience members were asked to separate from their friends and acquaintances in order to experience the evening alone to be exhilarating. All audience members also wore masks, creating an even stronger sense of anonymity, and were told not to speak a word for the entire event. For me, as I signed up for an early evening entry time, this meant that I spent three hours masked, alone, and silent. What a thrill!

I explored the rooms, ran down crowded hallways chasing performers, and even boldly interacted with performers without being prompted. I felt such a strong sense of being transported that I was overcome with fear and trepidation at times. Once, I found myself completely alone in a long, darkened hallway, in which I ran at full speed until I found other people. Could any real harm have befallen me in a controlled performance

environment? Surely not. But I was so lost in this world of fantasy that I feared anything that might reach out of the shadows for me, real or imagined.

While several elements of *Sleep No More* were inspirational fuel for my thesis, their use of space was not one of them. Audience members reserved tickets based on a specific time of entry. The earlier you reserved your ticket for, the more time you were allowed within the environment, which seems unfair if you hold a later ticket. This also meant that as the evening progressed, the space got more and more crowded. There were points when whole throngs of audience were chasing performers down narrow hallways, and I was pushed more than a few times. While I enjoyed this as part of the experience of *Sleep No More*, I knew it would be impossible and undesirable to present such an environment at the Clarice.

### The Advent of Zones

My next idea was to still split the audience into smaller groups, as in *Sleep No More* but make sure they all entered the theatre and began their experience at the same time. What if we divided the space into separate and discrete areas in which a smaller audience group could have a more intimate experience? If we took our audience of 75 and split it into three groups of 25, perhaps we could manage moving those smaller groups of 25 more easily. If the space were divided into three areas, perhaps we could simply orchestrate a rotation of these audience groups so that each one was able to see all three zones at some point.

Here began my struggle for balance of control. I went into the process with a desire to be less controlling of the audience experience, but here I was planning and mapping their every move. I had to remind myself that to move forward with the “hands-

off” approach, especially in light of my knowledge of crowding and sightline issues, would be irresponsible. I was giving structure to the audience experience while allowing for their free will within the process. Giving them absolutely no guidelines could potentially incapacitate them and their ability to seek their own enjoyment of the performance. I hoped to give them just enough of a roadmap that each and every individual felt they had the agency to make his or her experience what they wanted it to be.

To move forward in the zoning procedure, I simply handed the idea to Dan Patrick, and he mapped out the zones on the ground plan, taking into account where the risers and stage space of Megan’s world would be. While he planned the physical demarcation of these spaces, I began work on finding the particular character or flavor of these *zones*, as they officially became known. I took inventory of the sections of movement material my cast and I had amassed up until that point, as well as the different directions my research interests had taken me. I searched for intersections and similar shades and tones. Curiously enough, I found myself returning to the concept of time and its potential for qualitative richness.

My immediate instinct was to divide the space into zones of the past, present, and future. The past, or Zone 1, would be filled with collections of human-made objects, the dust and artifacts of memories. Zone 2, the present, felt like it should be where nature had crept in and grown over these human remnants. And finally, the future zone, Zone 3, was the space of the unknown. It would be a place of mostly just emptiness, with light, darkness, and shadows. It was not important to me that the audience be acutely aware of these distinctions, but rather that each zone had its own peculiarity in feeling and tone.

This would be accomplished through light, costume, scenic, and sound design as well as the character of the movement. I found it ironic that I decided that the physical space of my performance project should be divided and categorized by descriptors of time, when my original proposal was to experiment with presenting time as space.

As soon as I proposed this thematic structure of the zones to my collaborators both in design and in dance making, the whole process seemed to accelerate. While my designers worked on further distinguishing the zones in their area, I worked on assigning the existing dance material I had to specific zones. In this way, I also began to gravitate toward the idea of allotting specific zones for my cast members as well, from which they would not stray. Some of the material seemed to state rather obviously where it belonged within this world, while others felt adaptable. I asked my dancers what their own preferences were in the matter. Where do you feel like you belong? Which zone draws you into it? I did not always heed these opinions, but I was happy to at least spark discussion on the zones and their distinctiveness.

### The Structure: Defined by Space

It was my plan that the audience of 75 would be divided into three groups of 25 before entering the performance space. While gathered in the lobby, they would be handed a Mason jar that contained a small slip of paper and pencil. Upon the aged and worn paper, in typewritten text, were varying prompts to the audience to provide a memory:

I feed on memories. You must pay the toll. I require one part of a memory  
filled with laughter:  
... a memory that stings:  
... your coldest memory:  
... a shadowy memory:  
... a memory that lives in your throat:

As the emcee, Kevin would then enter the lobby and deliver an opening monologue that would both provide some exposition of the loose narrative of the world and also introduce the audience to the tone of what they were about to experience. This opening monologue went through several stages of evolution throughout the creative process. In its first version, it was full of abstract language about memory, the passage of time, and a clever invention. This version was developed in early Fall 2014 rehearsals, conjuring disconnected bits of imagery and jumping from idea to idea without a throughline. Later we switched to a stripped down rendition, with no abstract language and only clear directives to the audience about where they were, why they were here, and what to do once inside the theatre.

We finally settled on a combination of the two, hoping to somehow invite the audience in and give them pause at the same time. I was interested in the emcee's language both painting a vivid picture and then turning the picture askew, so the air around the performance felt just slightly off. The audience even participated in disseminating instructions on how to enjoy the performance, as Kevin selected audience members to read aloud from crumpled, water-stained bits of paper he produced from his pockets. Much of these directives we borrowed and bent from the instructional monologue at the beginning of *Sleep No More*, including the directions to separate from friends and to remain quiet throughout the performance. (See Appendix D.)

Once separated into groups and informed of their instructions, the audience groups would enter their individual zones and spend about ten minutes exploring the environment. Within the zone, there was much to see and do including textures, sights, and sounds to behold, and tasks to be completed. Dances performed by my stellar cast

would fold into and out of the dark corners of the theatre, but would rely upon the participation of the audience to occur.

At the end of ten minutes the groups would rotate to the next zone and repeat the process in this new environment. Kevin and I would float between the zones, making our presence known subtly, hinting at a relationship between us. Once the audience had spent ten minutes in each of the three zones, the hanging fabric dividing the space would be torn down, revealing the whole of the theatre. In this new wide-open space, Kevin and I would perform a duet, reliving the memories of our life together.

Once the zoning of the space and rotations of the audience were decided, the rest of the above structure seemed to fall into place. At times throughout the process, this structure felt like the burden of a cage. While I was making the dances that would occur in each zone, I constantly found myself itching to break my own rules. Perhaps it was one of those instances in which I had been with the work for too long and no longer had the ability to see and experience it all afresh, the way that an audience would. But I stayed the course, knowing that the basic structure of the work was the glue holding all of the parts together. I can say with confidence, now that it is all over and I lived through the frenzy of tech and performance week, this structure was necessary and instrumental to the success of my work.

When I think back on it now, I recognize that the early ideas for my thesis, especially the installation format, were very much inspired by the visual art world. It makes sense, as I was drawing on moving experiences I had recently had with different visual artists and their work. It was all there somewhere: Mark Dion's *Octagon Room* that you could enter and explore with its collection of curiosities on display, Andy

Goldsworthy's simple and impermanent *wabi-sabi* work with the natural elements of the earth, and Sol LeWitt's complexities born of layers of simplicity. I wanted to translate these visual experiences that were meaningful to me through the body.

I also recognize now that the stimulus to create a throughline between mine and Megan's works caused a gradual shift in my ideas away from the visual art ideas. Slowly the importance of a narrative, albeit nonlinear, crept into my process. When I first made this discovery, I was still in-process, although near the final stages. I used this realization to loosen my grip on the narrative and resurrected the simple ideas of an installation borrowed from the visual arts.

My sense of the evolution of my thesis is that I lost my way at times by trying to create connections and meaning. I am grateful that writing was part of my process while still crafting the work, as it helped me to find my way home, find the effortless moments of suggestion underneath all the layers. If I ever were to revisit or remount *Projects for the Living*, I would want to come home to the visual art influences even more. I would want a much larger space that could feel more like a gallery as the space in the Kogod is tight for nearly 100 people. I would want to allow for the audience to experience the work at their own pace, as ten minutes per zone is short. In my wildest fantasies, I could finally eliminate the limits of space and time.

## Chapter 7: Sense and Memory

### The Role of the Senses

In my mind, the whole of my show was contextualized around Kevin as the emcee and his journey through the work. The premise was that he invited and led an audience through it with him because he needed their help in rebuilding memories that he had lost. In this way, objects within the world of the performance could be concrete and real, but also have a whole metaphorical life beyond that realness. And that whole metaphorical life would be unique for each audience member that entered the theatre, because each would come with his or her own stories and histories. This held true not just for the props, but for all of the sights, sounds, textures, and scents within the performance. We hoped to create the mystery and potential of suggestion around everything that occupied our world, to incite the wondrous associative power of the senses.

The significance of the senses entered the picture early in the process for me. In Spring 2014, I was enrolled in dance faculty Miriam Phillips' *Dance in a Global Context* course. We often spoke about the idea of *defining the event*, in this case, the *event* of my dance thesis performance. When does it begin? Who gets to do the dancing? Who are the viewers? Where does it occur, and at what time of day? As the *who, what, when, where, and how* questions flow on, the ethnographer would further ask him or herself about the ways in which the senses were engaged within an *event*.

The notion of a sensory-rich *event* quickly became an obsession of mine. In my second-year studies, the senses began to play a larger, more foregrounded role in my readings and discussions. In my Laban studies, this included in particular Certified

Movement Analyst and physical therapist Irmgard Bartenieff's Developmental Movement Progression<sup>4</sup>, the ways in which a baby learns about and navigates through its environment by way of its senses. In assisting dance faculty Karen Bradley in her undergraduate *Teaching Dance* course, I latched onto the significance of the senses in developmental psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences<sup>5</sup>. As a choreographer and simply as a human, I am always intrigued by the ways in which we engage with our environment and come to know our world and ourselves in that world. Both Bartenieff's and Gardner's research was based on the belief that the senses are the interface between body and world, between the body and meaning. I learned in Miriam's class, that this connection between sensation and meaning is a vehicle for culture.

