

CHOREOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND MY AESTHETIC

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions how the choreographic medium can create new meaning and benefit from the appropriation and manipulation of elements from popular culture such as television and cinema. The thesis process has been an arduous joy set in motion many years ago. Time has become a pervasive and instrumental portion of my creative research. Taking the time to understand and honor my artistic inspiration, how much time an audience can maintain their attention span, and how television and cinema use time, have all become essential parts of my investigatory process.

Time is a commodity in our society I am intent on understanding that state and manipulating it for choreographic ends. The irony presented by time is the duration required to comprehend its influence. I will in some way have to overcome my own attention deficit disorder to deal with how much time I will spend investigating this particular question.

Much of the time spent during my choreographic process is focused on choosing performers. I work in a collaborative way that employs my performers creativity and artistry. The people with whom I work help define my vision and propel my creative voice forward. My work would neither find its depth or clarity without the people with whom I work.

My process of appropriating and using ideas inspired by television was explored in a creative evening length dance theatre work entitled ***THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life***. This choreoplay was artistic interdisciplinary research on my thesis question, which pulled a character from our *television* past. This character was then transformed and manipulated to shed light on the meaning of gender, relationships, and the human condition. Exploring theme and variation by altering the performer, theatrical context, and/or musical choices helps my choreographic voice create conceptual through lines, while balancing the tasks of directing, writing, performing, scheduling, and choreographing proved a challenging difficulty. This choreographic journey further developed my choreographic voice and is dissected here to inform about my particular process, what developments arose due to my research question, and how my creative voice was affected.

I. INTRODUCTION

How can the choreographic medium create new meaning and benefit from the appropriation and manipulation of elements from popular culture such as television and cinema?

This question has been driving my creative research for many years. I have spent endless hours pursuing popular culture as a pastime and at some point my guilty pleasure became a choreographic interest. Popular culture is a phenomenon referring to anything that infiltrates the culture's consciousness. This could range from attention deficit disorder to Paris Hilton to Omarosa from the television show *The Apprentice*. The portions of pop-culture on which I will be focusing my thesis are television, movies, and popular music. Television has many subsets such as situation comedies, dramas, soap operas, reality television, talk shows, and various other categories. Movies also represent a variety of genres. Television and movies helped form my personality and interests.

I have been struggling with ideas of how I would make dance more appealing for myself since my teenage years. I am engaged in these pursuits to this day and capitalizing on my own interests seemed a perfect place to start to make work that I would find interesting, provocative, and challenging.

How can I, as a dance artist, engage my audience and create work of artistic integrity? As an artist I want to create work that balances entertainment and art. Can we as

artists and choreographers create work that is artistically investigated, viewer-friendly, challenging, and able to create an audience base that extends beyond the world of dance? I constantly struggle with how to balance entertainment with artistic integrity. Weighing the scale between high art and low art and the judgments placed based upon those labels become tricky. As an artist it seems to be a pervasive feeling that if I am doing high art I am somehow better than, as opposed to a lesser creator presenting a form of low art. I do not believe these things are necessarily separate but they often seem to be separated. My creative aspirations are to both challenge and entertain my audience. I have turned to popular culture and theatre to answer my queries. The creative portion of my thesis, a dance theatre/choreoplay work titled *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life*, was the way in which I addressed these questions and will be the focus of this written document. I would like to address the term choreoplay then present some information about dance theatre.

While writing this thesis I struggled with how best to label my creative thesis work *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life*. This piece incorporates singing, dancing, theatrical scenes, and monologues to investigate its story and characters. The story is linear in nature and lends itself more to the traditional idea of a play. I have referred to the work as avant guard musical theatre, dance theatre, interdisciplinary dance theatre, and finally a choreoplay. As I struggled to categorize my artistic work, I thought of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girl's Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. This work is a series of poem monologues that are infused with dance to tell the story. A light bulb went off in my head and I decided that the best way to describe my creative thesis work was as a choreoplay because the dance as well as the theatre

conveyed the story. After deciding upon a term, I relied on cyberspace to see if any other artists had used this term I thought I created. As it turns out many artists, including Mark Dendy with whom I worked, have been using this term. In all the examples I found the choreoplays use theatre, dance, music, and occasionally singing to convey a subject and narrative.

Dance theatre is a form that weaves together dance and theatre to create meaning. Through the use of sets, costumes, pageantry, narrative (abstract or not), masks, and dance work accessing tools from the world of theatre. What some people refer to as dance theatre others would just call dance. I consider myself a dance theatre artist. I have a broad sense of the word because I believe dance has been integrating aspects of theatre for a long time.

As a dance student taking dance history I learned there was a time when people danced for the crops, rain, and war. Dancers adorned the Stations of the Cross and illustrated religion. Dance helped people grapple with their human experience. The origins of dance were filled with pageantry and were in nature theatrical. These rituals were soaked in subjects that created purpose and content. Ritual is not the same thing as theatre but ritual relied on theatre to establish its theme. I believe these tribal and religious dances show the origins of dance theatre as well as the origins of dance.

Dance on the global stage is for the most part theatrical. Elaborate sets, costumes, and text are often used to create a theatrical surrounding in which the dance lives. Dance theatre tends to be more abstract than what we think of as theatre. That is not to say that theatre is never abstract, just that dance tends to be more like a dreamscape than reality. American modern dance has pulled movement out and created an art form dedicated to the pursuit of movement for its own merits. Many of the voices driving dance theatre forward

pull images and ideas from their own imaginations while others look to artistic classics and recreate standards with their own dance theatre aesthetic. Given the surfeit of artists who added to the voice of dance theatre, a complete history of their work would be a thesis in and of it self. There are, however a few artists I would like to mention before I go further.

Many would refer to Germany's Pina Bausch as the mother of dance theatre. I certainly was presented that perspective as a dance history student. Bausch uses dance theatre to explore a bleak vision of humanity. Pina Bausch creates surreal theatrical landscapes in which the dance breathes and her vision is explored. Elaborate sets, pedestrian costumes, dialogue, and hyper-abstract narrative help clarify her dance theatre aesthetic. For example, in her 1982 work *Carnations*, the stage was filled with silk carnations that were trampled as the dance theatre work progressed, or her 1979 work *Arien* , which had her company wading through water that covered the entire stage. Bausch's use of imagery immerses her work in a theatrical setting that informs the audience and the choreography.

A more contemporary choreographer propelling the voice of dance theatre forward, whose work is innately theatrical, is Matthew Bourne. He has revised and directed such classic ballets as *Swan Lake* and *Carmen*. He creates new contexts in which these classics live. His cast of *Swan lake* (Matthew Bourne, Swan lake, 1995) features a lake filled with male swans. Bourne's *The Car Man* (Matthew Bourne, The Car Man, 2000) is placed in a garage and the characters are literally "car men" working on cars. His vision is so theatrical that he named his company *Adventure in Motion Pictures*. He not only views himself as choreographer but also as a director and has been critically recognized for both. By redefining classics and creating a new vision, Bourne's work manipulates ballet's theatre in

a more contemporary way. His work has already appeared on the big screen in the 2000 film *Billy Elliot* and he is currently pulling from cinema to create a new work based on Tim Burton's 1990 film classic *Edward Scissorhands*, Bourne's version premieres in November of 2005.

Though Europe tends to lean more toward theatrical dance, America is not without its dance theatre voices. Joe Goode has been weaving text, singing, and movement together since 1979. According to his company's web page, Goode uses gestures, humor, text, and highly physical dance to create his personal version of dance theatre. Goode's work explores the human condition through the integration of the performing arts and he views himself as a director and writer as well as a choreographer. In Joe Goode's press material he is quoted as saying:

I want to humanize the dance form, which at times seems very austere and distant. The stories I tell are very human, grounded in intimacy and compassion. Really, compassion is the overwhelming agenda here. I want an audience to go to their own intimate experience. The story may be specific in plot and character, but the perspective is generalized to get to audiences to take it into their own lives. They should be deeply moved by the simple truths that are the foundation discipline of my work. (Joe Goode, 2005)

Jane Comfort is another American Dance Theatre artist who has been creating interdisciplinary work since the seventies. She has choreographed and worked in theatre as well as modern dance and received numerous dance and theatre awards. Jane Comfort has created dance works based on such famous literary voices as Tennessee Williams and William Shakespeare. In 1988 Jane Comfort's *Cliffs Notes: Macbeth* used Shakespeare's famous play and featured wallstreet yuppies and urban punk rockers battling to be masters

of the universe. Comfort is currently turning to mythology with her new work *Persephone* that premiered in October 2004. While other choreographers were pursuing movement for movement's sake, Comfort created interdisciplinary artistic visions.

Dance theatre is a large term and I have been attempting to narrow the term dance theatre in a way that encapsulates the creative portion of my thesis. I have mentioned two artists who look to literature, classics, and pop culture as inspiration and I find myself taking a similar path.

