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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

*Though It May Shift*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

by

Erin Tracy

Committee in charge:

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Jim Carmody  
Shahrokh Yadegari  
Deborah Stein

2017

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The Thesis of Erin Tracy is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

## DEDICATION

To my mom who taught me that love is the most powerful form of leadership.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Images.....	vi
List of Supplemental Files.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Abstract of the Thesis.....	ix
Prelude: Fragments and Ephemera.....	1
Beginnings: Theories :: Realities: Politics .....	3
Process I: The Word is Love (Letters) .....	14
Process II: Making, Always Making .....	31
Performance and Reflection: The Uncertain Mirror.....	56
Postscript.....	58
Works Cited.....	59

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1: Initial Spectral Dichotomies .....	4
Image 2: Revised Spectral Dichotomies .....	9
Image 3: <i>Though It May Shift</i> design element photographs by Jim Carmody.....	53
Images 4a and 4b: Photographs of structure as initially recorded .....	54
Image 5: Structure as it was displayed in rehearsal.....	55

## LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL FILES

File 1. *Though It May Shift* performance archive video footage



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Thank you to everyone who helped make *Though It May Shift* a reality, especially performers Dina Apple, Kristopher Apple, Kyle Adam Blair, Issa Hourani, Nicole Javier, and Hillary Jean Young who gave much of their time and themselves to the process. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to work with such a genuine, egoless, and talented group of individuals. You are all brilliant, each in your own way.

Marybeth Ward, I would not have survived without you. Thanks to the other students past and present in the MFA Dance Theatre program but especially Dina Apple, Emily Aust, Anne Gehman, and Veronica Santiago Moniello. Your work and friendship are significant inspirations.

Thank you to Michael Francis and Laura Manning for helping me strategize and for thinking I'm funny.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*Though It May Shift*

by

Erin Tracy

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Liam Clancy, Chair

*Though It May Shift* is an evening length dance theatre work that premiered in the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre February 2-5, 2017.

This document is constructed as its own collection of artifacts from the making of *Though It May Shift* and is by no means an attempt to describe the show and process in its entirety. Like the performance it is describing, this text is a collage and not a linear exercise in exposition. False starts and changes in plan were significant fibers woven in to this piece. Time and again my collaborators and I would laugh about how apt the title was that I had created before knowing how the

work would unfold. It was not perfect. Neither is this record. But perhaps the reader's reconstruction of these artifacts will yield a greater kind of wisdom than the sense I alone can make of them.

In this particular approach there is also the hope that if I defy making full sense of what happened, the magic might last just a little bit longer.

## Prelude: Fragments and Ephemera

*“Whenever we try to make a piece of documentation, it becomes its own work of art, with little to do with the performance we had set out to document. But this is a good thing. Because there is no way to experience the performance other than to experience the performance. Its resistance to duplication in other media is in fact one of the reasons to do it in the first place.” - Matthew Goulish, Small Acts of Repair*

*“My house of memories is all I own,  
And I’m all alone, in my house of memories,  
In my house of memories.” –Merle Haggard, “House of Memories”*

Words I love words and I love words because they are often insufficient and I am so familiar with being insufficient that I have a great deal of love and compassion for words and so I will construct this out of words knowing they are insufficient and I am insufficient and so it will be constructed with love being familiar and great but nonetheless made of words.

.....

*Ephemera: There is a pink light and a woman in a peach dress slowly makes her way through the silence. She is actually seeing, not performing seeing. She sees her fingers wiggle. She sees the pink light around her. She sees the silence as she makes her way through.*

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin writes: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be” (13). While this is true of works of art spanning the spectrum from material to ephemeral, I would argue that this is especially true of dance. Certainly with the advent of the video camera, dance is able to carry with it a kind of record that enables a degree of repeatability,

though Benjamin goes on to say of film, “man has to operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence; there can be no replica of it” (29). This makes the attempt to capture an embodied form like dance particularly problematic. Perhaps the lack of interpretive record like a script or score is why the economics of dance are so unlike those of theatre or music, but this paper is not about the value of dance. I am interested, however, in how language attempts to record dance and dance making processes, specifically where it succeeds and where it fails. This document is one such attempt.