In the beginning of my time in Miriam's *Dance in a Global Context* class, I saw myself as culture-less. I felt like a plain, white, European-descended American with little connection to my heritage. Over the course of the semester, my understanding and definition of culture began to expand. This is because I was able to recognize that I was already a part of weaving the connective tissue of values within the field of dance, a culture in its own right. At the risk of seeming too bold or presumptuous, I began to see my potential to act as a bearer of dance culture, rather than choosing to fade into the background, an anonymous fish in the vast sea. I left the course feeling empowered to

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<sup>4</sup> The Developmental Movement Progression delineates seven body organizations as related to the study of human development both in ontogeny (infant to adult) and in phylogeny (amoeba to primate) (Longstaff). The work was initiated by Irmgard Bartenieff and further expanded by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering. More information on the Developmental Movement Progression can be found in Peggy Hackney's book *Making Connections: Total Body Integration through Bartenieff Fundamentals*. Details are listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Gardner does not explicitly draw connections between his theory and sensory modes of exploring the environment, although the relationship seems fundamental to me. See *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* by Howard Gardner to learn more about his theory. Details are listed in the Bibliography.

make my dance values what I want them to be. Within the context of a performance work, these included the vital role of process and collaboration in shared meaning-making through the vehicle of sensory-rich, participatory, immersive theatre. I hold with symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz who quoted anthropologist Max Weber as saying that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” and who believed those webs to be culture (Geertz 5). I was ready and excited to spin some webs!

The webs would be made out of everything I was collecting in my thesis stew pot. This included actual objects (rocks, keys, books, various bric-a-brac), people (my cast and collaborators), imagery used to create dances and design elements, and stories. I took great pleasure in the very real and physical act of collecting for this work. (See Figures 17-19.) I collected rocks, leaves, and pinecones. I collected images for dances from my own memories, however significant or not, and then my cast and I worked collectively to bring these images to life. I collected memories from my cast as well as audiences throughout the process.

Somehow, this act of collecting allowed the work to be both specific and general. Offering a smorgasbord of memories and curiosities made room for the audience to make their own stories, their own meaningful connections. But, at the same time, these bits and pieces of personal histories were specific, each having their own flavor. This created a sense of a story of particularity rather than generality even though it belonged to no one person but several.

I have been fascinated by this power of suggestion ever since I have been creating dances or art of any kind. Here again, I was celebrating John Keats’ negative capability.

How can we make connections without feeling like we have to get the answer to the puzzle correct? There is no puzzle and there is no answer.

Why does dance matter?  
Because it does not give answers.  
Understanding is not a requirement.  
It just is, and that “is-ness” is worth sinking your teeth into.

### The Role of Memory

I believe wholeheartedly that the audience’s ability to connect to the tapestry of my work was due entirely to the fact that we are all human, that the audience recognized the sheer humanness of this collection, and empathized with that humanness by accessing their own memories. Once we had settled upon the central theme of memory, and Kevin’s task to get the audience to assist in rebuilding memories, the space of the theatre and all of its contents immediately became a metaphor for the emcee’s mind. When I use the word *mind* I mean so much more than *brain*. While the brain is a mysterious enigma to us still, with vast pockets and corners we have yet to discover let alone understand, I still know that I mean more than just this one organ.

Perhaps I mean the entirety of this character’s human experience: all of the bits and pieces of happenings, stories, and memories that combined in just the right way to make him who he is. It is his way of perceiving the world, his way of being. It is both the input and output of his physical, psychological, emotional, and social existence. When it was suggested to me early on by Dan Patrick that the layout of the audience paths within the theatre resemble the hemispheres of the human brain, I disagreed. To me, the metaphor was bigger than a one-to-one relationship. Theatre  $\neq$  brain. To me, the theatre and all of the happenings within were a microcosm for a human life, full of lightness and darkness, curiosity and choices, wholeness and loss.

Loss is where I enter the picture. In order to present the audience with motivation to participate and help and to provide the show with a reason for being, it needed a problem. Kevin and I decided that the emcee had somehow lost the person he loved and was spending every night with these audiences trying to get her back. Perhaps she had died, or simply left him. To us, the specifics did not matter. The pain and desperation of loss and loneliness is what mattered. Completely by chance in one of our very early playtime rehearsals, we stumbled upon the idea of the show as a machine, an invention of the emcee, a man covered in the dust of forgetfulness and slightly crazed by his loneliness. This machine was unlike any machine the audience could have ever encountered before. Both its fuel and output are memories, provided that it is given the help that it needs. The audience is required to complete tasks leading to the ultimate goal, the replay of memories between the emcee and his lost love, me.

## Chapter 8: The Duet

The work of creating the dances for my thesis went much in the way I had hoped it would from the onset. Early on, I split my cast into smaller groupings and worked on smaller, shorter dances or vignettes. It was not until I began work with the fourth grouping that it suddenly dawned on me that I was creating a dance of only duets. It was a dance of five duets to be exact: Lynne Price and Nicole McClam, Colette Krogol and Matt Reeves, Celeste White and Julia Smith, Sarah Oppenheim and Justin Le, and lastly Kevin and me. This realization caused a sudden and uncomfortable flashback to my undergraduate dance composition class. Composition 1 and 2 were studies in solos and duets. Composition 3 and 4 were studies in trios and larger group dances. My professor's final evaluation in Composition 4 read: "Even with a large group cast, you are still only making duets." I felt like a failure.

For a short moment I feared that the fact that I was still making duets eight years later was a final sign of my shortcomings. I am not a choreographer, but a joke. I can only make duets. What kind of choreographer can only make duets? What kind of range could I ever hope to achieve? And then another thought occurred to me. SO WHAT! A duet, I thought, is a wonderfully deep and rich creature to explore. It could take a lifetime to find all the magic of a duet. So, I'm not done with duets. Here's five more that I hope you will enjoy!

### The Blind Duet: Lynne and Nicole

The very first rehearsals for my thesis were rooted in my early research of negative capability, as I hoped to tap the prolific "uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts" of which all humans were capable of perceiving. I worked with my cohorts, Lynne and

Nicole, and I have never been more pleased with a casting choice in my entire life. The three of us sequestered ourselves in an unused office and turned off the lights, dancing in the dark for four days. I cannot think of a better way to explore negative capability than to turn off the lights and ask an audience to watch a dance.

We began by spending 20 minutes at a time in the complete darkness just to observe, to notice aspects of both the darkness and our own reactions to it. We gathered sensory data, imagery, and memories. Because we could not reach complete darkness with the light leak from under the door, I had them blindfold themselves in rehearsal. For Lynne and Nicole at least, it was complete darkness, even if it would not be for an audience. I had them take 20 minutes to explore the room as a connected unit, one blind creature made of two people. My goal was for them to truly know the lay of the land without relying on the sense of sight.

After a while, I began to like the look and feel of my blindfolded, two-headed, two-bodied creature and so I decided to keep the blindfolds as part of the image. The three of us crafted a dance for this dark-dwelling creature with two bodies in a tight space. We played with a wide range of time, from geologic to quick and sudden. The movement was generally tight and close to the body but it occasionally reached out into the empty space of the office, gently searching. And all was done in almost complete unison with almost constant physical contact between the two bodies. I was aiming for an eerie sense of doubling so that they were uncannily identical even though, on the surface, their skin tones and differing body shapes clearly differentiated them. I began to refer to them as my cave dwellers. Whether they were embodying imaginary living beings, shapes or shadows that shift and recede in the darkness, or formations of minerals and

rock changing achingly slowly over time, it did not matter to me. For me, the movement and imagery was enough of an invitation for the audience to form their own meaning.

(See Figures 37-38.)

The blind duet was truly my first choreographic step in the process. I was thrilled that I began on my own terms, playing, experimenting, and noticing. We gathered ideas, sensory data, and images and wove them together. We were not in a dance studio. I was proud of this beginning and remain attached to it for these very reasons.

I did not continue rehearsals with Lynne and Nicole for quite a long time, only reconvening near the end of the next semester. We had no existing video of the original dance we made in the dark office, so instead we relied upon each other's memories to reconstruct the duet. They were both initially slightly uncomfortable that we might lose some material, but I was calm and confident that this was just the right process for this dance. I truly believed that we would remember what needed to be remembered, and when there were holes, we would either fill them or not. I was even more pleased with the newer version of the dance, as it seemed streamlined from its original iteration. Again, it felt in keeping with my goal for simplicity.

After we had resurrected and rejuvenated our cave dwellers' dance, it was time for me to assign dances to the specific zones that I had devised for the performance space. I immediately placed Lynne and Nicole in Zone 3. It seemed appropriate to bring my creatures, who lived in the darkness of the unknown, into this world of nothing except light, shadow, and empty space. Among the whole of my cast, I had the strongest faith in their ability to handle the pure abstractness of that space without feeling compelled to layer extra weight or meaning. As my cohorts, they had a keen sense of the tone of my

recent work and understood my research interests in the simplicity of repetition, juxtaposition, and scale. Because of this strong connection we shared throughout our graduate studies, I feel, even now that the thesis concert is complete, that this section of my dance was among the most successful, even with the least amount of rehearsal time. I was extremely fortunate to cast my classmates, and to have classmates with such presence, patience, and sensitivity.

Once I knew that Lynne and Nicole lived in Zone 3, we could begin to play with the specifics of the space. Their zone was shaped like an “L,” with two wide hallways, one at least twice as long as the other. I placed the first, already choreographed half of their duet under a table in the shorter hallway. What remained was to create a section in the longer hallway. This newer movement material was mostly an exploration of the space of the hallway, in which it was my desire to line the audience members up along either side of the passageway, facing in toward each other. We played with the sense of their bodies shooting fearlessly into the vast length of space that they could only sense, not see, trusting that the audience was against the walls and out of the way. We also played with the other end of the spectrum, in which Lynne and Nicole got intimately close to individuals lining the walls, and slowly reached a hand out to touch the person next to them, seeing them through their touch.

#### The Foot Duet: Matt and Colette

By the time I was placing dances and dancers into zones, I struggled with the decision of whether or not to keep Matt and Colette together as a duet. Since they were two of my earliest collaborators, I had already worked with them on creating duet material. My instinct was to split them up because so much of what they do in their own

work and as dancers in other artists' companies is duet work together. In a way, I did not want to pigeonhole them. I wanted them to know that I valued them as individual movement artists. I experimented with replacements in their duet material, but it just did not work. In the end, I decided to keep them together, maybe only because of my own time constraints, but I feel it was the right decision for my work. Someday perhaps I will revisit working with them separately.

In the fall of 2014, I became fixated on the image of a story unfolding between two people from the simplest of movements but with a view only of their feet. My first and most sincere explanation is that I find feet to be beautiful. And I do not mean "the dancer foot" with the shape of the ankle consciously and delicately designed. In fact, I specifically mean the everyday foot, the ordinary, no-fuss foot. However, I did know that I would probably need a dancer's sensibility about Effort qualities and timing choices in order for the wonder and mystery of this story to be revealed, and in any fashion that was worth watching. Both Matt and Colette were superb with timing and quality details, but repeatedly had to be reminded to relax the feet or even forget that the focus was on their feet. I told them, "Stop performing the feet!"