This thesis will be exploring how I have integrated theatre into my own artistic vision and have begun to understand my creative process. I will address my specific influences and examine how my dance career led me to graduate school. Then I will discuss television and inherent structures involved in the medium. I will look at my creative journey and how the process formed the creative portion of my thesis. A detailed account of my process in writing, casting, and directing will be explored. I will finish by uncovering what I have learned and the questions and challenges still facing me on my choreographic journey.

II. *Influences and Graduate School*

I realized, when taking on the daunting task of writing this thesis, I wanted to create a written work that in some way mirrors the creative projects I have been investigating. In my creative work I have been playing with how one can cut and paste different medias together and play with popular culture to create new meaning: musical theatre, television, cinema, pop-music, literature, and personal story constantly appear and re-appear in my artistic vision.

As I began my dance career, I worked with renowned American choreographer Mark Dendy. Mark Dendy is an avid storyteller in life and onstage whose choreography has achieved national and international acclaim. His company Mark Dendy Dance and Theatre disbanded in 2000 and Dendy now choreographs for Broadway and opera. He is currently developing one of his dance theatre works into an off-Broadway show.

I was greatly influenced by Dendy's theatrical bent and learned immensely from his choreographic process. While working with him, Dendy created a dance theatre work "Back Back," which traced the life of a dancer dying of AIDS. I danced the role of the HIV virus/ harbinger of death. Time was an essential conceptual element in this dance theatre work as the main character's time on this earth came to an end. Dendy had written a script and had singing to accompany his literal yet abstract theatrical landscape. During this experience, I had an epiphany that I myself could pull from all of the performing arts to create work. Not just that I could sing, dance, and talk but that I could borrow more

traditional theatrical forms and manipulate them. This was a liberating moment that opened up the realm of choreography for me.

In 1993, I began working with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Liz Lerman is acclaimed as a visionary in community work and whose choreography, teaching, and intellect have also received national and international praise and acknowledgement. In 2002, Liz Lerman received the MacArthur fellowship and was recognized by the intellectual community. This fellowship is awarded to individuals who have shown extraordinary vision in their fields. Liz Lerman is another dance artist focused on storytelling and she also helped to form my choreographic process and artistic voice.

Liz draws her stories from herself and those with whom she is working. She bases much of her company work in the community, so not only are stories generated from the company members but from community participants as well. Lerman uses the individual to focus on larger political and social issues. In creating artistic work she finds a larger question with which to elicit personal stories. In order to find her company's personal connection to this subject matter, Liz creates a series of questions to motivate individual connections to the topic.

As a performer in that company, my dedication to the work was more than just as a dancer. I was part of the creative process and my artistic voice was woven into Liz Lerman's choreographic work. I began to take ownership in the collaborative experience and my commitment grew. I was advancing the creative vision forward and helping to solve choreographic problems. Lerman's unique and compelling method of creating came with pitfalls. The question of ownership becomes nebulous. Both choreographer and dancers are assuming possession of the material created. As a dancer in this process I often

felt my choreographic talent was not getting enough recognition. I was not in the program as a contributor to the creative and choreographic process. The work was solely Liz Lerman and my creative work was not formally acknowledged.

As a dance artist working within this process, I found that my connections and commitment to the project deepened the more we investigated. The more we unearthed, the more integral the process felt to me. I danced for The Liz Lerman Dance Exchange for four and half years and during that time my process and artistry grew immensely under the tutelage of my fellow dancers, community members, and of course Liz Lerman herself. In my case, whilst in the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, most of the movement was mine and in many instances I helped guide the structure. To tell the truth, Liz very rarely added any movement of her own to the work. Lerman guided us through composition assignments and creative ideas but the company members created the movement we used and manipulated its use in many ways.

The question of ownership becomes confusing in that context. When attending dance concerts, one may notice in the printed program the choreographer acknowledging the creative input of their dancers but ultimately the choreographers receive the praise. This is an uncomfortable position that is sometimes overwhelming.

Upon leaving the Dance Exchange, I spent a few years traveling back and forth between Europe and America working with various artists. I was greatly influenced by the improvisational artist Katie Duck, an expatriate residing in the Netherlands, British choreographer Sharon Smith, Danish choreographer Eric Pold, and Dutch choreographer Martin Butler. These artists employed a large amount of theatricality in their creative

works, which are conceptual in nature. I worked on creative projects with all of these artists and they provided valuable artistic research and helped guide my creative voice.

How far back do I cast the net to give you, the reader, an accurate assessment of my aesthetic choices and creative endeavors? A Rogers and Hammerstein lyric from 1959 *The Sound of Music* comes to mind, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”

I remember at the age of twelve spending a Friday twilight watching the 1972 movie *Cabaret* when my young mind was invigorated with an inspiration I did not comprehend. That moment planted a seed of fascination with entertainment and artistry in regards to the human condition. I have spent a large portion of my artistic life deconstructing how much that moment influenced my aesthetic.

My mother, recognizing my theatrical bent, gave me season tickets to the professional theatre in Baltimore. The shows I attended reinforced my passion and propelled me toward creativity. My artistry continued to flourish as I attended the Baltimore School for the Arts, my high school; though dance was my major I found that literature and theatre, most specifically Tennessee Williams, were the things that spoke to my creative soul the most.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence I was enthralled by television and its impact helped form my developing mind. I would run home from school to spend time with my friends on the small screen. My movie obsession also provided countless afternoons when I escaped my suburban home and found independence, inspiration, and excitement in the movie theatres. My family spent Friday nights together going to the cinema. These

outings spawned familial conversations that challenged my aesthetic intellect by forcing me to articulate my point of view.

I seek to uncover and manipulate the fleeting moments in life that help us define who we are. In the simplistic brilliance from Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*: "Life is made of moments even now and then a sad one. But if life were only moments, then we'd never know we had one" (Stephen Sondheim, 1991).

The process of making creative work can be an elusive entity. I am continually uncovering things about my artistic process and find the quest a confusing labyrinth of inspirations and ideas. I have an innate interest in storytelling. I love storytelling, so much so, that one of my nicknames as an undergraduate was "Mother Goose." My professional experiences, love of storytelling, and early training eventually urged me to attend Graduate school so I could experiment with all of the information I had acquired, continue my choreographic research, and define my aesthetic. The dance-theatre work I created while at the University of Utah is immersed in my own experiences and formed by my perceptions of life. Though my work has been affected by the thought-provoking academic investigation I have pursued during the past few years, my personal experiences and those of the performers with whom I have worked still drive my creative endeavors.

III. TELEVISION AND POPULAR CULTURE

I have an interest in folding my lifelong fascination and exploration of television and movies into my choreography. Most of the general public in America is familiar with, consumes, and watches media. I do not want to define what is good and bad about television and cinema, but rather look at the forms that have evolved and recognize the power they have in our society.

I have spent years investigating television and by that I mean watching the little box. In addition to television, I have spent years and countless hours watching dance in the big box. As I have become more engaged with my research, I have come to view television differently. I notice what types of shows are emerging and how societal stereotypes are created and enforced. For example, “reality television” inundated the airwaves in 2005.

Television gives viewers immediate information in a crisp clear package. Americans tune in every week to see how their favorite television characters are dealing with fictitious situations during their allotted hour or half-hour time slots. Comrades and fellow employees chat about the latest antics and/or tragedy of their television sitcoms and dramas. “Will Rachel and Ross stay together” on *Friends* has been as much a societal phenomenon as was “who shot J.R.?” on *Dallas*. Whether or not one watches television, the images and characters created for the small screen affect the society in which we live.

The images presented on our small screens are not only entertaining divertissements, but also shaping the way we view our world. How often have you heard politicians refer to “family values?” This term infers the era of *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Donna Reed Show*. These shows presented an American dream, consisting of a stay at home happy homemaker mother, a silent providing supportive father, cheery children, a pet, and all of the essential commodities of the suburbs. These fictional images from television’s past have become a political tactic used to win votes and promote an idealized view of the American family. Yes, television is a powerful medium, shaping the way we think, feel, and absorb information. Closer examination and understanding of the medium can create a sharper awareness of culture and could therefore help artists create more contemporary works of art.

Television shows have become a form of modern day storytelling that the public follows for comedy, reflection, and escape. Television and Cinema often presents fictionalized stories of people we love, hate, and love to hate. These stories often reflect our hopes, dreams, humor, and cultural interests. These ideas are explored in a 1992 *Time* article *TV could Nourish Minds and Hearts*:

“In our society only human family surpasses the television in its capacity to communicate values, provide models, form consciousness and motivate human behavior”. (Father Ellwood Kieser, 1992, 80)

Characters created for mass consumption become friends, enemies, imaginary lovers, and inspirations. Placing myself amongst the characters created for the small and big screens helps me define my personality, cultural awareness, humor, and wit. Television and movies are topics that bond individuals and give people a frame of reference with

which to understand each other. The characters created for the television and cinema help me define who I am and how to form the characters I create for my artistic work.