*Ephemera: She is standing on the bench with her hand raised, waving at the wrist and looking at him with wide eyes. He gets up and slowly starts to drag his chair toward her in starts and stops making creaks and squeaks with purpose. She is looking at him; he is listening to her. This is one of the last times she will look at him, but now that he has started, he will not stop listening to her.*

This work began with a house. And two losses. Though not necessarily in that order. They are significant inasmuch as they were beginnings.

## **Beginnings: Theories: Realities :: Ideas : Politics**

*“Is holiness therefore an unreal postulate? I think it is just as well founded as that of movement at the speed of light. By this I mean that without ever attaining it, we can nevertheless move consciously and systematically in that direction, thus achieving practical results.” – Jerzy Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre*

*“To be clear, this is not to posit some utopian interdisciplinary unity. Rather, it is to assert that to the extent that there is a tension between the word and body, speech and gesture, the future belongs to all collaborators—choreographers, directors, dramaturgs, and performers—who are curious about that tension and can imagine how to engage, explore, manipulate, or even undermine it. These are artists for whom that tension is fodder, not limit.” –Katherine Profeta, Dramaturgy in Motion*

As a dance-maker with a theatre background and a theatre-maker with a dance background, I have spent much of my time living between two worlds. As a dance theatre maker, I make a work that investigates the boundary between these disciplines. The ideas that comprised the foundation of my initial proposal for this project are ideas I have been working with for the majority of my career—namely, how is it possible for dance and theatre live together in performance such that they enrich and not diminish one another?

.....

### Theories: Ideas

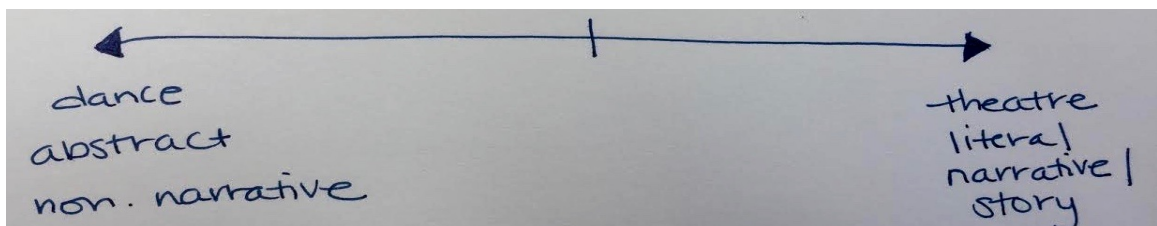
*Though It May Shift* was not my first proposition for my thesis production. Instead, I proposed a deconstruction of the play *Café le Monde* by Charles Mee. While *Café le Monde* was not ultimately the work I ended up presenting, it is important inasmuch as many of the approaches included this preliminary plan ended up being integral to how I built the material for *Though It May Shift*. This section is devoted to those concepts and theories.

They are:

- Spectral dichotomies
- “Soft narrative understanding” (Profeta 52)
- Collage / montage
- Interdisciplinary devised collaboration

### Spectral Dichotomies

One concept I was interested in researching through this work the idea that theatre and dance actually exist on a spectrum within live performance. Put simply, it looks like this:



**Image 1:** Initial Spectral Dichotomies

In her book *Dramaturgy in Motion*, Katherine Profeta addresses this spectrum when she notes the moment in contemporary performance “when theatre lost the primacy of the play script, gained a fascination with the embodied performer, and generally started to appear more like dance, and when during the same decades Judson and Bausch invited their dancers to speak and use quotidian movements, and generally started to appear more like theatre...” (11). The performance work I am most interested in and what I am often attempting to navigate in my own research is work that addresses the spectrum of possibilities that exists between dance and theatre. Some related questions I was exploring in *Though it May Shift* were: *how much literal information overpowers*