The making of this dance was made through structured improvisation. Our earliest rehearsals were in Preinkert studio, where there was no curtain behind which the dancers could hide. Instead, we used a square patch of sunlight strewn from a window, makeshift lighting design highlighting their feet. I began by offering them story structures: First, she is alone. He enters. There is some sort of greeting. Maybe they say "good morning" to each other. Next a disagreement arises which has time to develop into a conflict. The conflict is resolved and then one person exits, leaving the other alone.

Once they could remember the basic layout, they improvised these events with movement, no voice, in the very limited space they were given. I chose this basic outline, and more specifically to include a disagreement, because I felt that it kept with my desire to tell a short story. I was digging through and drawing from my literature toolbox. If I remember correctly from high school English, all good stories have a conflict. As work on this duet progressed, I kept clinging to the conflict and its importance as a climax in the overall phrase of the duet.

Eventually I realized the conflict itself and not its role as climax was the most important part to me. One rehearsal, as Matt exited the space of the square of light, leaving Colette standing alone, I was overcome with empathy for her, for the feet left alone. The whole dance had connected me to my experience of my parents' arguing when I was a child. They fought where I could not see what was happening, but the volume of their voices became so intense at times that I heard the sort of song of it all even if I could not always hear the words. The bursts of yelling were like my partial view of the whole picture, just the feet. My brain filled in the rest, sometimes with images of horror and sometimes with hope. And in the end, I felt alone. When all apologies and resolutions were made between them, I was alone and unresolved, the one left behind.

With my newfound interest in the moments of conflict, we moved forward attempting to highlight that physical idea even more. It was important to me that the female character in this situation, portrayed by Colette, not allow herself to be pushed around or bowled over, which would show to the audience through stumbling, faltering steps. We worked on ways for her to be able to drop her center of gravity lower in order to have better access to her weight against her taller, stronger, and heavier partner.

The only time I wanted the male character, Matt, to gain the upper hand was when he quickly lifted Colette just barely off the ground, arresting the whole image for a dreamlike moment. Here, he took Colette's capacity to ground and access her weight away from her, but the whole quality shifted for me. It was no longer about fight, but neither was it about giving up. It was just a short moment in the story that had been frozen in time, like a quick inhale that gets stuck in the lungs. I was slightly defensive to my own questioning mind in those moments. No, I am not portraying the female as weaker.

Another image we tried out was the skimming drag of Colette's toes across the floor in an arcing pathway, soles of the feet facing out toward the audience. The whole duet ends with Colette's feet completely disappearing from the frame, seemingly sucked up into the air as if abducted by aliens. Matt, in fact, quickly lifted her whole body as high as he could as she drew her knees up toward her chest. These were yet more moments in which Colette was seemingly passive or submissive to Matt's actions. Soon, I found my feminist mind gradually shifting and being drawn to the ambiguity of these less-than-feminist statements that I may or may not have been making. Woman is strong, and she will fight to keep her ground. That is until of course, by sheer strength, man takes the ground away from her. One day a memory floated into my consciousness. When I was a young teenager my mother said to me very gravely one day, "Robin, you have no clue how much stronger they [men] are than us. You would never know until you were in a situation in which they were already overpowering you."

The nature of this dance of conflict between man and woman shook the dust off of this old story for me. My immediate reaction was to be angry that my mother had even

said it to me. Was the goal to make me frightened of men? How about surrounding me with the sort of male role models that would never put a woman in that situation? Wouldn't it be better to present the information without making it personal, as though this was to be an inevitable occurrence in my life? I know that if she were to have a teenage daughter now, she might word things differently. But this dance between male and female partners, male and female feet, became a way for me to digest my anger from this memory.

Let me not neglect the fact that those feet were not just male and female, but were also husband and wife. Having done a work filled with volatile duet movement with my own husband in the past, I made sure to bring this up in conversation with Matt and Colette. I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge that I was asking them to direct physical, and therefore very real, aggressive energy toward one another. It can easily affect one's personal emotional climate, as well as the shared emotional sphere of a partnership.

I shared with them the reasons for my interest in this movement research connected with my mother and father. I felt comfortable doing so as they are both very old friends who are aware of much of the tumult in my family's history. I wanted to be sure that they felt they had a way to move through this dance healthily. They shared with me the sensation that the aggression was real and that they could feel its effects psychologically and emotionally, but they assured me that they and their relationship were all right. I am forever grateful to them for taking on the burden of the challenge as, in truth, it was not theirs to bear. But being able to see these ideas framed and on other

bodies, rather than experiencing them firsthand, was invaluable for me both as a dance maker and as a human going through life and dealing with her stuff. (See Figures 34-35.)

Much later in the creative process, I worked with Matt and Colette on duet material that traveled through the space of Zone 1, weaving through the audience and leading them toward the location in which the Foot Duet would happen. It was some of the last material that was created and was only worked on for two or three rehearsals. The task was two-fold, I needed a way for Matt and Colette to get to the other side of Zone 1, and I needed to create a shift in energy. We created a structured improvisation in which the key images were rush, gush, and spiral. I was drawing on inspiration from one of the Laban program classes on knots and spirals.

LIMS faculty Esther Geiger taught this class, citing the connection between these curvilinear forms in space and a lemniscate, figure eight, or mobius strip. I was in high school when I first began to develop a deep connection to spirals, obsessively drawing them on anything, including my own body. Kevin and I have adopted the infinity symbol ( $\infty$ ) as the emblem of our relationship. I am drawn to the curve of a spiral and its potential for infiniteness, how the farther one follows it, it only continues in earnestness, with even more richness of determination and commitment to the curve. It is the way I feel about life, love, humanity, and spirituality. I thought we could take all of this depth of emotional connection to the spiral, and pour it into a gushing pathway through the space.

My only stipulations to Matt and Colette were to resist the urge for recognizable dance vocabulary. I said that it should never feel like they were performing turns, because a body revolution did not equal the complexity of a spiral to me. I also asked them to

keep the distal initiation or decoration of the limbs to a minimum and instead enjoy throwing their core, their entire body into riding the waves of these rushing spirals. They could use each other and audience members as spatial points to spiral around and in this way keep a sense of relationship. I loved the feel of this very short section and how it quickly created a shift in the space of Zone 1 shared between audience and performers.

### Filming with the Experts

There was one more monumental way in which Matt and Colette contributed to the collaborative process of making *Projects for the Living*. In an early meeting with my lighting designer, Connor, he and I came up with the idea of using video as a way to connect to memory and keep the audience aware of Kevin and I during the initial zone-rotation phase of the performance. Within each zone, there would be video on display in varying forms that would depict quick flashes of imagery of Kevin and me. In Zone 1, Dan Patrick chose an archaic television. In Zone 2, the audience could select from a stack of VHS tapes to insert into a VCR. In Zone 3, the video played in a floor projection that I often danced within. The audience would not have enough time to try to glean a story from these films, and so instead we focused on evocative imagery using objects, settings, and scenarios from within the world of the work.

I enlisted the talents and expertise of Matt and Colette, as they are accomplished dance filmmakers. We had two shoot days, one inside a studio with controlled lighting, and one out in the woods just after a snowfall. Whenever I have endeavored to film vignettes like this for other projects in the past, I have never come prepared with a plan. This time Colette kept me on track, requiring that I secure locations, props, and lights ahead of time and that I compile a shot list. I could sense that I still was not as organized

for the shoots as they were accustomed to working, but each of their skill behind the camera and in directing came through in the end. I was thrilled with the final result in which framing was unusual, point-of-view was always shifting, and focus was soft. They truly captured the essence of what I wanted, even if I could not articulate it to them. (See Figures 27-28.)

### The Floor Duet: Celeste and Julia

Some of the first material I made was in one-on-one rehearsals with Celeste in Fall 2014. I wanted to further develop some of the ideas that came from the summer rehearsals in which I was watching from the outside with a broken ankle. The dancers moved across the floor on a low level like the elements moving across the Earth. I was reminded of Mary Oliver's *Wild Geese* again: "Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain/are moving across the landscapes,/over the prairies and the deep trees,/the mountains and the rivers" (Oliver). I wanted to take the movement qualities evoked by this imagery but give the dance a form and a relationship so that the audience felt like they were watching more than bodies rolling.

Early on in making this duet with Celeste, I noticed that both the dance and the relationship I had with the person dancing with me felt like an ode to the bygone childhood relationship I had with my sister, but with roles reversed. I am four years younger than my sister and spent the whole of my childhood looking up to her. For the past year and a half, a similar sort of feeling has been developing between Celeste and me. Before this, I cannot recall ever having been anyone's mentor in any sort of meaningful way. I have always felt like the goofball youngest child, carefree and making her own path.

My friendship with Celeste has created a huge shift in my life. Suddenly, someone is watching the choices that I make, the language that I use, and the way I conduct myself. She is curious about my opinions and asks for guidance and advice. When we began creating our floor duet together, I became acutely aware of the teaching and learning opportunities of the situation, for both of us. I felt like I imagine my big sister must have felt growing up with me by her side.

This nearly six-minute version of the duet did not make it into the final work. As heartbreaking as it was to admit, my thesis did not have room for this new relationship between Celeste and me. I also felt the disappointment in Celeste, although she kept herself fully open to whatever the creative process should require. I recast Julia in the duet in my place. Instead of accentuating the sister angle, I tried for simply older and younger, as Julia was my oldest cast member and Celeste was my youngest. Without having to layer it with significance, I was interested in the simple juxtaposition of these two bodies, one older and one younger. The movement was simplified and shortened, with a lot of repetition and theme and variation due to the constraints of space and time for that section. In the end, I found it to be a pleasing choreographic nugget, but it had lost the memory of my sister and the story of Celeste and me. Someday, I will reopen that chapter and do some more digging.

#### A Solo Amongst Duets: Celeste's Memory Solo

Perhaps because I felt so strongly about my one-on-one work with Celeste, I continued to hold rehearsals with her alone even after I had given my duet over to Julia. Instead, we took this time to work on a solo for Celeste. It had been a goal of mine for a while to incorporate the audience's memory papers that they filled out in the lobby into

the work. I had loftier ideas at one time that they would actually dictate the narrative of the work, but let go of those ideas eventually. I realized that the simple act of the audience members having to mine their own memories before entering the performance space was what mattered to me. I was also interested in them having to donate this piece of themselves to the project indefinitely. It was a way for them to feel like they had left an imprint on the work. Celeste's memory solo was simply a way for us to gather these memories. There was almost a sense of ritual to it of which I was fond. I enjoyed spending time with Celeste working out the details of timing sensitivity, subtlety in quality, spacing choices, and focus in order to imbue this moment of exchange with some meaning.