How could I, as an artist, mine the wealth of these popular entertainment forms to add to my own creative resources? Issues of duration of time, entertainment, communication, elitism, high-art labels, etc. have been at the forefront of my inquiry.

I have seen a lot of dance work over the past twenty years, ranging from the Kirov Ballet to Japanese Butoh. I have found myself subjected to work that from my vantage point goes on to no avail. Friends and family have lamented to me the arduous experiences they have had attending dance concerts. Personally, I have noticed the dazed faces of modern dance concertgoers appearing disgruntled and not excited after a performance. I realized that I could in no way satisfy everyone in terms of accessibility to my work and have set out to make work that flaunts its relationship to television programs and movies to help address the issue.

Television has grown from a handful of channel options to hundreds in almost every home. When cable television and MTV (music television) hit suburban homes, television options increased enormously. As MTV grew in popularity and understanding, the number of images shown in a single video multiplied greatly. If one is watching an MTV video today one could see numerous images in one second. Music videos are flashy, jump-cut-image festivals that also represent a form of modern day storytelling, with seemingly no problem of maintaining an audience base.

Our culture has turned into a kind of permanent Forty-Second Street filled with exciting experiences, sights, loud sounds and an abundance of information that we must somehow manage to process instantly. When I reflect upon the first time I beheld the

glorious sight of Times Square in New York City my mind still blurs. Mountainous buildings, neon signs, trash, the homeless people, businessmen, restaurants, drugs, cars, taxicabs, theatre, and strip clubs filled my view.

People no longer need to leave their homes to find the overwhelming excitement of information I found when first viewing Forty Second Street. All one needs to do, is turn the television on, and instantly the images can wash over you.

I believe the dance medium can excel in an image-driven society. Understanding the images perpetuated and created by popular culture in our Cyber-42nd St. society can benefit the choreographic world. By utilizing graphic images, timing, and narrative methods obtained from society's art and entertainment consumption, perhaps the choreographer can create works that are more attainable to a nondancing public.

When I watch television my commitment to a particular program is relatively short. I watch characters evolve in either half-hour or hour-long sequences unless I am watching a two-hour TV movie of the week. The time spent in these hour or half-hour durations is further broken down into much shorter scenes. Not only do television consumers know how much time they will commit to a particular program, they are use to relatively short scenes that are inherent in television. A typical television consumer is only going to spend two to five minutes with a particular scene. Commercials add another form of break for the television viewers, unless they are watching a paid premium channel. On some level I realize that if I do not like a scene or the characters in it, I only have to endure them for a few short minutes. Given an understanding of these structures in society, manipulating them in artistic work is possible. The following Liz Lerman quote, from her 1995 *ARE*

MIRACLES ENOUGH? Selected Writings on Art and Community 1993-1994 illustrates how my mentor views employing all influences at her disposal.

“But at least for me, the demands of being an artist right now in history seem to require we use every element within our power in order to make work which addresses our private visions and public realities”. (Liz Lerman 1994, 2)

The closer I look at and think about my popular culture-driven choreographic ideas, the more I believe that duration of time and the audience’s attention spans are particularly important. This is not a new idea and can be found in choreography’s first textbook: “All dances are too long.”- Doris Humphrey (1959). Attention deficit disorder has certainly made itself known over the past ten years and I believe we are suffering from a kind of societal attention deficit disorder. The copious amounts of television, consumed by the average American, makes them used to a world full of visual and audio sound bites.

Television viewers understand their time commitment with a specific program on TV, whereas modern dance audiences usually have no idea how long each choreographic work is going to be, much less the entire concert. I first experienced what I saw as a modern dance manipulation of television’s time structure in 1991. This was a choreographic work by the Belgium creator Wim Vandekeybus. The work consisted of short concise movement scenes that were strung together like a string of pearls. As a dance student I was inundated with the importance of transitions but Vandekeybus’s choreography simply changed to a new section. This choreographic device moved beyond my class studies to a new realm of ideas. Much like changing to another scene in television or cinema, Vandekeybus just did something new. His choreographic sections shared the

same theme but were constructed in completely different ways. The singular scenes were seamless but the connections between sections were simple changes. What was most powerful for me was that the Vim Vandekeybus work was over an hour-long without intermission and I sat riveted in my seat. In general, I mentally check out of dance concerts after twenty minutes. This structure, complete with its simple changes, managed to keep my attention focused. This work proved to be artistically liberating for me and I began to structure my work in sections without transitions.

IV. The Creative Journey

Artists have myriad ways in which they problem solve and find themselves in the midst of creation. My process, inspirations, understanding, and ability to make connections often take a while to germinate and develop. Sometimes I am not aware that I am answering creative questions set in motion months or years ago. I can in no way say all of my ideas work perfectly. I can only rely on my intuition and intellect to drive my choreographic vision. I can read books and analyze philosophies but in the end my perspective must translate my ideas into action. All I have is my particular brand of creative problem solving skill, in conjunction with my performers' perceptions to guide my artistic voice. I never know when the answer to my creative question will come and I often wait weeks or months until my mind produces an answer. I could wake from slumber or be on my way to work and all of a sudden, the answer to my choreographic problem is as obvious as the nose on my face. As a creator, I have no other choice but to trust my instincts and listen to my perceptions. I am an intuitive creator and though it can be a scary, frustrating process, I am constantly re-invigorated by the wonder my process reveals.

In the following pages I hope to shed light on my process and clarify my creative decision-making.

When I applied to the University of Utah, I wrote in my application letter that I wanted time and space to cultivate and understand my aesthetic. I made a challenge for myself to concentrate on work that was evening length and explored ideas of dance, theatre, and pop-culture. Evening length work is generally around an hour in time and the audience watches only one choreographic piece. I have spent the past three years investigating ideas about my artistic voice and in the process have created two evening length dance theatre works, *Waltzing with Melancholy* and *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life*. *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life* is the creative portion of my thesis but I find it important to mention *Waltzing with Melancholy*. While working on *Waltzing with Melancholy*, which was produced off campus by a local nonprofit group, I learned a great deal about storytelling and structure and came to fully understand my own aesthetic. Many of these same challenges arose again as I worked on *THAT GIRL* as part of my thesis research.

Pinpointing the creative catalyst for any project is an interesting challenge. I find it fascinating how ideas germinate and appear in my work. *Waltzing with Melancholy* began the day I decided to audition for the University of Utah. I generally draw from my daily life to inform my creative inspiration. When I auditioned, I was working in a gay bar, where I met a host of interesting individuals. One story, which I thought personified a particular gay New York City experience, served as inspiration for the text that I merged with movement to become my audition solo.

'My friend Chad called the other night wanted to stir up a bit of mischief and asked me to meet him downtown at the Duplex. We got a little crazy and Chad flirting unabashedly with the bartender when all of a sudden Chad HAD to go to a piano bar and HAD to sing, "I

don't know how to love him." Which, incidentally, is the only thing Chad ever sings at any of the piano bars that he frequents! And it was a need not a want.

As we entered the basement piano bar each patron was preparing to do his or her special number. As I looked around the room, each person looked a little lonelier and a little sadder than the next. And playing his special number was Dine Daily, the piano bar host. Now, his name was not actually Dine Daily but it was something with D's and alliterative. Dine looked like a disembodied head. He was encased in this large red box so you could hear the music but could not see him playing the piano. Dine was singing his special number and with every phrase he looked importantly at one of the piano bar patrons. That's when I had my Alley McBeal moment. I pictured Dine with this large from Costco family-size jar of Cheese Whiz and a soup ladle. He was just ladling out the processed cheese for all of the piano bar patrons. He looked at me and I started laughing, I mean wouldn't you? I felt horrible; there I was in the basement of broken hearts and vacant dreams and I was just making everything worse.

Soon after that Chad sang, "I don't know how to love him" I guess we all have our dreams.

This story captured a sad desperation I saw in New York all the time. Working in a gay bar, I was privy to a gaggle of intelligent gay men who, tarnished by time, shut themselves off and became increasingly bitter. It appeared to me that many people moved to New York in search of some dream that always stayed slightly out of their reach. I had found a moment from my life that illustrated many of my perceptions, which is indicative of how I work. After the audition, I continued to work on this solo and performed a thirty-minute version before leaving New York City for Salt Lake City.

During my first semester at the University of Utah, I worked on three solos about women. At some point I understood that all of this work was connected to the solo I choreographed the previous summer. The realization made me want to reinvestigate that solo using my work involving three women.

While I was choreographing the women's trio at the University, one of my professors, Ellen Bromberg, asked my class what we thought the purpose of structure in choreography was. In that moment I realized that I thought structure reveals content. The structure of a dance work often gives clues to the larger meaning of the choreography. By placing sections together in the correct way, a choreographer may guide an audience on a path to his or her investigatory question. All the dance work I have found most compelling and thought provoking seemed to use structure as a tool in this way. I began to understand the influence I felt when I saw Wim Vandekeybus. Vandekeybus's sections may not have had transitions between them but the placement of each scene accumulated to create understanding. The structure becomes a path of breadcrumbs for an audience to find, follow, and from which to create meaning. I know many dance artists do not agree with this statement but it certainly rings true for my experiences with dance.