*abstraction? How can movement lead the generation of theatrical material? Can I provide enough narrative material that the work does not exist in pure abstraction but instead gives the audience enough information to feel invited to participate in a certain amount of meaning making?*

“Soft Narrative Understanding” (Profeta 52)

Indeed, I wanted to explore Anne Bogart’s proposal that “it is not difficult to trigger the same emotion in everyone. What is difficult is to trigger complex associations so that everyone has a different experience” (108). I was interested in using the spectrum to help create what Katherine Profeta coined as “soft narrative understanding” (52). She elaborates by writing:

I would like to argue for the reimagining of “narrative” to apply much more broadly to how a viewer perceives movement that unfolds and emerges through time... Time-based arts, insofar as they sequence events, engage narrative understanding. Sometimes they neatly satisfy it, sometimes they complicate or frustrate it, but in being temporal they are never able to entirely disengage from it, so they are always in relation to it. And if that is true, this ‘soft narrative understanding’ deserves full consideration, both by those who would make dances and those who would view, think, and write about them. (Profeta 52).

Collage

Part of how I attempted to use spectral dichotomies to create soft narrative was through the use of collage. This form lent itself to the proposal of *Café le Monde* but ultimately remained a strategy for building *Though It May Shift*. With collage, I could create and interweave a variety of pieces that existed at different points on the aforementioned spectrum that could come together to create a soft narrative.



## Interdisciplinary devised collaboration

Admittedly, the title of this section is a hodgepodge of buzzwords in contemporary performance today. “Interdisciplinary” “devised” and “collaboration” are terms for sophisticated approaches to making work that would merit their own separate research papers. For the purposes of this document and process, I will define them as follows:

Interdisciplinary- artists from different trainings and backgrounds contributing their efforts and expertise to synthesize a new temporal entity.

Devised- a piece of performance without a pre-existing script or score that is created using prompts or assignments.

Collaboration- a way of working that challenges the traditional hierarchies of the theatre or dance rehearsal room. Specifically, it empowers the artists involved to share in the overall creation and artistic decision making of a work.

Interdisciplinary devised collaboration- artists of different trainings and backgrounds coming together in shared authorship to create original material from a series of assignments to make a new work.

## Realities: Politics

Initially, I proposed *Café le Monde* as collaboration between the theatre and dance programs within the Theatre & Dance Department at UCSD. Part of that proposal was to work with graduate actors, dancers, and musicians. My intention for the proposal was that it would gain enough traction to be fully produced by our department— and have support that is traditionally given to theatre productions, but not to dance

productions. Specifically, I was hoping for assigned performers, pre-determined scheduling for performer availability and rehearsal space, and a fully committed stage manager throughout the entire rehearsal process. The request was both idealistic and practical—I wanted to collaborate with my cohorts across areas of study and I knew that undertaking a work with the scope I was proposing would take a tremendous amount of organization. I would be able to focus better on the creation of the piece if I could rely on systems and structures already in place in the department.

Without going in to excessive detail, my proposal was rejected and I was not given permission to work with MFA actors or to have my work produced as a main show within the season. Ultimately, the experience can be elegantly summated by: “It is, after all, the institutional structures and conditions of production that do the most to retain the disciplinary boundaries between contemporary dance and theater today—challenged as those boundaries may be by a variety of artists” (Profeta 18).

When it became clear that my initial proposal had been rejected, I realized much of my research would remain the same, but I would change my approach: instead of using a pre-existing text to deconstruct, choreograph, and reimagine, I would work with playwrights to build an entirely new work engaging with the concepts above. Because of production timelines and the ever-changing terrain of permissions I was navigating, I gave my work a title I felt appropriate to the experience of production within an institutional setting: *Though It May Shift*. This first shift also indicated a change in my proposed role from choreographer / director to choreographer / director / recruiter / stage manager (for the first four months of rehearsal) / scheduler. At this point I had decided not to perform in the work.