I made each and every one of those papers myself, all 375 of them. The paper had already been cut and aged by the prop department. I formatted the text on my computer to look like it had been made on a typewriter and printed each one individually, as my printer had issues with the non-uniform sizes of the papers. When I ran out of paper that was large enough for my printer, I made each one on new paper and tea-dyed it myself to look aged. This process took me about 12 hours the week of the performance. (See Figure 20.)

I am not complaining. In fact, to the contrary, I quite enjoyed making them myself. It felt like I had handmade a gift for each audience member. It felt like the difference between the props in *Sleep No More*, created by a props master, and the collection of personal artifacts in Mark Dion's *Octagon Room*. That personal connection made a difference to me. While there was no overwhelmingly grand plan for the use of the memory papers within the performance, they mattered to me. Celeste was the sort of

midwife, receiving the papers and bringing them into my world. I truly looked forward to being able to read, cherish, and keep these pieces of my show and my audience with me for the rest of my life. (See Figures 21-26.) I found out on closing night that the crew had been throwing away the memory papers for the previous three nights and there was no way to get them back. I was devastated. I cried like I had lost a performer. This loss still stings.

#### A Quartet Amongst Duets: The Floor Quartet

In a short period of time in which I was second-guessing myself for only making duets, I made a quartet for the two sets of partners in Zone 1. It was completely in unison, with little to no variation among each dancer, which again had me doubting my capabilities as a choreographer. But I was in love with the patterns of lines and curves it created on the floor. We constructed a quartet from movement material from my original duet with Celeste, which it seems I had so much trouble letting go of that it cropped up in every other section of my thesis I made after. The quartet read like a human kaleidoscope, or an ever growing and shrinking and growing mandala of human bodies. The audience stood in the round to watch, looking down on the designs unfolding and swirling across the floor below and in front of them.

The smallest of details and the subtlest of timing shifts was of the utmost importance to the success of this quartet. I would say that this section was one that received the most amount of rehearsal time, as it was difficult impressing upon certain cast members the necessity for specificity. Floor work may look luxurious, as that is indeed one of the goals of this type of movement in my piece, but in reality it is difficult and challenging work. This is another section that I could see myself revisiting in later

works. It would be wonderful to develop and expand the material and perhaps film it from above or, even better, perform it in a space that allows for an aerial view.

#### My Creatures: Sarah and Justin

At the time in which I was assigning dancers to zones, I had spent the least amount of rehearsal time with Sarah and Justin, having only one rehearsal with Sarah and none with Justin. In a way, I paired them together and placed them in Zone 2 because I had no existing material with them upon which to base my decisions. In a way, Zone 2 felt like the junk drawer in a kitchen.

Of course, I do not mean to say that I think of Sarah or Justin as junk or expendable. I would not have cast them if that were the case, as I only cast people in this work whom I was entirely sure I was excited to work with. But, after all of the other cast members were assigned to zones, I grouped the two dancers I knew the least about together into the zone I knew the least about. That made the first rehearsal both daunting and exhilarating. A blank canvas!

Just before my first rehearsal with Justin and Sarah I had a costume idea that sparked my imagination for the movement we would create together. This was a first for me, as I rarely give a thought to what my dancers wear. I fully recognize that costumes can make or break the piece, but my brain just does not think in that way usually. This time, however, as I stood in the studio and imagined the landscape as it would be in the theatre, with risers on two sides and bits and pieces of nature strewn about, I saw my dancers costumed as hooded, cloaked figures. They would crouch, hunched over on the risers, shrouded in mystery and blending in with the set. I saw them as half human and

half creature, close to the earth literally and figuratively, gritty and unpredictable like rodents perhaps. (See Figures 29-30.)

In rehearsal, movement material was almost exclusively developed by Sarah and Justin, based on different prompts for improvisation. These prompts included imagery, as well as specifications in space. Once we felt the content and space were working well together, we layered in what felt like the key element to me, time. As impulsive, twitchy, itchy creature/humans, the subtleties within the sudden shifts in rhythm were key. This was true of every section I created, but it held even more weight for the Zone 2 dance. As a group we would practice my sense of how each rhythmic phrase should feel. Each of my dancers could sing the dances just as much as move them. There were so many sharp movements that needed to click in unison that I allowed both Sarah and Justin to give each other auditory cues using breath or clicking sounds.

Interestingly enough, the space of Zone 2 felt the most open to me of all of the zones. The audience seemed to predominately stay off of the risers when Sarah and Justin were dancing on them, and there was enough room for them to run freely in swooping diagonals through the space. They only had to deal with the terrain of the risers, which presented some challenges to them as performers, but provided endless thrills for me as choreographer. I could watch the two of them on the risers all day long, melting down like sludge or scampering up like mice. The first time we actually rehearsed on the risers rather than in the flat studio space, I was over the moon in love with the qualities they brought to their movement in accommodating this new terrain.

I cast Sarah much earlier in the process than I did Justin. I knew Sarah Oppenheim from dance events in the Washington DC/Maryland/Virginia community and

from work with mutual friend Stephanie Miracle. After my first rehearsal with Sarah, I was slightly concerned that her movement style may not fit the flavor of my work. I felt that she often moved in ways that I would have previously defined as “dance-y.” There was a certain preciousness to the texture of her movement. A couple of weeks after that first rehearsal, in last-minute preparation for an informal showing of our work at First Friday, I asked her to develop an improvisation with keys on her own. I spoke with her briefly about my interest in an ever-shifting base, balancing keys on different surfaces of her body and replacing them when they inevitably fell.

When I returned to watch the solo minutes later, I found that she had created a mesmerizingly beautiful dance. It managed to somehow be low to the ground and gritty and also delicate and sensual. She even added a magical moment in which she would shake her head and keys would rain from her hair, scattering across the floor. The combination of her gritty, sensual movement with the auditory clangs and clacks of the keys was sensational. I knew in that moment Sarah was going to be integral to this work. Over time, I was continually filled with joy with all of the decisions she made on her own within the structure of my work. I became obsessed with her keen sensitivity to phrasing and with the smallest of details: the texture of her feet or hands, the angle she would turn her head with eyes downcast, and the weight of her steps. (See Figure 31.)

Justin Le was a student in my *Fundamentals of Modern Dance* class the first semester I taught at the University. It was also his first dance class, and one that started him on his journey to continue to pursue dancing. I had been enjoying watching him grow as a mover from a distance ever since when I made the decision to cast him. He was the last addition to the cast as I was thinking about adding one more male to the zone

dancers so that Matt Reeves was not alone. I made the decision after watching him move adeptly with force and weight in Lynne's thesis concert.

While working with someone who was relatively new to the dance making process was challenging at times, there were also times when his fresh perspective offered new ideas for movement. In the end, I found myself watching him slink down the risers, thinking how he looked like a seasoned contact improviser. Casting Sarah and Justin together turned out to be such a gift. They balanced and complemented each other qualitatively, and Justin learned from Sarah what I did not have the time to teach.

Since Sarah had her key solo, I also wanted Justin to have an element solo. For months of the process, this solo was a water dance, in which Justin stood under a stream of dripping water and continually shifted his body to catch the drops. (See Figure 16.) The audience would then come up to collect drops of water in their jars. This was one of the elements of my dance that I had to sacrifice in a production meeting. There was only one place the water drop could happen in the theatre due to slip hazards, and we learned six weeks before the show that there would also be a spotlight in that one place. Since water and electricity do not mix well, and the spotlight was essential to the design of Megan's thesis, I let go of my water dance. I barely wasted any time in mourning its loss, as I had none to spare, and instead shifted my focus to earth. I delegated the task to Justin, providing him a trunk full of dirt, to create an earth solo. I let him make his own choices to highlight the texture of the dirt using different qualities of movement and timing shifts, pushing and sifting it around with just his hands, and the audience was still able to collect this element with their jars.

Within Zone 2, there were trunks filled with pieces of nature. This was a compromise I made with the design and production team from my original idea to have Zone 2 be overgrown with nature. This would have been a challenge to strike in the short amount of time in changeover between the two thesis concerts. Early in making the creature dance, I came up with the idea of having the audience build fires with sticks from one of the trunks. I was interested in involving the audience in this task of building, creating. Later in the process, I knew I needed to somehow remove the remnants of the previous fire in order for the next group of audience to have the experience of building as well. Instead of coming up with some clever solution, I tried the most obvious idea in rehearsal. I had Sarah and Justin pick up their pile of sticks during the running section and continue running, scattering the sticks throughout the space.

The first place I had them drop sticks was a place at the wall where other significant moments during the dance had occurred. I asked them to run up to the wall and hold the pile of sticks against the wall. I prefaced this request by saying, “This is probably the wrong idea, but let my just see it anyway to make sure.” I found myself saying this sentence multiple times throughout the process of my thesis. And almost every single time, the wrong idea was exactly what the moment needed. Maybe eventually I will get to a point in my dance-making career in which I will not doubt myself and I will not even have to vocalize the possibility that I could be wrong. But at least in this process I felt comfortable enough to even risk making the wrong choice, perhaps even to look *stupid*. Without that risk, many of the more arresting moments within my piece would never have come to be.

## The Final Duet: Kevin and Robin

The making of this climactic duet between Kevin and I was a daunting project. In order to jumpstart the process, I gave myself the assignment of making a duet for the two of us in November 2014 in application to the Annual Choreographer's Showcase. The process was an accelerated one, as we made the duet in three or four rehearsals in order to make the audition deadline. My first step was to give myself spatial parameters to work within, as the thought of creating a dance for two for the vast space of the Dance Theatre intimidated me. It was just like my summer drawing sessions on small, business card-sized canvases. The limitations freed me. We made a rectangle to do our dance inside of, about 12 feet wide by 10 feet deep. We imagined it would actually be rendered by an isolated rectangular pool of light that we would pass in and out of, much in the same way that memories pass into and out of focus within one's mind.

The dance, entitled *shadow hers/shadow mine*, consisted of short vignettes of different aspects and faces of a relationship. There was tenderness, disagreement, tension, playfulness, and intimacy. At the end of each vignette we would exit the activated space of the rectangle and then reenter for the next. We played with timing by not always having a sense of completion to our phrases, sometimes beginning in the middle of a thought or memory, sometimes cutting moments short. At times, we experimented with shifts in who seemed to hold the power of a moment. On the literal level, we often alternated who had control over the timing or spacing of certain vignettes, keeping the dance democratic. We both fed our own memories of each other and our own movements into the process. Some of the strongest motifs that we returned to throughout the original

duet were created by Kevin, not me, because they were simple and unadorned, just the starkness the moment needed.