Structure became a key point in the creation of my choreography. My idea was to create movement threads from beginning to end. Seeing the same movement done by the women, then by me, would create a new context in which the movement could live. The larger challenge was how to construct the work and connections within, to create the most meaning possible. As I thought more about this, the metaphor of the women's trio revealed itself to me: the women were all distilled parts of me. One was wide-eyed and naive, another neurotic and obsessive-compulsive, and the last an insecure anti-establishment type, over-compensating with anger and hate. These, of course, are simplified caricatures but, nonetheless, parts of others and me.

This inspiration certainly comes once again from popular culture of my youth, more specifically, the movie *The Breakfast Club*. In *The Breakfast Club*, the princess, basket

case, brain, jock, and juvenile delinquent were distilled caricatures and a combination of them allowed me as an audience member to find myself as an amalgamation of the characters. Along with my solo the women were distilled parts of me and I definitely appropriated the idea from that movie.

I wanted to set the tone of *Waltzing with Melancholy* by placing the women's trio at the beginning; this would hopefully create a larger context for my solo. The work was no longer just about a gay man living and working in New York City but now it involved women. A movement phrase was first seen done by women and their identities influenced how the movement was performed. When the trio was finished my solo began. This section included a lot of singing and storytelling interrupted by movement sections. The movement I did was exactly the same as the women, and in some cases, danced to the exact same song.

The apex of the work was a section called "Epitaph for My Heart." In the women's trio the wide-eyed innocent character performed this solo and I performed the same solo towards the end of the evening. The difference between the two performers became instrumental for me. It spoke to what I felt happened to people, specifically, gay men. How our lives often grow tarnished and cynicism becomes our last defense against defeat. These ideas certainly sum up my experience of Manhattan.

I mention *Waltzing with Melancholy* because it strongly influenced how I work with and think about structure. When the work was finished I realized that I was very excited how its structure had created meaning for me. This work informed me that I was following the choreographic path I was meant to investigate.

My next work, *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life* had a similar ponderous journey. I once again immersed myself in revisiting and reworking an earlier choreographic idea. The long path began seven years ago with a moment that spoke to my creative voice. I was leaving a springtime happy hour in Baltimore and an old friend approached me. This friend proceeded to tell me how his toilet overflowed and he needed ten dollars to purchase some toilet paper. This particular friend was/is a heroin addict, HIV positive, and is often in need of ten dollars. In Baltimore, ten dollars equals the amount of money one needs to purchase a baggy of heroin and this fact was not lost on me.

I myself have been dealing with loved ones and addiction my entire life. My uncle and brother were both addicts as are a number of close friends. This topic is something in which my human experience is steeped. Shortly after the toilet paper incident I wrote a monologue that included the story. I wanted to contextualize the story differently and so created a female character dealing with a drug-addicted boyfriend. I knew I was going to perform the monologue but was also clear that the character was a woman. Due to my closeness to this particular subject, I thought it was necessary to create some distance and this monologue was written:

“ I came out of hiding the other day. I was holed up on my mother's sofa up against the wall. I had one hand on the telephone and the other on the flash back button. I was listening to the radio on my Walkman and flashing between a Jesus channel and ice-skating. Well it got me to thinking. All that suffering that Jesus did for us and it's just like what I did for Joe. Now I am not saying I am Jesus, or a saint, I am not even saying I am Mary Magdalene. I am just saying I gave unconditional love that resulted in overwhelming pain. All I have done for the past few weeks is sublimate my emotional anguish with diet-coke, cupcakes, Fritos, and ding-dongs. I am not going to let that man run rent free in my head any longer. It was at that moment that the phone rang. You know that it was Joe and apparently his toilet overflowed and he needed ten dollars to get some toilet paper.

So I say's to him I say's "Joe, where exactly do you have to take a taxi to get this toilet paper? And why is it always ten dollars? Do you think I am stupid?" As he launched into his rationalization it happened- the moment- Tara Lipinski nailed this triple sow cow. And in that moment of power, beauty, and grace I realized if that little girl can complete that amazing feat, I can certainly drop this piece of trash. BLACKOUT."

Who was this character I was creating and what was her name? I looked to my past to find the answer I sought. As a child, I would run home from school excited about television. One of my favorite after school programs was *That Girl* starring Marlo Thomas.

V. THAT GIRL

Marlo Thomas's *That Girl* created television history in 1966 when she became the first on air woman to live on her own, without a boyfriend or husband, as she pursued her own dream. In the process of the show Marlo's character found a boyfriend but that relationship was not established at the beginning of the show. This whimsical sitcom gave young women their first look at independence and paved the way for future television ladies. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* could not have existed without the groundbreaking sitcom *That Girl*, which aired from 1966-1971.

After writing my original "THAT GIRL" monologue, I started thinking about the show and most specifically about the name "THAT GIRL," because the name could symbolize any young woman, just as any family or friend may have to deal with addiction or any number of ordeals that occur in life. I realized my female heroine was "THAT GIRL" and a lengthy process ensued to develop her life. In fact, the project evolved into the creative portion of my thesis.

So seven years ago, inspired by Thomas's sitcom and show title, I began working on a solo that would introduce the character of THAT GIRL, her relationship, and the difficulty of dealing with a loved one infested with addiction. I also knew that I was going to play THAT GIRL. It was clear to me that I was only speaking for a woman unable to tell her story. This first solo starts with a sensual; gesture movement phrase accompanied by a

breath rhythm of THAT GIRL then informs the audience how she has met this great guy Joe.

I was coming out of the bathroom at my friend Sarah's party when my gum dropped on the floor. As I was prying my gum off the parquet floor my head roughly grazed this guy's inner thigh. I was mortified and apologized profusely. His name is Joe and he is soooo cute and nice. He just laughed the whole thing off and asked me over to the snack table. I know this is going to sound silly but he prefers cheese puffs to cheetos. I mean who would have thunk it? We have the same taste in junk food. That is kismet in my book. Anyway we talked all night, he asked me outside and we swung on the swings, and at the end of the night he gave me a proper kiss. I really hope he calls me!

So excited about meeting Joe, THAT GIRL sings *La Vie En Rose* and executes the same movement phrase from the beginning of the work. When the sensual gesture movement phrase was seen in the beginning of the piece, with the breath rhythm, it was serious. In contrast, by adding *La Vie En Rose*, the movement took on a much more whimsical and naïve look. By adding layers of information the character's journey created different meaning for the same movement. The song disintegrates into an intensely physical dance intended to convey the destruction occurring in her relationship with Joe. The solo ends with the original monologue I wrote.

The use of repetition of a specific movement phrase in different contexts has become a pivotal point in my creative work. As a dancer and choreographer, I have been aware of theme and variation for many years. One does not have to be an artist to find theme and variation; one can look to nature and find it abundantly. I became interested in how the same exact movement can become a variation based solely on the performer, the

situation, and context in which it is placed. My thought was by using the same movement; the audience is given an anchor from which their minds can create more meaning.

In my mind, THAT GIRL had an entire life to uncover and a second solo was created. I was interested in how people become damaged, strengthened, and defined by their emotional baggage. I knew I wanted to show how THAT GIRL was a product of her experiences and her original naïve trust would be replaced with trepidation and fear.

I felt that I should re-create the structure of the first solo and began my exploration with a monologue. I wrote the following monologue with Harry Thomas. (Harry Thomas is a talented published writer and a personal friend who helped me clarify and solidify my thoughts succinctly. I generally look for stories from life to illustrate my thoughts on society but in this case I wanted to create the story from scratch.):

*A cell phone is ringing
Hello Tammy, oh Sarah, I am so glad it's you and not that overly
indulged social headline column I work for. Yes it's really that bad! Do
you know what she has me doing? It's lunch hour, busy as shit, and I am
standing in line at the Dean and DeLuca in Soho for Haagen-Dazs
raspberry sorbet. Oh yes Miss Tammy's third nose job is not healing so
well and we need some Haagen-Dazs raspberry sorbet. I always like
that Tammy always says "we." Like "we" decided to have men in
surgical masks go at our faces with knives for no good reason in the
whole world. Like "we" understand why the Haagen-Dazs raspberry
sorbet needs to come from Dean and DeLuca in Soho or better yet the
new whole grain foods market in Chelsea. I could just skip to the Duane
Reade but No, got to go to Soho to get that Haagen-Dazs raspberry
sorbet. Do you know what we did this morning? We stood around
Nordstrom for an hour and a half because "we" didn't know if our
husband needed one or two pairs of pants.
Oh you're having a party. I would so love to come but I can't, I am on
call. I don't know if Tammy is going to need me to run down to Bendels
and get her a new pair of panties. You never know what her highness
might want. It is sad, she does look like someone lodged a huge golf ball
in her nose.*

I'm not going on a date who would I be going on a date with? A date with that guy, that guy had a beeper. Beepers aren't that bad, Sarah, he could be one of three things. He could be a drug dealer he could be UMMM I know that a Yuppies life is tedious Sarah but this free range chicken salad, this free range chicken salad is looking soooooo tasty. Food is not love don't start in on that. Entertainment lawyer I don't care if he was an entertainment lawyer in a suit, he had a beeper. You saw Joe; let me guess he asked you for ten dollars. Oh, well that's uh great. He is looking good I mean I don't really care. Good. No I don't want his number I don't want to see him.