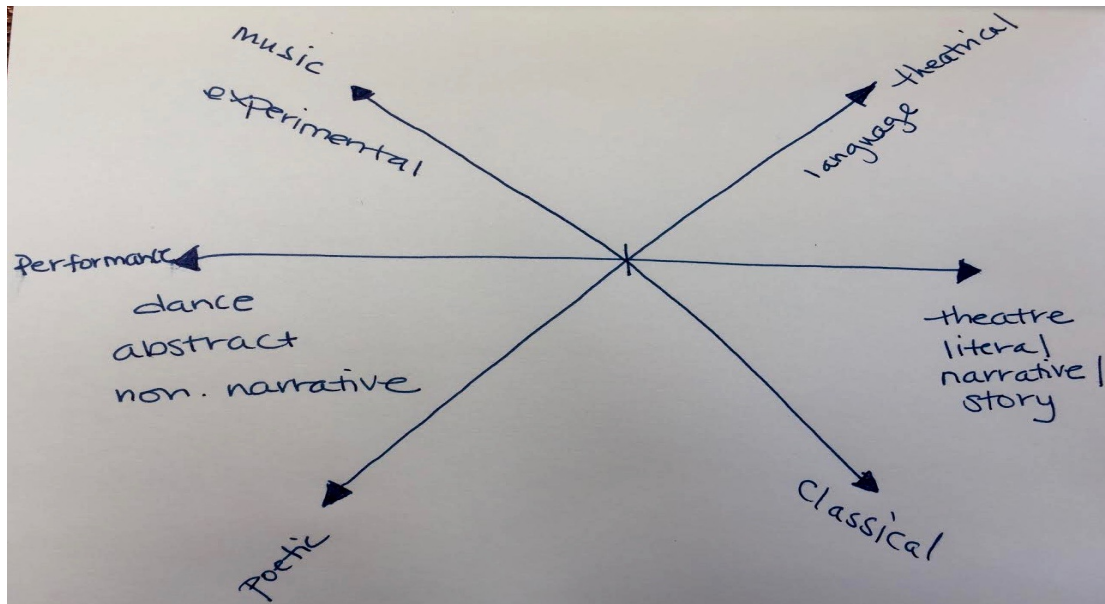
While campaigning for the original proposal was challenging, I was able to connect with new faculty members in my department and to refine and clearly articulate my concepts with those obliquely related to my interests in the dance theatre field. I also received one concession: I was able to work with MFA actors if they did it on their own time and it did not interfere with any of their other commitments.

### People

I had no problem finding actors who were interested in being involved in the process, and began rehearsals with four actresses from the MFA acting program. Working around their schedule and commitments proved especially daunting, however, and only one was ultimately able to successfully navigate the schedule negotiations required to be part of *Though It May Shift*.

Because I was not able to work with a team of designated artists, I recruited all of the performers, musicians, and writers for *Though It May Shift*. In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg writes: “When people are asked to do something that takes self-control, if they think they are doing it for personal reasons—if they feel like it’s a choice or something they enjoy because it helps someone else—it’s much less taxing. If they feel like they have no autonomy, if they’re just following orders, their willpower muscles get tired much faster” (183). Because this project involved a tremendous amount of work and no pay, I lost a few performers early on in the process, those who had other more pressing commitments at the time. Those that came to the project and stayed because they wanted to be there brought a tremendous amount of focus and effort to each rehearsal.

Ultimately, the team was the personification of the concept of spectral dichotomies inasmuch as they each brought a unique combination of performance and composition skills to the ecosystem of the project. It also made me reimagine the spectrum concept to include a music and language. It looks something like this:



**Image 2:** Revised Spectral Dichotomies

Below is a brief description of each of these collaborators.