For the audition, we performed in silence because we had not decided on sound and we marked the rectangle with spike tape. A few days later, I learned the happy news that we were chosen for the showcase. We accepted the performance opportunity and continued the development of the work alongside the process of my thesis. I knew that now I would be getting into the real meat of this duet.

In work that I have created with Kevin in the past, I have begun to recognize certain patterns. The movement has been largely gestural, usually starting from a stable base, feet hip-width parallel. I tend to veer toward cause-effect types of movement mechanisms in which a movement I perform affects Kevin, which affects me, which affects Kevin, and so on. While there is still a part of me that finds pleasure in creating these sorts of human movement machines, I also recognize it as a sort of gimmick, or at the very least, a creative crutch upon which I heavily rely.

With the Choreographers' Showcase deadline looming, I definitely fell back into these old patterns for this duet as well. But I also felt that I was at least taking the time to acknowledge it. Firstly, being able to observe and identify my own patterns was key. I also took some time to at least ponder why it was that I had these preferences, even if they were previously subconscious. I noted that it was a very similar method of creating movement material to one I was deeply involved with as a dancer for Israeli choreographer Deganit Shemy's company in New York from 2008 to 2010. Additionally, I recognized that I had some distrust of both Kevin and the audience. I worried that it would be apparent to an audience that one of us was a well-trained dancer and the other

not. I felt that if I kept all of his movements limited to the realm of direct kinetic reactions to my movement, this difference in our movement backgrounds would be less noticeable.

This time, I wanted to celebrate the body and movement history that Kevin brought to the process. He is a distinct and beautiful mover, not only because he actually does have a keen kinesthetic sensitivity, but also simply because he is a human and has a body. I was finally ready to put my money where my mouth was on the issue of the universality of human movement and the beauty of the everyday. It was time to trust Kevin's innate capabilities and allow him to create and perform his own meaningful movements without the restriction of only a cause/effect relationship.

This led me to begin to analyze the types of relationship that could be explored through a duet, whether in dance, music, or in life. After cause/effect, the next logical option ripe for exploration was unison. For much of my dance making life, I have thought negatively of unison. It seemed too easy, like only half the work had been done. The movement was made and the dancers could perform it, but the relationship between them would inevitably be flat and underdeveloped. I would not say in any certain terms that I planned it this way, but it seems that my thesis project was not only a study in duets, but also more precisely a study in unison. It seems that I wanted to squeeze all of the depth and richness I could out of unison movement.

This proves true for three duets in my thesis, and even parts of my final duet with Kevin. Sometimes our aim was exact uniformity, an eerie sort of twinning effect. At other times, we would try to delicately or dramatically highlight dissimilarities in timing, spacing, quality, or even within the inherent differences between bodies. I think it is safe

to say that my formerly negative opinion of unison has drastically shifted to a deep appreciation for its ability to highlight one of my favorite movement qualities, subtlety.

With my thesis, I feel that I was still making my fledgling attempts at another type of duet relationship, complementary movement that harmonizes. Here, the connection is trickier as it is more fluid and ever changing. While this type of duet may have cropped up here and there in my thesis, I know that I have not yet had the time I desire to sink my teeth into it. And perhaps another project for the future would be to dabble in dissonance and discord.

There were at least three drafts of the final duet between Kevin and me before we finally discovered the winner. For a very long time, our first draft was the duet we had performed in the Choreographers' Showcase, *shadow hers/shadow mine*. I kept thinking of it as a placeholder for the dance we would eventually make, as it was a dance made for a proscenium, not a mobile audience. It did not work to simply insert that dance in its full original version into the world of my thesis. In our first new draft, we dropped the *shadow hers/shadow mine* material and played with revisiting all of the zones, attempting to shed light on the significance of the previous happenings in each zone by connecting them to memories. Kevin and I cycled through the zones much in the same way the audience had done, but with each cycle, I got farther and farther ahead of Kevin until I was gone and he was left alone. In the next duet draft, we kept the same basic structure, but added more dancing and text about memories. With this draft, I discovered that we were on the wrong track with the movement, but the right track with the text.

### *I Remember*

In Fall 2014, before I split my cast into zones, I had a handful of full cast rehearsals in which everyone who could be there was present. We did not make dances in these rehearsals, as apparently I can only do so with two dancers present, maybe four. Instead I used them as brainstorming sessions. We sat in a circle together and talked about my thesis: all of the ideas and images I had, discussions with designers, wild fantasies. There were truly some magical and wildly fantastic ideas thrown about in these meetings. But also, I used this time to hone in on the themes of the work. We did individual writing assignments in multiple rehearsals centered around memory and sensation.

I had them describe memories of their favorite tree as a child, memories of fire, memories of being disappointed. One of the richest prompts was for the memory that you do not want to remember. Within these writings, I made sure they did not feel that they had to actually relive the story or divulge the details. They only had to share pieces. Without realizing it at the time, I was actually interested in ethnographic accounts of these memories: sensory-rich descriptions that conjured imagery more than accounts of reality. I spoke with them about the challenge of being asked to revisit painful memories, as I was concerned they would follow them outside of rehearsals. Sarah expressed how it felt good to give the memory away to someone else, and for it to be repurposed, to have a new life.

I collected these memory pieces, gathered my favorite parts of what were already fragments, and stored them in my computer. I did not revisit them until the last few weeks of the whole process, when Kevin and I were desperately grasping for a sense of

culmination of meaning in our duet. I opened the memory file and began reordering the bits and pieces to form a loose sort of story portrait of this couple. And then I added two vitally important words sporadically throughout the jumble of images. They were two simple words that grounded the text and allowed the audience to see the couple empathetically: “I remember.” (See Appendix E.)

Once I realized the weight of this statement, and the significance that the emcee was the person saying it, the poor man who built an entire machine to help him remember, the duet began to make itself. With each “I remember” we began a new vignette, a new glimpse into the past, at least the way he saw it. And then the strongest components of our old duet, *shadow hers/shadow mine*, fell back into place. They were the visual/kinesthetic component to the spoken word memories. (See Figures 32 and 40.) And lastly, we fit it all together by still moving through the space of the theatre, revisiting different zones and sites where previous memories had unfolded. And we did not move alone. The audience came on the journey with us, led by my zone dancers. In the end, when I backed off into the shadows and disappeared, leaving Kevin alone in the center of the theatre, I could truly sense the weight of the hearts of each audience member. (See Figure 41.)

### My Deeper Study of the Duet

In my first year of graduate studies, dance faculty Sara Pearson gave my cohort a writing assignment in our *Choreography I* class to write a poem in which every line began with the words, “No more.” It was a chance to say a farewell of sorts, whether it was to something or someone we were happy to be rid of or an experience of great loss. Without overthinking, I immediately began writing a farewell to Kevin, as if in some

alternate reality we would have to part ways. The poem was not particularly spectacular, but the sentiment behind it left a lasting impact on me. I later choreographed a short solo in my wedding gown based on this assignment called *Torrent*, which I performed in the 2013 Shared Graduate Dance Concert. When I think about it now, I see the final duet and the larger theme of loss within *Projects for the Living* as ways in which this assignment has stayed with me. It was a chance to open up the sensation of loss to anyone and everyone who was willing to feel it with us in those final moments in the Kogod Theatre. The sensation that Kevin and I shared with the audience was palpable and real, and just the feeling of it was its own reward.

In the summer of 2012, just before I would begin my graduate school journey and seven years after our inaugural Awesome Summer, Kevin and I orchestrated and successfully executed our second Awesome Summer. We moved away from New York, living as blissful, carefree drifters. We spent a month with our families before traveling to Europe for a seven-week backpacking trip. On this journey across the continent, before either of us owned smartphones, we discovered even richer shades to our relationship, both the light and the dark. We got lost in every single city we visited. In Ireland, we sprawled out together on a cliff jutting out over the Atlantic Ocean, watching the sky change above us in perfect silence. Walking beside the Parliament in Budapest, we chuckled together at our choice to get married so young. We thought we knew what love was then, but in the years since had come to know a fuller, deeper sense of it.

One of the moments that has left the deepest imprint on me was an argument. Although I remember them, the cause and contents of the argument are not actually relevant. I will describe the *event*:

*As we walked down the streets of Prague in June, I began to seethe, roil and boil with rage toward Kevin. I was speaking to him in harsh and sharp tones, and he was responding with softness and evenness. I hate it when he does that. I could not control the storm anymore. I erupted, skin hot and angry, eyes wide in disbelief. Standing at an intersection, I was yelling, screaming, raging at Kevin. I have no recollection of what I said. I can only imagine what I sounded like. He tried to take my arm to... what? Control me? More likely it was to comfort me. I flung his hand off me and rallied all of my strength to shove him away from me, while yelling, and this I remember clearly, "DON'T TOUCH ME."*

*Pause. This is a concept I learned about later in theatre faculty Leslie Felbain's Alexander Technique class at UMD, and I definitely experienced a version of it in that moment. Sometimes things happen in life that make you pause. And in that pause there is space to perhaps make a different choice. For me, it always feels like there is some climactic spike of energy experienced in the body, followed by an uncomfortable buzz of self-awareness. An explosion precedes an unsettling stillness in which I can finally see myself, my actions, and my choices.*

*Shove. "DON'T TOUCH ME." Pause. This embodied moment of rage allowed me to momentarily have a sort of out-of-body experience of awareness. I could see myself from outside the situation. I was like an animal. I was like my father and mother in those arguments so many years ago.*

I will not lie and say that I made a complete 180-degree turn in my behavior patterns after that. But this was definitely a turning point in our Europe trip. And in time, it proved to be a turning point in our marriage. Once I became aware that I actually am

capable of that level of anger, to which I was sure I was immune, I learned to recognize the beginnings of it brewing in me. I use these warning signs to pause. And in that space, I choose to be the kind of partner I want to be. I began the journey of applying this self-awareness in my relationship with Kevin immediately. I entered graduate school knowing that this journey would continue as I was still healing from my own self-inflicted wounds of hurtfulness and the accompanying shame. I knew my time here would involve taking long, hard looks at myself, the darkness of which I was capable, and choosing something else.