Excuse me Ms. Do you have any more of that Banana pudding?

THAT GIRL had already taken quite a journey before I entered the University of Utah and I was interested in exploring her story more in depth. Who was she before she met Joe and how did she finally decide to drop Joe? These questions were percolating in my creative mind and seemed a perfect project to explore my fascination with pop-culture and narrative.

As I look back on my work I am confronted with a recurring theme. I seem to use a feminist lens when creating work. I have had many women ask me why I make women's work. I believe my interest has as much to do with my sexuality, as it has to do with women's rights. Being gay and part of an oppressed minority, I turn to an oppressed majority to explore my own oppression. Homosexuals are often seen as feminine and due to that perception; in society's view gay men become less than men. This socially imposed paradigm manifests itself in the gay community and leads to a pervasive self-loathing amongst many homosexual men. I cannot separate myself from my social construction and neither can women. If I am feminine, I am somehow less than a man, and that perception drives the feminist investigation in my creative research. This is not to say I do not have a

keen interest in women's rights, just that my creative interest is dually propelled by my own oppression.

VI. THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life INFORMAL VERSION

All women were girls at some point and after entering the University of Utah I decided I needed to see THAT GIRL pre-adolescent. I turned to my favorite young adult writer Judy Blume to find clarification and inspiration. I read and re-read many of her books not the least of which is *Are You There God It's Me Margaret*. (I always find it curious exactly how far back my inspiration and ideas extend.) Judy Blume was one of my first inspirations, and I can remember sitting at my fourth grade desk, completely entranced in one of her young adult novels, when my teacher had to actually shake me to bring me back to the classroom because I was so enthralled with what I was reading. Judy Blume's work gave me a base from which to write about young women's pre-adolescence.

As I set out making this new work I was specific about dividing the work into scenes and making it more of a linear narrative. I began to view this emerging dance theatre work as a modern dance musical. Often in musical theatre, dance is generally an entertaining divertissement from the story. I wanted dance to advance the story forward and/or reflect upon the situation and characters. I was intent on weaving song, music, dance, and theatre together but I wanted dance to be a substantial and necessary portion of the work.

Dance has the power to convey information in a way that is beyond words. As much as I find dance a daunting art form distorted with pretension, when choreography is at

its best it is the most powerful medium I have ever encountered. Dance speaks to the unspeakable. Movement often connects with people at the core of their being like a primal scream. I believe dance has the power to create understanding and I challenged myself to employ this idea in the context of a play/musical/dance-theatre work.

As a graduate student interested in the weaving of dance and theatre, it was necessary to take classes in the theatre department. Directing seemed to be the most pertinent of choices because I was doing so much directing in my work. It was also important for me to take some acting classes to understand how to get my dancers to speak the way I wanted. In addition, playwriting was a natural step because I was writing a script. All of these courses proved valuable and helped guide me to my final creative project and reaffirmed the notion that the creative process comes from similar places no matter what the artistic medium.

In addition to my academic theatrical exploration, I decided I should reinvestigate the performance aspect of musical theatre. If I intended to create a kind of modern dance musical, I should then get some experience from the source. Since I had performed in musicals as a teenager and had been in the professional dance world for fifteen years, I auditioned and was cast in the University of Utah's first college of fine arts inter-departmental project, *Godspell*. This was a great way to reconnect with musical theatre. In the midst of the project I was supported, inspired, and taught, by artists from different backgrounds.

Casting

The first performance I saw at University of Utah was the senior concert featuring choreography by departing undergraduates and a sophomore performer, Corinne Penka, intrigued me. I asked her if she would be THAT GIRL after seeing her performance. Corinne accepted, having no idea who I was or what I was talking about. Fortunately a year later she was still interested and agreed to be part of my choreographic process.

I needed to cast THAT GIRL's best friend Sarah and turned to Natosha Washington. Natosha is an extremely gifted choreographer of color. Natosha, like me, has a body type not often associated with dance, meaning each of us would be considered a bit too large. I wanted to balance out body types by including different sizes, colors, and shapes in the cast I was choosing. I was very interested in working with Natosha for a variety of reasons. I wanted the character of Sarah to be of color because I dealt with race issues so often growing up in Baltimore. I also rely on my cast to help me create and using Ms. Washington's creative skills would aid me greatly. Natosha Washington fulfilled all of the qualities I was looking for and was an exceptional addition to my choreographic process.

I was also interested in working with Sarah Barry, a fellow graduate student who had a very lovely singing voice and was an incredible dancer armed with a wonderful intellect. Though I believed she would be a great addition to my process, I had no role for her. I was going to be a host/narrator of the show and created a female counterpart for myself. Sarah and I would be Co-hosts of the evening. Immediately I realized that I could utilize this concept by working with ideas of gender. Sarah and I could play men and women, furthering the idea that anyone could be THAT GIRL.

When I began my rehearsal process things went very smoothly. My performers were both dedicated and excellent. I gave my dancers all of the same choreographic problems that I had presented myself. I also took the cast members through a series of writing and choreographic processes to generate material and help develop their characters.

At one point I was discussing the idea of passing notes in middle school. I was attempting to elicit ideas from the cast about the kinds of notes they wrote and received. Much to my happiness and surprise, Corinne had actually kept her notes from middle school and had a love note, which we used verbatim.

Natosha Washington sustained a stress fracture injury and rehearsals were delayed. I was specifically curious about working with Ms. Washington and decided to diligently wait for her recovery. Natosha was in her senior year and working on various choreographic and performance projects. The injury occurred during fall semester and my performance was not until the following spring. After winter break I realized Natosha was not going to be able to perform and so I had to make a decision. I decided to have an audition to replace her.

I invited four dancers with whom I was interested in working to audition, and they all accepted with excitement. Eileen Rojas was a senior with passion, dedication, and a wild abandon about which I was curious. Marci Rubin was a senior with a quirky specificity and a theatrical bent. Dannel Hathaway was also a senior with a delightful floppy movement quality and a lovely sense of whimsy. Lastly, Brittany Gadbury was a freshman I had taught who was extremely intelligent, passionate, of color, and came from a theatre background.

I knew I wanted the character of Sarah to be a strong fun individual who is actually the true feminist in the play. *THAT GIRL* played by society's rules while her best friend Sarah created her own truths. There was a lot of singing involved in the show and I asked

the women to come with a song to sing. I was not necessarily worried if they had great voices just that they were willing to sing. In addition to singing, my cast was going to teach one of the more difficult movement phrases and ask the dancers to do a movement composition assignment. I had written a monologue about Sarah being sexually assaulted at a graduation party and decided that would be the acting portion of the audition.

So me and THAT GIRL went to Cindy's Dionysian party the other night. I remember the smell of mildew that permeated the dank basement. THAT GIRL was standing next to me talking to some guy named Joe, and every few moments, I would feel her excited pinch on my thigh. I love THAT GIRL ... And all, but standing there listening to her bat her eyes was only a laugh for a few minutes and my attention turned to the keg and how much I could consume for free.

The beer started rushing to my head and the boy across the room became increasingly interesting. He had a CLASH T-shirt on and you know how I am about those anti-establishment types. Well his baby blues kept wandering yonder to my fetching gaze. I was doing the "I am coy but I want to talk to you" thing and he was doing the "I am not interested and by that I mean I am all over you like white on rice" look. We maintained our cool distance and I have to tell you that my thigh was procuring a large bruise because THAT GIRL kept grabbing my thigh and giving it a nice fleshy pinch.

I wanted to turn to her and say, "I got the message! You think he is HOT. Stop using my body as your personal exploration for unresolved lust."

Anyway Mr. Clash t-shirt finally made his move after a long come hither look imparted by moi. He talked about bands and movies and I nodded and threw in a couple of witty quips while I dug my nail into the THAT Girl's hand. That gave her the message and my thigh finally got some relief.

Back to the boy---he said, "do you want to go outside for a smoke?" As I escorted him outside he grabbed my ass like it was a slab of beef I said, "Excuse me I am not your evening pork chop. How would you like it if I grabbed your balls?" I was about to leave but he threw me up against the garage door. I thought he might have been kidding at first but he did not let me go. That's when I started to get really scared.