Performers:

Rachel Torres- Rachel was the most technical and classically trained dancer in the piece and active member in the San Diego dance community. Before this collaboration, Rachel and I had seen one another's work, but my first in-person conversation with Rachel was about being in the cast of this show.

Issa Hourani- Issa had just graduated from the undergraduate dance program at UCSD when he began work on *Though It May Shift*. We met when he took my Intermediate Contemporary dance class and subsequently I invited him to work with me as a dancer on the UCSD production of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Dina Apple- Dina had just graduated from the graduate dance theatre program at UCSD when she began work on *Though It May Shift*. Having studied together, she and I had a shared interest in theatrical language and it's place with choreography.

Nicole Javier- Nicole was a first year MFA actress in the department. She and I were in class together when she expressed her interest in dance theatre and joined the work.

Kyle Adam Blair- Kyle and I met my first year at UCSD and had previously worked together on productions of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Movers + Shakers*. He was pursuing his DMA in Music Performance for Piano at the time of *Though It May Shift*.

Hillary Jean Young- Hillary was also a candidate for a DMA in Music Performance, but as a vocalist. She had taken my Beginning Contemporary dance class and her classical training and interest in experimental music intrigued me.

Kristopher Apple- Kris was a staple in the San Diego dance and theatre collaboration scene when I met him. From what I had seen prior to this process, much of his work was experimental.

Playwrights:

Kristin Idaszak- Kristin graduated from the UCSD MFA Playwriting program my first year in the department. We had worked together on several works during our time together and following her graduation from UCSD.

Lily Padilla- As a graduate candidate in the MFA Playwriting program, Lily and I had bonded over our shared undergraduate education at the Experimental Theatre Wing at NYU (though we had attended the program during different years) and our love of collaboration.

Faculty members assigned my designers and stage manager, though as part of my initial campaign, I had expressed a desire to work with scenic designer Charlie Jicha.

Designers:

Charlie Jicha- Charlie was a scenic design MFA candidate in my year and had designed two other shows I had worked on at UCSD.

Jaymee Ngerwichit- As an MFA costume designer, Jaymee designed the costumes and projections for *Though It May Shift*. This was our first time working together.

Chao-Yu Tsai- Chao-Yu was an MFA lighting design candidate and the lighting designer on my second year MFA choreography project *Precipitate*.

For the interests of this paper, this is a break down of my creative team and does not include various other contributors to the work including but not limited to my stage management team, technicians, shop support, and crew.

### Inspiration

Throughout the process of making *Though It May Shift*, I resisted a certain degree of “about-ness” when discussing the work with my team. Certainly, the assignments I gave to my performers came from specific themes and imagery, but I was more interested in what my collaborators would create with my input than explaining to them a predetermined outcome. This was one of my strategies for keeping a responsive process, which I will discuss at length later in this document.

For *Though It May Shift*, I was dealt with themes around memory and loss. Oliver Saks elegantly articulates: “memories are not fixed or frozen, like Proust’s jars of preserves in a larder, but are transformed, disassembled, reassembled, and recategorized with every act of recollection” (162). With this in mind I was also interested in the act of accessing imperfect memory from the place of one’s present state. Saks goes on to say:

Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience.... It is thus hardly ever really exact (171).

Specifically, I was interested in the grounding forces (memories) and departures (losses) that accumulate to give us access to our own complexity.

With this in mind, I used a home as a structural frame and central image for the elements of design and a number of the compositional elements.

### Logistics: Planning Space and Time

I had learned from other production timelines that there was very little time-- often just one spacing rehearsal-- to let the work inhabit in the theatre and set before gaining an audience. Because I was making a piece that featured a moving set that was to be woven in to the piece in such a way it could provide structure for transitions, I decided that one spacing was not enough. I went and spoke to our Production Manager Michael Francis about my production schedule to address this. There was some precedent for this in the department as the devised work *Movers + Shakers* had a few early rehearsals with their set in their theatre. I approached him with this proposal: I was willing to give up one week of shows in exchange for a week of devising, or “spacing” the work in the Potiker Theater with the full set. This week turned out to be very generative and important inasmuch as it gave me time to intelligently choreograph the space and moving of the scenic elements as opposed to dictate problem-solving transitions out of pure necessity.