And so, it comes as no surprise to me that my thesis project was my way of unpacking how I feel about the duet and the potential for loss. The more I have learned about myself in my three years at UMD, the more I have learned about what it means to collaborate, to be a partner. The process of making my thesis has been a precious gift to me in my efforts to be the best partner I can be to Kevin. This creative process has also been a healing one. And the timing could not have been more perfect, as Kevin and I prepare to embark on our next process, that of parenting. Perhaps it is time to start exploring the trio.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

To me, the success of my work can be judged by the moments that the audience fully entered the world, believed in the magic of the moments, and engaged their own imaginations in creating meaning within the work. Below, I have gathered memories of these moments, along with my own memories of the beautiful collaborations of which I had the honor to be a part.

I remember Patrik using two flashlights he found within the set to “light” the fires in Zone 2.

I remember Chelsea’s friend who took off his shoes before he would stand on a book in Zone 1.

I remember my father searching in the cracks and crevices of the floor for the red key in Zone 3.

I remember JC finding a Japanese fan in Zone 1 and taking it with him, later using it to fan the flames of the fire in Zone 2.

I remember the dance of confusion between Matt and Miriam when he was attempting to get her to stand on a book in Zone 1, and it ending with Miriam holding a stack of books instead.

I remember having to throw my body onto the table in Zone 3 to keep the curious audience from ripping off my paper while looking for the red key.

I remember worrying that my dancing might hurt the baby.

I remember the feeling of both pure relief and utter joy from the hug Connor gave me on opening night.

I remember Esther digging through the trunk of pinecones because she was convinced she would find a secret.

I remember making a secret to hide in the pinecones later, a tea-dyed paper with excerpts from one of my favorite poems.

I remember my difficulty in getting a key out of my father’s jar in Zone 3, and how apologetic and giggly he was under his breath.

I remember collecting leaves and pinecones on a sunny fall day with a smile on my face.

I remember collecting rocks in the rain and how they left a wet splotch on my shirt where I had carried them like a kangaroo.

I remember the feeling of doing contact improvisation with Kevin in one of our earliest rehearsals, in order to connect with and trust each other.

I remember laughing honestly and loudly during tech for the final duet because Kevin told me that kittens had caused the scratch marks on the surface of the piano.

I remember watching Karen watch the audience and not the dance.

I remember Sara sitting on the floor mere inches in front of Matt and Colette's violent duet, when there was no one else in the audience except her, and not budging an inch.

I remember Kevin backing up and nearly stepping on my mother in a performance and her calmly placing a hand on his lower back so that he would tactilely know she was there.

I remember the hug Sharon gave me when I told her I was pregnant.

I remember Kevin and I holding up the palms of our hands to the fire on closing night, the day we found out that our baby was currently the size of the palm of a hand.

I remember making a promise to myself that I simply would not allow myself to get stressed out during tech and performance week.

I remember breaking that promise.

I remember the pain I felt when I found out that I had forever lost some audience memory papers.

I remember the heartbreak I saw in Ruth's eyes when she felt responsible for the loss of the memory papers.

I remember reading through tears the memory papers that the entire cast and crew filled out for me to make up for the lost ones in some small way.

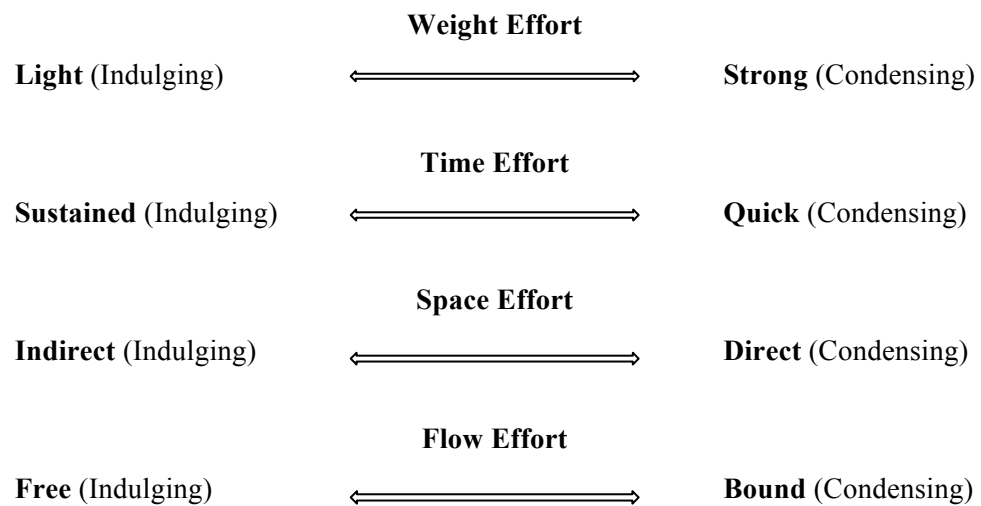
I remember an audience member stepping forward to be there for Lynne's touch when she was blindly reaching out into space.

I remember my mother-in-law dumping the entire contents of her Mason jar, dirt and all, into her purse on closing night with a huge grin on her face.

# Appendix A

## Laban Movement Analysis: Effort

Movement qualities can be described by the mover's use of weight, time, space, and flow. Each of these Effort factors exists upon a continuum between a more indulgent side and a more condensing manner of moving. The following visual representation of the Effort elements is my own adaptation from my learning within the Laban Certification program, but a similar chart can be found in *Everybody is a Body* (Studd and Cox 137).



Appendix B  
Comparison of Modernism and *Wabi-Sabi*

Extracted from a table comparing the aesthetic notions of Modernism and *Wabi-Sabi* (Koren 26-29).

<b>Modernism</b>	<b>Wabi-Sabi</b>
Absolute	Relative
Looks for universal, prototypical solutions	Looks for personal, idiosyncratic solutions
Expresses faith in progress	There is no progress
Believes in the control of nature	Believes in the fundamental uncontrollability of nature
Geometric organization of form (sharp, precise)	Organic organization of form (soft, vague)
Needs to be well-maintained	Accommodates to degradation and attrition
Purity makes its expression richer	Corrosion and contamination make its expression richer
Solicits the reduction of sensory information	Solicits the expansion of sensory information
Is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction	Is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction

Appendix C  
*Still Waters*, Lyrics by Jim White

*Still Waters*, Lyrics by Jim White  
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Well, I was shackled up down in Mobile  
With a girl from New York City  
She woke me up one night to tell me  
That we weren't alone

She said, she saw the ghost  
Of a woman staring at me  
I told her not to worry  
But in the morning when I woke up, she was gone

So I headed on to Florida where  
I tangled with some sailors  
And as I lay bloody on the wharf  
I cursed the ship they sailed on

Wouldn't you know, twenty four hours later  
That ship sank into the ocean  
Disappearing like an unwanted memory  
Beneath the waves

I guess it's 'cause still waters run  
Run deep in me  
'Cause I got this crazy way, crazy way  
I'm swimming in still waters

And I was woke up just before dawn  
By an old man crying in the rain  
He was drunk and he was lonely  
And as he passed by he sang a hymn

And as I lay there listening  
Well, I almost joined him in that song  
But instead I just held my peace  
And waited 'till that old man moved along

Then later on that day  
About a quarter mile out of town  
I found his body hanging in  
A grove of pines, swaying in the wind

And as he swang that rope sang  
Another hymn to Jesus  
And this time, though I don't know why  
I somehow felt inclined to sing along

I guess it's cause still waters run  
Run deep in me  
'Cause I got this crazy way, crazy way  
I'm swimming in still waters

Yes, and there are projects for the dead  
And there are projects for the living  
Thought I must confess sometimes  
I get confused by that distinction

And I just throw myself into the arms  
Of that which would betray me  
I guess to see how far providence  
Will stoop down just to save me

And it's all because, still waters run  
Run deep in me  
'Cause I've got this crazy way, crazy way  
I'm swimming in still waters

Appendix D  
*Projects for the Living Opening Text*

The Emcee's Opening Monologue  
Written by Robin Neveu Brown and Kevin Brown

Come. Come in. We must not waste time. It does not flow back. It does not flow back.

Behold my cunning, clever creation. It winds and ticks. It sings and falls. It flies, and seethes, and splits, and screams, and stings, and rolls, and walks, and talks, and hears, and feels, and smiles, and cries, and sinks, and shakes, and shouts, and dies. It opens. It unfolds. It unwraps. It shuts up. It is very clever. Very, very clever indeed.

Clever, but unfinished. I need your help. Will you please read this paper aloud?

Yes, boldness goes a long way in here. I'll need those daring souls to help rebuild the memories.

You see, memory is like water. An ocean sloshing, frothing, turning and churning with little regard for those living within it.

It all spills into a puddle that quickly seeps into the grout before you can get a hold of it. Or it dissipates into a thick, chewy fog stuffing the backs of our eyes, where its true form can never accurately be seen. Memory is rarely solid and never fixed.

Behold my mightiest invention, a machine for remembering, and, as it seems, for forgetting. But lucky for you, it also has the ability to create breath. To create astonishments, amazements, and wonders.

It feeds on memories in order to function. You must pay the toll to enter.

Come. Come. We must not waste time. It does not flow back. It does not flow back.

Written Audience Instructions  
Written by Robin Neveu Brown and Kevin Brown

This is not a theatre in which you will sit comfortably in a chair and watch a show. It is a machine built for remembering and forgetting, in which memories will fold into and out of the darkness.

There will be much to see and do.

The machine you are about to enter is divided into three chambers.

You will spend a specific amount of time in each chamber before a bell will sound, signifying the time to move on.

Crew members dressed in black will help direct you in your transition between chambers. Should you ever need assistance, refer to these crew members, stationed at the entrance of each chamber.

In order for the machine to function properly, your help in completing certain tasks will be required.

You may need to find or collect objects, or build something.

The machine needs your participation in order to unlock memories and move forward.

Please do not speak once inside the machine.  
You may find yourself separated from your friends.  
Be brave.  
This will be the best way to enjoy your experience.

When in doubt, always remember that there are no rules.  
Explore the space, touch whatever you want, and be adventurous!

Fortune favors the bold.

Appendix E  
*I Remember* Monologue

*I Remember Monologue*

Woven together by Robin Neveu Brown from writings from the entire cast

I remember:

Shadow hers. Shadow mine.

Black as black as black.

A flash of leg, soft pink.

With a sharp line of black cutting across the thigh.

A soft pink hand draped across the top.

I remember:

Tiny fingers reaching into the warm earth.

The air had a brine to it.

It seemed to always be changing.

I remember:

Skin hot and angry, but eyes smiling.

Fire. smoke. black center dancing, crinkling, folding in on itself.

Fire eats quickly.

It seems to always be changing.