The women began the audition by learning the movement section and then did the monologue and the song by themselves. As I saw each woman individually, I directed her to see how she took direction. I ended the audition with a movement composition assignment that was about a series of firsts in the dancers lives. For example, the first time they told a lie to their parents, or the first time they kissed, or the first time they told someone a secret. I asked them to create a solo that was like flipping through a picture postcard book. I then created a theatrical set-up for the three of them to perform this together. They were to each do their solos one by one as if they were in their best friend's room telling this for the first time. It was to be very intimate and about the support and love you receive from true friends. This structure was very powerful and became part of my larger choreographic work in addition to being used as a lesson plan for the non-major dance composition class I was teaching for the modern dance department at the time.

The four women who auditioned were all very good and had different strengths. Brittany Gadbury gave an incredibly powerful acting audition whereas Marci Rubin offered a more challenging and abstract one. Eileen Rojas's openness in conjunction with her energy, talent, and commitment was very persuasive. Unfortunately Ms. Rojas was suffering from a busy schedule and a neck injury. Since I was replacing an injured dancer I was extremely hesitant about adding another one. Lastly, Dannel Hathaway was also impressive. Ms. Hathaway was not the best at any one portion of the audition but was strong in all areas. Due to Hathaway's overall strength I decided to work with Dannel.

I was worried that Brittany Gadbury was a bit too young but I still wanted to work with her. I asked Brittany to be an understudy and as rehearsals started I loved working with her. Ms. Gadbury was a great addition to the cast and I created a role for her so she would

be part of the performance. Brittany became “Extra,” a character that is a man or woman depending on the gender in need. One of Extra’s characters is a nerdy self-absorbed middle school student who has a huge crush on THAT GIRL. Extra relays the love note that THAT GIRL receives in middle school.

During this same period I was performing in *Godspell* at the University of Utah. I was intrigued by a student from the school of music, Nathan (Nate) Brian and wanted to create a role for him in my new work. I was excited to add a performer not from the movement arts medium though Nate did have a lot of natural movement and acting talent in addition to his beautiful baritone voice. The possibility of THAT GIRL being wooed and serenaded was compelling and THAT GIRL had no person playing her romantic male interest as of yet; Hence the role of BOY was born.

It became clear to me that who I am interested in working with is almost as important as on what I am working. The cast I choose becomes an incredibly important part of my process and often defines the work I am doing. I added three roles to *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman’s life* because of my interest in working with certain people. I believe these additions made the work more complete and my decision to trust my instincts was proven correct. Each person brought with them a different set of intellectual and artistic strengths. My performers challenged and added to my creative inspiration and I relied on the strength of my performers’ choices to guide my artistic process.

I have embraced the idea of performer/choreographer collaboration that I was exposed to in the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and have grown to depend upon that collaboration to guide my creative process. I was certainly the creative force and without my

inspiration and guidance, my performers would never have created or used the material I drew from them. Who then can take ownership of the work?

The answer is not black or white. As a choreographer, I have decided to add the dancers under the title choreographer while naming myself as director and taking credit for the concept. I know that Liz would often omit any mention of dancers from choreographic credit. I believe that more and more choreographers employ their dancers in the creative process, so the question of ownership is a contemporary choreographic question not soon to go away.

Script and Music development

After securing a cast, I had the task of writing a script to also include the new characters I added. As I developed the script for *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life*, I wanted my musical and choreographic choices to be an integral part of the script. I selected specific songs for their lyrics and/or my association with the songs. The actual singing was often used as a humorous witty comment on what was happening in the show or as an entertaining aside.

As I was working on all of this I saw the seventy's feminist kitsch cult film *The Stepford Wives*. I found the movie eerie and timely. I was compelled to appropriate lines from this movie to symbolize the socially constructed roles of women. *The Stepford Wives* presented a quick pop-culture way to point out female gender roles and their pitfalls. Lines from the movie would be presented as a pre-show and all of the performers would be adorned in aprons.

I thought a logical place to begin would be welcoming the audience and introducing the cast of characters. I turned to my childhood inspiration, *Cabaret*, to welcome the audience with “wilkomen.” My co-host and I could then introduce the characters and set the stage for the audience.

In writing the show I wanted to focus on three different portions of THAT GIRL’s life. These larger thematic ideas would be broken down into a few scenes for each. The first investigated her pre-adolescence when her body would be changing, her friends would increase in import, and her mind would be turning to the topic of boys. This section would establish Sarah as an important voice in the show and best friend to

THAT GIRL.

As I wrote the pre-adolescent section I chose a few songs to be sung. “It’s a hard knock life” from *Annie* and the theme song from the movie *Ice castles* were both fun and entertaining songs that could illustrate the start of puberty and love.

The second area on which I wanted to focus was THAT GIRL’s life in her mid-to-late teen years, when everything is new and you can start to make you own choices. THAT GIRL would be coming into herself and beginning to date boys. Sarah confronts the audience with the serious subject of date rape and her feminist voice is strengthened while she performs the monologue I wrote for the audition.

The musical choices in the second portion of the show became much more serious and important in relaying the emotional state of the characters and propelling the narrative

forward. There was text in this portion of the show but the music and choreography were equally important. I chose Depeche Mode's song "Black Celebration" to signify an over-eighteen club and symbolize my rebellious teen years.

When I was eighteen I would venture out into the Baltimore night and dance the night away with other wayward teens. We found our identities, together, pounding the dance floor listening to Depeche Mode, New Order, The Smiths, and a variety of other new wave musicians.

The next musical choice was found while watching a movie and happened to be a remake of an alternative song to which I used to dance wildly. "Mad World" originally performed by Tears for Fears spoke to a kind of dark depression I remember from my youth. I was watching the cult classic film *Donnie Darko* and the lyrics of the song washed over me. The song was "Mad World" by Gary Jules and spoke to a crazy cycling we do as human beings. These lyrics seemed appropriate to highlight Sarah's frame of mind after her date rape experience. "Mad World" became the sound score for Sarah to reveal her secret to her friends. This was a very intimate dance section that focused on the dancers' stories through movement.

The third portion would deal with THAT GIRL's relationship with BOY/Joe and embrace the idea that she had to let this person she loved go. THAT GIRL would be maturing and dealing with a very serious situation. The audience would see how she copes with adult situations. Sarah becomes the rock on which THAT GIRL depends. The friendship between THAT GIRL and Sarah is a bond that helps THAT GIRL in processing her tragic situation.

As I began writing, I felt that the end of the show might have become a bit too serious. Going from a date rape scene to a drug addiction scene seemed excessive. So I decided to create a Christmas movement section. The dancers made movement indicative of skating and gliding. I began this movement section with a romantic duet between BOY/Joe and THAT GIRL cementing their relationship.

I returned to the “Mad World” lyrics as a way of showing the grave nature of BOY/Joe’s addiction. I incorporated the element of repetition in my choreography and re-used lines and movement seen in former scenes. All of these ideas led up to the original monologue I wrote seven years ago about THAT GIRL watching the two television channels. I did not want to end on a depressing note and decided to have THAT GIRL escape from her turmoil by going on a road trip.

Directing

I have spent the majority of my life choreographing, and directing gave me a new set of challenges. I have been creating theatrical work for years but this project is by far the most non-abstract with its linear narrative.

Once again I relied on my intuition to guide me. I found I had difficulty articulating what and how I wanted things to be done. I fell back on my choreographic knowledge to help define my directorial voice. When taking a directing class I did learn how the space in which you are performing is essential in understanding how to direct a scene. I needed to decide where I was going to perform my new work and looked to my past to help find the answer.

While in the Dance Exchange the company did many projects in non-traditional performance spaces. These projects were always my favorite creative endeavors and as an artist I was interested in performing in a non-traditional space. I wanted to adapt my new work for the University's old museum of fine arts (New Media Wing). I had a course in that space during my first year in graduate school and was excited by the variety of possibilities it presented. I thought that traveling from room to room with THAT GIRL, as she grew older would be an effective way to show her maturing. In addition, the audience would have "commercial" breaks when moving from one space to another. The audience had time to stretch their legs and talk for a few minutes before resuming THAT GIRL'S story. The old museum had many rooms of different sizes and atmospheres so the audience could have a different experience at each site. This seemed a more successful way to deal with set design than actually creating sets.

The old museum space was open to teachers but not graduate students so I had to get special permission to use that space. As I waited to hear the final verdict on the old museum space I continued to rehearse in a dance studio. This was particularly hard where specific scenes were concerned. It was hard to direct when I had no idea what the space would look like. Movement sections were also bound to change once we placed them in different spaces. I wanted my entire creative process to be in the old museum space but that luxury did not present itself. I did finally get the positive response to my old museum application and rehearsals became more productive.

The old museum was in a state of shambles with excessive amounts of discarded art projects strung about. The space was dirty, disorganized, and incredibly raw. In the fashion of all my creative endeavors I decided to turn lemons into lemonade. I utilized the various

things left in the old museum to build sets in each of the different chosen spaces. This helped me define the space and give me directing ideas. I was able to construct a makeshift bedroom and nightclub with discarded objects left in the New Media Wing.