**Process I: The Word is Love (Letters)**

*“The quality attention one offers in rehearsal is key to a fertile process.”  
- Anne Bogart, A Director Prepares*

*“I think I’m in love but it makes me kinda nervous to say so.” – Beck, “Think I’m in Love”*

The making of *Though It May Shift* prominently featured an investigation of my ideas and values around leadership.

After years of being in different rehearsal rooms with different hierarchies and value systems, I found myself wondering if a work of art could change the world for the better if the way it was made adhered to an old value system. In the spirit of choreographer Deborah Hay and her “proposition in the form of a ‘what if?’ question” (11), I asked myself *what if how I make work is just as political as the work I make?* That question gave rise to a series of intentions for my quality and style of leadership throughout the process and resulted in the two-pronged approach of using *holistic choreography* and a set of rules around mindfulness.

Following the closing of the show, I asked my performers to write—as much or as little as they wanted-- about the process in their own words. Their responses to that request are interspersed throughout this section.



Free write from my journal before starting rehearsal on October 23, 2016:

*There is a house with many people living in it—the house contains the intersections and layers of many homes, thoughts passed, what once was. The landscape allows for each*

*person to be as complicated as they really are. And we're building. Really, truly from nothing. Or rather, from each person's own states of being, pushed close in to rooms like a home travelled through hallways (narrow or deep). And we arrive somewhere together. Maybe on parallel planes of being that have somehow, for tonight, chosen to coincide. A house is a house is myself. And I have to start with what I have. This is not a work about homes. About childhood or constancy. This is a work about things that remind you of your own legacy. You cannot hold this piece in your hand. It is becoming for each person in each moment. It falls over on itself. And if I have to be really, truly honest, I'm still discovering it.*

About a year before I began rehearsing for *Though It May Shift*, I was working as choreographer for a graduate production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the University of California, San Diego. The best and most challenging part of that particular project was choreographing a solo movement phrase for the character Firs, who was being played by a performer in his eighties. He had never performed dance before (though he was proud to tell me he had taken a modern dance class years ago as an undergraduate) and was skeptical about the dance component of the piece. Specifically, he was uncertain about performing the movements without looking—in his words—like a “fool”. During a particularly tricky phase in that rehearsal process, choreographer Liz Lerman came as a guest to visit our Dance Making Processes class. Each choreographer in the class had an opportunity speak about what we were working on and when she got to me, I spoke a bit about *The Cherry Orchard* and the one on one work I was doing with this particular performer. I expressed concern over his lack of confidence and she asked me what my plan was to make him feel safe in the material. Impulsively, I told her that the approach I

had decided to take was one of *holistic choreography*. Something came together for me in that moment.

The question seemed simple: how was I paying attention? In her book *A Director Prepares*, Anne Bogart discusses:

As a director, my biggest contribution to a production, and the only real gift I can offer to an actor, is my attention. What counts the most is the quality of my attention. From what part of myself am I attending? Am I attending with desire for success, or am I attending with interest in the present moment? Am I hopeful for the best in an actor or do I want to prove my superiority? A good actor can instantly discern the quality of my attention, my interest. There is a sensitive life-line between us. If this line is compromised, the actor feels it. If it feels cheapened by my own ego or desire or lack of patience, the line between us is degraded. (74)

I came to graduate school after years of teaching one on one movement and yoga to people who wanted to become more embodied. With that experience I gained not only the ability to quickly assess and react to what was happening with a person physically, but I had also been in the practice of really paying attention and responding in order to make them more comfortable while out of their comfort zone. Why wasn't I bringing what I knew about this to my leadership in the rehearsal room?