I remember:

The two of us feeling like the only light on Earth, roaring in the darkness.

I remember:

It's dark and she's barely visible.

She speaks softly, softer than I'm used to hearing her.

She repeats.

I am close to her, but not touching.

I remember:

My tears are on her face.

Unchanging.

It speaks in ears. In hushed sweet tones.

Sweet to cover the dark.

Black as black as black.

I remember:

She moves lightly, but leaves a deep footprint.

I remember:

It was like home, but not home. A beautiful cage.

In which sharp, waspy voices tore at each other in the night.

I remember:

The high pierce of her disbelief.

The hot damp feeling of the sheets clinging to her frustration.

I remember:

Her voice in the night suggesting the impossible.

It does not let go. It grips, it wrings.

I remember

Shadow hers. Shadow mine.

Black as black as black.  
It's dark and she's barely visible. Already fading.

What does it feel like to become nothing?

I'll show you what it feels like to be what was left behind. To be a remnant. This. This is what it feels like.

Home, but not home. Close, but not touching. Sweet to cover the dark.

I can't remember anymore. That's it. It's all gone. I forget.  
If you see her on your way out, let me know. The machine has failed, again. We'll try again tomorrow.

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## Images of Influences



Figure 1. Site-specific rehearsals for PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER.  
Photo by Jonathan Hsu.



Figure 2. Site-specific rehearsals for PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER.  
Photo by Jonathan Hsu.



Figure 3. Site-specific rehearsals for PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER.  
Photo by Jonathan Hsu.

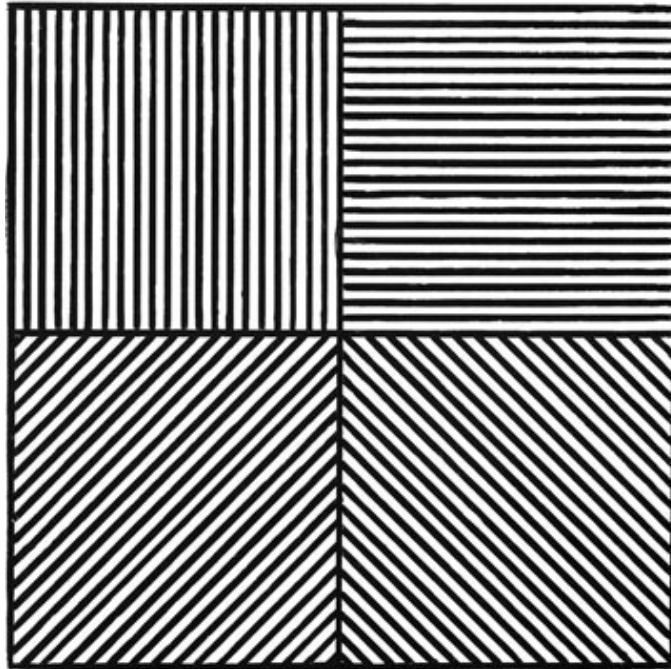


Figure 4. Sol LeWitt's *Bands in Four Directions*, 1980.

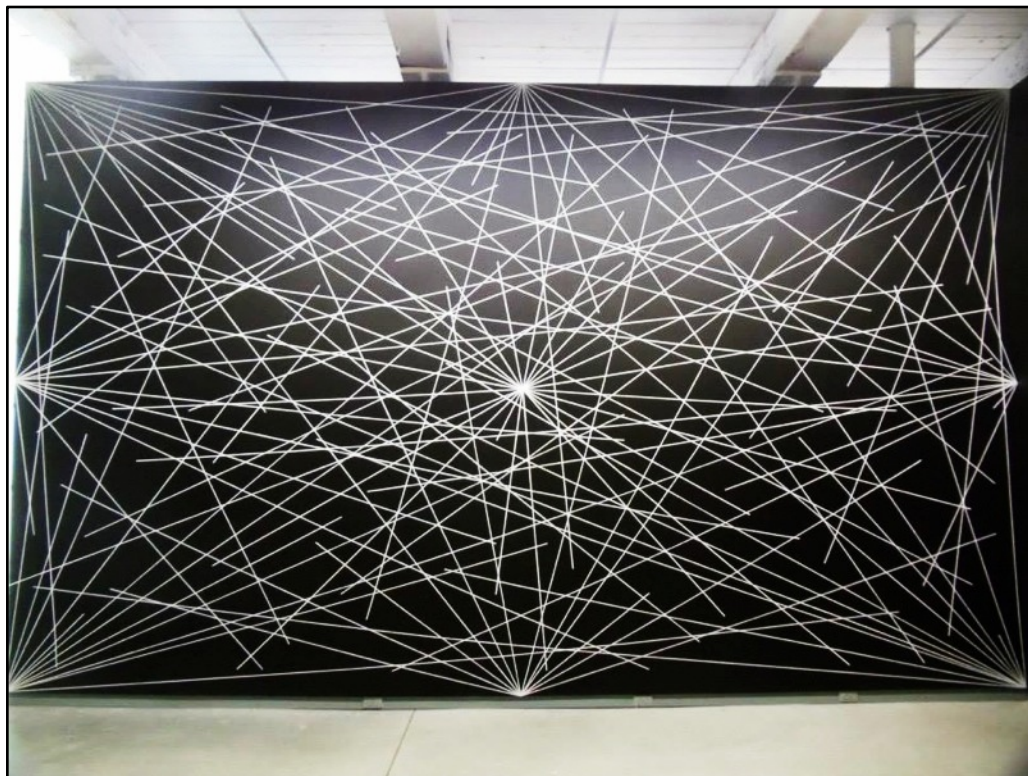


Figure 5. Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #289*, 1978.



Figure 6. Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #793B*, 1996.



Figure 7. Sol LeWitt's *Scribbles*, 2005.





Figure 10. Mark Dion's *Octagon Room*. Photo by Art Evans.



Figure 11. Mark Dion's *Octagon Room*. Photo by Eddee Daniel.

## Images of the Process

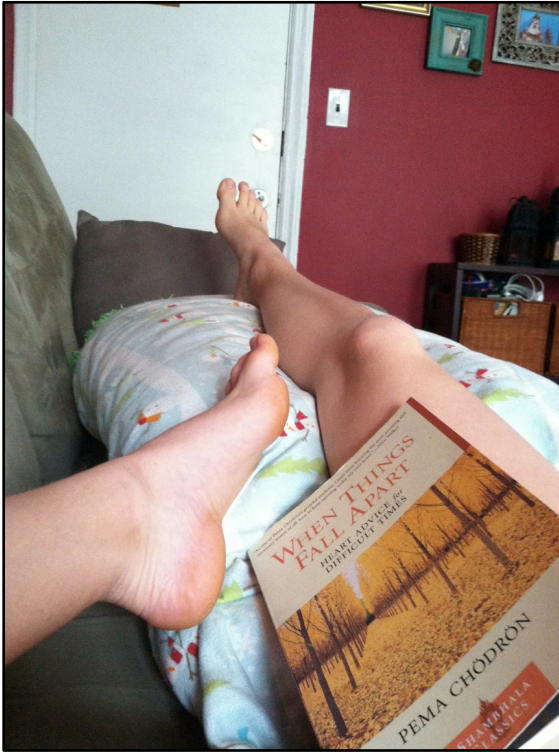


Figure 12. Me and my broken ankle. Summer 2014.



Figure 13. First day on set with Dan Patrick Leano (far right).



Figure 14. In a costume fitting, seeing Robert Croghan's designs for the decay detail on the back of my dress.



Figure 15. Enjoying my favorite part of the lighting design by Connor Dreibelbis, the hanging bulbs.



Figure 16. Stage manager Ruth Anne Watkins assisting with the water drip solo during a showing.



Figure 17. Collecting leaves, pinecones, and sticks.

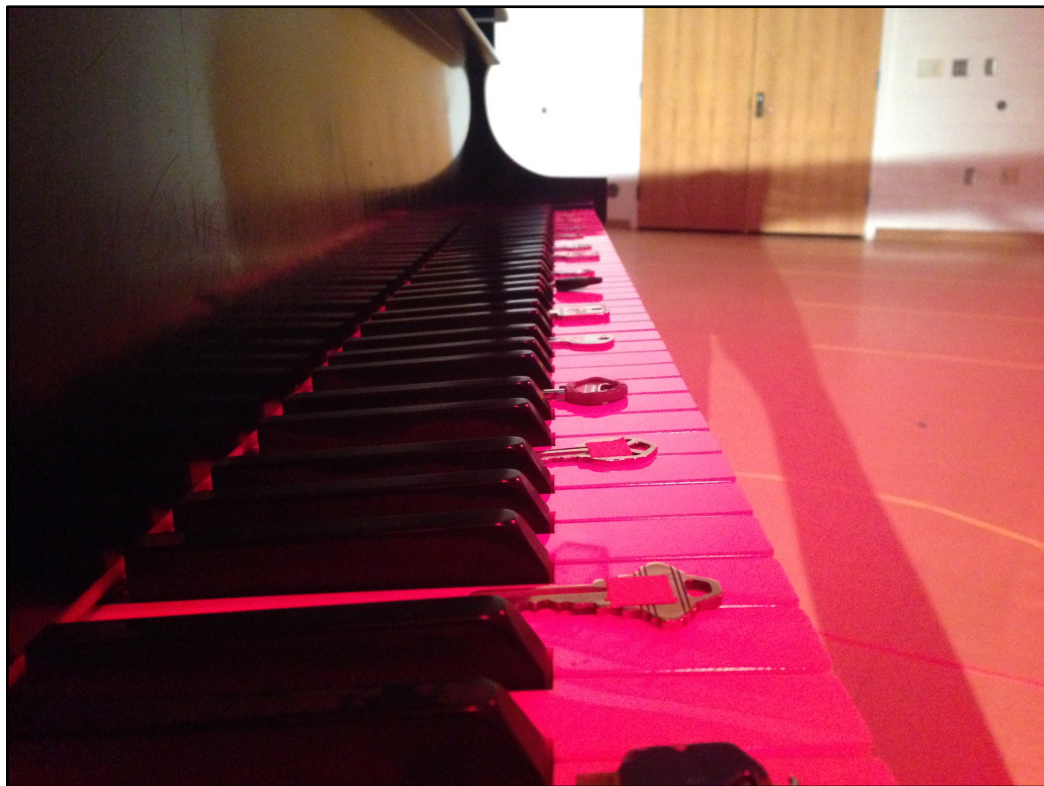


Figure 18. The collection of keys arranged for a showing.



Figure 19. The collection of rocks arranged around dancer Colette Krogol.



Figure 20. Working on formatting and printing the memory papers.