Another problem presented by the new space was how and where different scenes would happen. I needed to create a journey for both the piece and the audience. I knew I wanted the audience to see as much of the space as possible and decided to have the audience move with every scene change. I also had to consider how much space would be required for the dancing and how much the audience would have. I needed to be aware of audience sight lines, how the movement would look in particular places, and if it would even be possible. All of these things were considered as I designed a pathway for the piece and the audience.

Costumes were going to be simple, individual, and specific. Each dancer was given a white T-shirt on which they were to write their characters' names and design it how they liked. The combination of the space, informality, costumes, and simplicity had me referring to the work as garage band modern dance. The entire feeling of the piece was very casual and I loved the way it was coming together smoothly.

I must admit that I was somewhat lost in the process when it came to my directorial voice. I was working a lot with foreground and background and how that information could mirror or reflect on the content of the play. For the most part I was making quick decisions so I could move forward and finish.

I was diligently working but had one serious roadblock; I had not actually proposed a thesis. My garage band dance was quickly coming together and was filled with fun. I had envisioned this project as my thesis work and it had not officially been accepted. The cart

was before the horse and I was working furiously to complete something that in the end was not accepted as my thesis project. Despite my frustration and helplessness, the Department of Modern Dance, forced me to spend more time with my creative idea and the performance of *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life* in the spring of 2004 became an informal version. My first draft of this evening length work was a success and so I had laid the groundwork to make a much better work.

My first draft had seeds of depth but those seeds had not matured to grow strong roots. The work was entertaining but superficial in many respects. I was happy with my accomplishments and believe I achieved my original goal in the most modest of terms. This work provided me with invaluable information that took me months to decipher

VII. THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life FORMAL THESIS VERSION

It is my time to eat humble pie and thank my department for understanding that I was capable of making something more profound than the original version of *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life*. My thesis committee saw the potential but recognized the lack of in-depth investigation in my research. I was spread a bit too thin in the process and my work had been compromised as a result. This is possibly the most valuable lesson I have learned on this thesis journey. I believe that when I make work, I see directly through to the potential but do not realize I have not exactly obtained my goal. My process with *Waltzing with Melancholy* illustrates this.

The first version of *Waltzing with Melancholy* was left untitled and possessed the same conceptual intention of the final product but lacked the grit that eventually made the work powerful. After I originally performed the solo, I was excited and felt I had accomplished my goal. It was not until a few months later that it dawned on me that the work was not finished and that may have been why I was unable to title the work. The difference between the first and second versions is like two completely different pieces of work. One was a light-hearted rough draft with glimpses of depth and the second a fully developed abstract three dimensional exploration into my ideas

I now know that the first time I show something it is only a rough draft. I need to perform that draft so I can go back to uncover the true work I was attempting to accomplish and not consider it a finished product. In the case of both evening length works I created at the University of Utah, upon closer inspection and deeper investigation, my true voice was found.

Casting

While I was working on the informal version of *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life* I was also creating on a short piece on ballet students. It took me an entire summer to realize that I had actually been working on THAT GIRL and my ballet dancers should be integrated into my larger work. The piece I made on nine ballet dancers was titled *Images for Candy* and played with the idea of women being viewed as candy. My intention was to empower these students with their sexuality by providing overt versions of heterosexual male fantasies. Schoolgirls, French maids, a dominatrix, a subservient housewife, and little girl were the images with which I was working. I was going to juxtapose all of that with candy commercial slogans.

I felt that the ballet women would create a great prelude for THAT GIRL. *Images for Candy* was a much better way to get to socially constructed gender roles than *The Stepford Wives* section. I was also interested in how the larger work could benefit from a chorus. The ballet dancers could reflect other versions of women, THAT GIRL, and Sarah. By incorporating these dancers I could more easily encompass the idea of “women” in general, as opposed to a particular woman. The ballet world is notoriously misogynistic and adding an element of ballet would re-enforce the idea of assumed gender roles and women's oppression.

As my choreographic vision focused on a more feminist point of view, my ballet dancers became known as “The Those Girls.” I wanted to keep them separated but connected to the original cast of characters. Lumped in a group, without their names, the ballet dancers could become a metaphor for the larger category of women. I also felt they could be used like a Greek chorus and/or as a movement image relaying the emotional context of the choreoplay. They would help me drive the emotional information and make movement as important as the text and song. Of my original ballet cast of nine only six could commit to the project and in the end I found it appropriate that there was one of the “The Those Girls” for each character in the choreoplay.

I was not happy with the performance of Dannel Hathaway the year before. She somehow missed all of the character’s depth and never actually memorized her lines. Dannel had brought a lot to the process but I did not believe she could tackle the seriousness required for the role of Sarah. This is in part due to my young directorial voice but none-the-less, Dannel lacked the dramatic force to complete the character of Sarah. Brittany Gadbury, who I originally used as an understudy and for whom I then created the role of Extra, was my first choice to replace Dannel. I had actually spoken to Brittany after the first version was finished and knew she was on board to perform the role of Sarah.

Sarah Barry my delightful co-host was a bit non-committal. I knew she was interested but over extended and pregnant. Sarah was also having problems with scheduling due to a variety of rehearsals in which she was involved. I ultimately suggested she was too busy and proceeded to find a replacement. Natosha Washington approached me to ask if she could sit in on some of my rehearsals. She was curious about my use of theatre and text and found my work inspirational. I asked if she would just be in the work. I

had always wanted to work with her and originally stalled my process in order to have Natosha involved. She would be a perfect co-host and was excited to be part of the process again.

I had two roles left to fill, Extra and Boy. Nathan no longer lived in Utah and Brittany was going to perform the role of Sarah. I had offered the role of Extra to Dannel Hathaway but she was unable to accept. I asked two different men to work with me. Brandin Steffenson, a talented professional dancer in the Salt Lake City area and David Luna, a gifted actor in Salt Lake City. Both men accepted and were excited by the project.

After both men accepted I needed to decide who was going to do what. Originally, I was going to have Brandin play the role of Boy but soon realized that was a mistake since David could bring a depth to the character with his acting skill that Brandin could not. I understood that David was not an exceptional singer and had to re-think the role of Boy more for David's strengths. The role of Boy was created for a non-dancer, which somehow separated that role from the rest of the cast. I was interested in playing with how that character was "other." Everyone else was a version of THAT GIRL or could even be THAT GIRL. The role of Boy was distinctly different.

My cast of six had multiplied to a cast of twelve. Performers are the joy and torture of my process. Often I wish I had been a visual artist because the paint is always ready when it is needed. People have pesky lives with which you must contend. Balancing twelve peoples' work, rehearsal, school, and social schedules soon became a daunting task that consumed a large part of my rehearsal process. The scheduling problem increased when attempting to accommodate my thesis committee. Scheduling is by far the most frustrating and irritating thing I confronted whilst creating this work. I just kept rehearsing and dealing

with scheduling issues for my entire creative process. I had entire rehearsals devoted to scheduling conflicts.

Script and Music Development

My script stayed the same for the most part and as always, I allowed my performers to play with language to find text with which they felt most comfortable. This only slightly altered what I had already typed on the page, with the exception of Sarah's date rape monologue. Brittany Gadbury embraced her role and re-worked that monologue, making it much stronger. Much of this had to do with a directorial/performer relationship that I will discuss later.

I wanted to rely on David Luna's acting skill to strengthen the choreoplay and decided the role of Boy needed a monologue. I had been aware of this for months and spent countless hours trying to decide what this new monologue would address. The answer did not come to me until I was home for Christmas.

I was staying with a friend and listening to an answering machine message when I realized that Boy's monologue would be a series of telephone messages. Below is the text I wrote for the messages:

JOE

Message 12: THAT GIRL are you there? Pick up! Please THAT GIRL I need you. Don't shut me out ! You know we love each other. How can you turn your back on me? I love you! I can work on Oh come on I know you are there. Ok then I am going to hang up now just remember how much I love you. THAT GIRL..... Ok um, well bye.

JOE

Message 18: THAT GIRL I am in some serious trouble. I am trying to stop but I need you to help me. PLEASE! How can you fucking do this to me you fucking bitch? I have given you my godam heart and soul and you just spit on me like this. You know what? I don't need your dumb fucking ass. Fuck You THAT GIRL and don't bother calling me back because you are dead to me, bitch!

JOE

Message 19: THAT GIRL you know I did not mean that last message. Please call me I am falling apart without you. I love you so much. You are my life. I want to marry you isn't that what you want? Please THAT GIRL I will do anything. I know I can kick this with you by my side. Otherwise I do not know what will happen. Let's get married THAT GIRL I love you and need you.

JOE

Message 40: THAT GIRL. I went to one of those meetings and they are bullshit. I know I would do better with you; the people at those meetings are losers. Please call me.