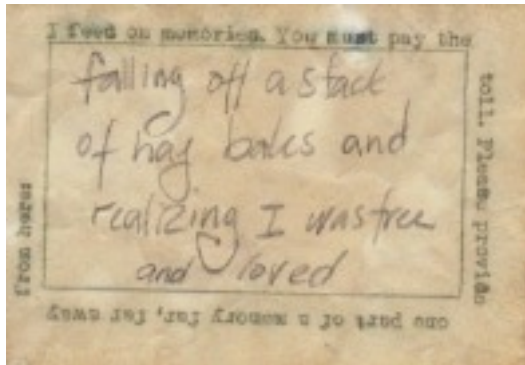


Figure 21. An audience member's memory.

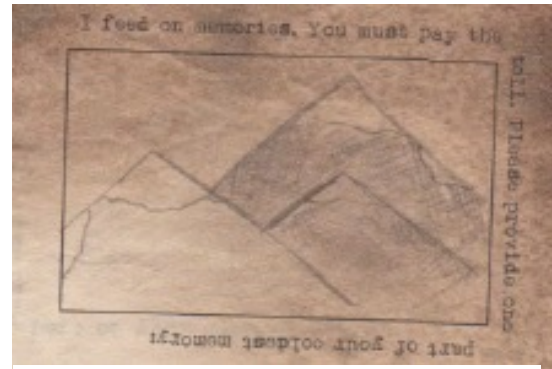


Figure 22. An audience member's memory.

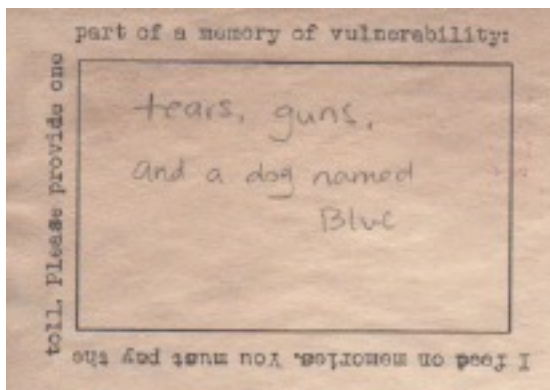


Figure 23. An audience member's memory.

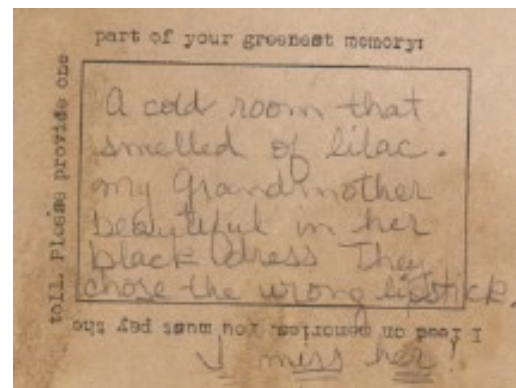


Figure 24. An audience member's memory.

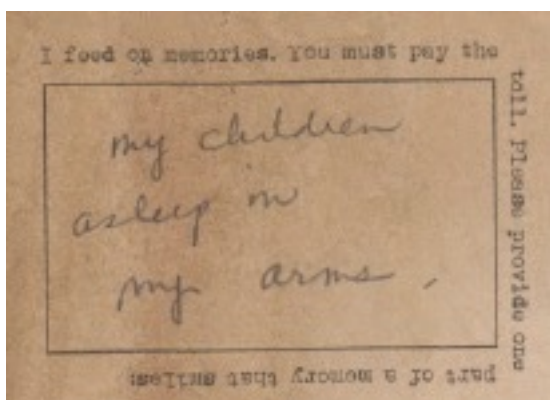


Figure 25. An audience member's memory.

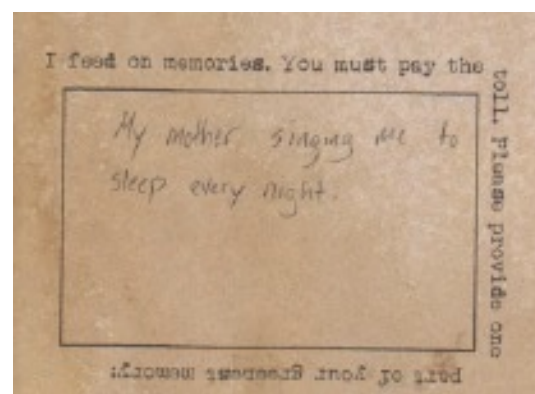


Figure 26. An audience member's memory.



Figure 27. Filming with Matt Reeves and Colette Krogol.



Figure 28. Filming with Matt Reeves and Colette Krogol.

## Images of the Performance



Figure 29. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.

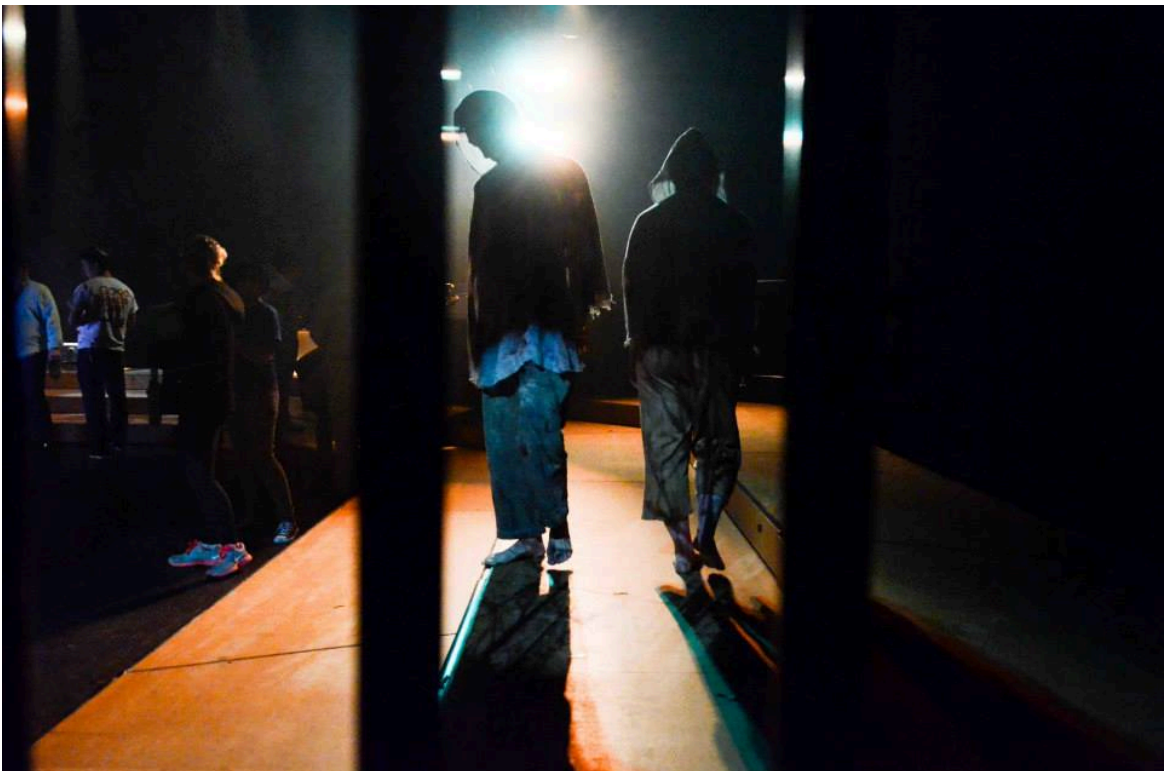


Figure 30. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 31. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 32. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 33. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.

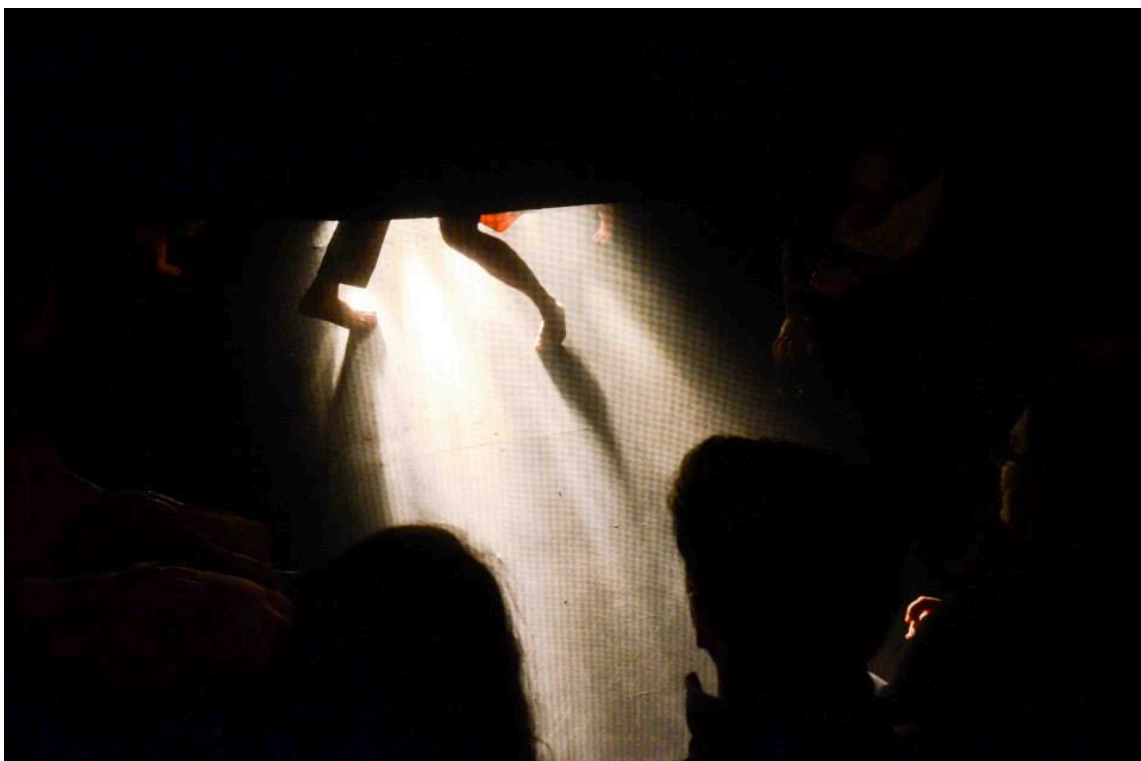


Figure 34. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 35. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 36. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 37. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 38. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 39. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 40. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.



Figure 41. Photo by Zachary Z. Handler.

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