David did a great job with these messages and added a lot of emotional weight to the show. In creating the role of Boy/Joe for Mr. Luna I needed to rethink my original musical choices. The original Ice Castles song sung at the school dance no longer seemed appropriate. I turned to the musical group Journey and their 1981 hit “Open Arms” as inspiration. I choreographed a ridiculously silly dance including our couple being lifted by “The Those Girls.”

I felt the Depeche Mode song was still a perfect way to set the tone for rebellious youth. This turned my musical attention to Sarah's monologue. I decided to continue to use

“Mad World” but wanted to add another dance section featuring “The Those Girls.” I felt that preceding Sarah’s monologue with a dance that could then contextualize her emotional state I would capitalize on the strength of Brittany’s performance and the monologue’s content. I chose “Asleep” by the Smiths whose lyrics embody a deep depression and lack of will to live.

I love “Mad World” but did not think it should be associated with Joe as well as Sarah. I began to look for a song that could symbolize Joe and what I had decided was an honest love for THAT GIRL. Once again the answer to my question was found in the darkness of a movie theatre. The original version of this song is by the Postal Service and Iron and Wine made a version. As I was watching the movie Garden State song lyrics from “Such Great Hights” seemed to call to me about finding a match for your soul.

The last musical choice I am going to discuss is actually the last section of THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman’s life. I was not happy with the ending because I felt it was too huge of an emotional leap for the characters. I was struggling with what to replace “Let’s Go.” While sipping on a cocktail listening to the jukebox, my answer came. My favorite Dianna Ross and the Supremes song seemed to articulate exactly how THAT GIRL would feel after dumping Joe. “Reflections” became the final section of my work since the lyrics illustrated a woman done wrong so well.

Directing

As I spent more time thinking about directing, I decided to use my choreographic process to guide character development and vision. I had many of the performers keep journals as their characters and then create movement based on their writing. I had them focus on their characters' personalities, histories, and physical surroundings to give them information from which to make acting choices. Many of the scenes shifted due to this investigation and I am going to talk specifically about a few.

The first scene with THAT GIRL and Sarah is a fun whimsical scene to which I wanted to add more depth. In thinking about the work, I decided an important issue was one of friendship and the bonds we make with other people. Sarah is THAT GIRL's best friend and helps her in her time of need. I wanted to strengthen their bond from the beginning of the show.

I guided Corinne and Brittany through an exercise to help them focus on their characters. I asked the dancers to visualize themselves in a picture postcard store and all of the post cards were images of THAT GIRL and Sarah's friendship. The images were all snap shots taken in their character's room. As they looked I told them to select four of their imaged post cards on which to focus. We spent about a half hour on this while each dancer memorized their pictures and rooms. Next I had each dancer relay their images to each other. I was shocked by how specific each performer was with the details. As they retold their experience, each character's room became alive and real. We created movement based

on the imagistic postcard assignment and the fruit of our labor was woven into the first scene. This process is certainly derived from a variation of the work that I did with Liz Lerman.

During one of my first rehearsals Brittany was braiding Natosha's hair. I immediately knew I wanted to use this image. I was looking for a way to strengthen Sarah's monologue and the braiding hair spoke to my needs. I decided that Sarah was telling the monologue to her mother whilst her hair was braided. This added many layers to that scene. Sarah was choosing first to tell her mother she had been raped.

I mentioned before that Brittany changed the monologue and this is why: Much of the language had to shift due to the new context in which it was being said. During One of the rehearsals I spent about an hour with Brittany going through the monologue line by line defining her character's objectives. She had been diligently working but was getting frustrated. I was overwhelmed with a variety of creative tasks and trusted her instincts. Brittany forced me to articulate my directorial voice and helped me clarify my point of view. Through a series of probing questions my monologue was dissected. I had to confront the validity of my own text in regards to the character's context.

I received similar help from David Luna. David, being from a theatre background, often questioned my motives, forcing me to confront my decision-making. David was frustrated that we were not spending more time with the script and I was unsure how to approach the text. I also knew I could not do too much directing with out the luxury of the performance space.

When David and I recorded Joe's messages we spent a considerable amount of time on the first message. This baffled me. I thought the first message was the easiest. Like Brittany, David asked a series of questions, which made me pin point my direction. After going through the process, I realized, that it was in that exchange that David began to understand my vision. Once we finished the first message, all the other recordings were done in one take.

David and Brittany were both performers with practical knowledge about acting and Corrine had a very clear idea who THAT GIRL was and her perky peppy attitude translated beautifully on stage but the rest of my cast were dancers without access to that information. I called upon my experience in Godspell to help bring the dancers' characters to life. "Listen, think, react," was a mantra I heard while working on Godspell and I used that vocabulary to invest my dancers in the script.

After the first few times reading through the script, I recognized that Natosha and Brandin were playing dull versions of themselves. I told them to create caricatures and have as much fun as possible, in the next read through they were both great. Somehow, I gave them freedom to be ridiculous and that freedom proved fruitful. The caricatures Brandin and Natosha created were vibrant enough for an audience to read and understand.

Natosha had a fairly weighted acting challenge playing Sarah's mother. Natosha had to respond and process all the information about her daughter's rape. Once she had given herself permission to be ridiculous this scene also benefited. We discussed a variety

of her reactions, confusion, anger, awkwardness, and love rose to the top of the list.

Brittany's powerful performance certainly informed Natosha but Natosha's interaction with Brittany also enhanced Brittany's performance. Natosha focused in on Brittany and listened before reacting. These two women performed a scene that formed a powerful mother daughter relationship.

The further we went in the rehearsal process, the more I focused on the journey of the choreoplay. I wanted each performer to define the journey their character was taking during the course of the show. I asked them to know what they were bringing to the evening and to create connections from beginning to end. I wanted the performers to take ownership of the experience they were going through. It was a delight to see and experience how each performer grew every time we ran the show. When "The Those Girls" told me they had had so much fun, I knew I had succeeded. The ballet dancers had become totally immersed in the characters and context of the choreoplay. They were playing and my work was reaping the benefits.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Artists reflect and comment upon the world in which they live. Television and cinema are powerful media influencing the way some people navigate themselves through their human existence. The structures, characters, and images created for media will continue to grow and as they do, other art forms will research and appropriate from them.

As a movement artist I am continually interested in the weaving of dance, theatre, and pop-culture. My creative investigation of *THAT GIRL: a musical pastiche of one woman's life* was a way in which I explored my ideas about choreography, art, and popular culture. This interdisciplinary vision speaks immediately to the existence I inhabit and most succinctly distills my perceptions. THAT GIRL represents a version of everyman and I am in no way finished with that creative research. As I continue to explore different versions of THAT GIRL I will continue to challenge myself to incorporate and manipulate images from cinema and television.

This research has helped define my aesthetic and educated me about my creative process. One of the most valuable lessons I learned is understanding that the people with whom I work are as important as the idea on which I am working. Mixing my performers' experiences and intellect into my process aided my choreographic vision. Without input

from my performers, the end product would have been an incomplete version of my choreographic intent.

Continuing to work with artists from different artistic fields, specifically actors, is an important aspect of my creative process. My work is theatrical and much of my creative voice involves text. This requires that I hone and articulate my directorial voice. Choosing performers like David Luna and Brittany Gadbury forces me to explain my theatrical concepts.

Both Brittany and David did plenty of acting homework but we had to come together as director and actor to create complex characters. I had to spend quality time communicating my ideas to these actors in order for understanding to evolve. Once the vision was clear, the creativity soared.

Taking time to let my ideas germinate is essential in realizing my creative work. I need to create and then revisit my ideas before the choreographic seed gains clarity. This is a hard realization in a product-driven society but allowing myself time is paramount for creative excellence.

As a choreographer, I consider myself a tour guide, for my cast and audience, through an artistic landscape. As the tour unfolds, those along for the ride point out mountains and streams I had not noticed. Seeing my ideas through others' eyes constantly brings a new perspective and helps me make my creative vision more three-dimensional. I always tell my performers that I expect a large amount of improvisation, even in set work. I believe if you are doing something by rote you are not completely engaged in what is happening during a performance. My work is approximately 80 percent set and 20 percent improvised. This gives my performers a lot of power to employ their creative voices. Many

of my written lines were transformed due to the performers, and certainly the choreography shifted. I find collaboration exciting, scary, invigorating, and necessary to my choreographic process. By depending upon the strength and intuition of my performers, I believe my work is rendered more powerful and complete.

As a choreographer I have also been struggling with questions of ownership in my choreographic process. Acknowledging that I collaborate with talented performers means giving creative credit to these gifted individuals. I put the performers and myself as choreographers in the program while honoring my creative research by crediting myself as writer, director, and responsible for the conception of the idea.

This thesis is important for me and represents the beginning of a creative journey. This research is something I will continue to unearth and understand. I believe the manipulation and appropriation of popular culture for choreographic purposes will be my life's work and something with which I will continually grapple

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