*Holistic choreography* is the practice of seeing the whole performer and allowing the work to come through and from what I am seeing. Sometimes, it means attending to things around the work that aren't exactly the work itself. It is not about coercion toward a predetermined final product. It is deeper and more intimate than making work on my own body and then "setting" that work on their bodies. Indeed, choreographing movement feels less like setting something **on** someone and more like assembling material **from** them. What I've learned through this approach is if I can attend to what is happening around the work and all I am seeing from a particular person, the work

can go deeper. With this knowledge, I can invite a collaborator or performer to show facets of themselves they might not normally share with an audience. Usually, this is not something I address at great length with performers, but I have learned that this process is intimate and therefore frame how I make work by letting them know that I will be witnessing and responding to them as individuals.

I wanted to put this approach in to full practice with *Though It May Shift*.

An email from Issa Hourani:

*In the beginning of the rehearsal process for TIMS, I had expected it to be similar to previous rehearsals I have been a part of. However, with every rehearsal, not only did it help me realize how much growth there is for me in my comfort areas and habitual movement, but it has revealed to me areas that have been in me all along, but never tapped into nor explored. These areas of discovery brought along frustration and gratitude at the same time, it was exciting and terrifying as I had forgotten what is it like to really push my boundaries and to not be safe within my own comfort, but the question and exploration of how taking risks and stepping away from comfort zones arose aid to create my most beautiful dance. The movement that emerged was new yet was still me, which I had found fascinating as it kept the integrity of my human, my self, in areas that I wasn't aware of, places that were hiding in plain sight.*

*Issa Hourani*

*UCSD Alumni*

In addition to practicing holistic choreography, I was interested in giving myself a set of guidelines around how I would lead.

The rules were:

- No suffering.
- I am mindful of my own language and choreography within the rehearsal room.

When appropriate, I leave space.

- The structures for devising give the performers agency.
- I bring snacks.

No suffering.

How many times had I been in a rehearsal room where something had been “pulled out” of a performer? How often had I been in a room where an unspoken value was that good work was only possible to achieve through a certain degree of suffering? Because I was approaching this work from a place of really seeing and responding to each person in the room, I had the sense that the vulnerability I was hoping to cultivate could best be achieved if I committed to a process that did not require suffering to achieve results.

I am mindful of my own language and the choreography of the rehearsal room. When appropriate, I leave space.

I knew that part of how I wanted to lead this process included mindfulness around my own language and physical presence. I chose my language based on what I thought would encourage the best solution to the problems that arose when devising. Specifically,

I found using phrases like *I wish... and I have a desire...* were particularly fruitful when directing this ensemble in the work. After a while they caught on to this use of language and these phrases would become a part of a shared inside joke.

It was also important to be conscious of how I was choreographing my own body within the rehearsal room. The choices I made around where to place myself and what I was looking at in relationship to the simultaneous action in the rehearsal studio were intentional. For example, I often found myself seated on the floor of the perimeter of studio (as opposed to seated at a table or standing by the mirror at the front of the room).

The last facet of this self-choreography is about leaving space. This was a verbal and physical practice about knowing when to allow my collaborators room to self-organize.

In one section of the choreography, I wanted performers Dina Apple and Rachel Torres to have a party. We tried a few ways of partying in rehearsal, but nothing really seemed like it created the right sense of fun. Instead of solving this for them, however, I encouraged them to find a way to make a party that was fun and particular to them. Kyle came up with a solution: each night before the performance, he would deliver Dina and Rachel a private envelope with the name of the song at the party to which they were to imagine they were dancing. They were to keep it a secret from one another until the show was over. This device created a sense of anticipation each evening and took the party section from being something dreaded to something delightful. This was a particularly thrilling moment for me as a choreographer because my collaborators had self-organized to solve a problem.

An email from Kyle Adam Blair:

*Hi Erin!*

*Greetings from Buffalo, NY! I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write, and I hope all is well! Mostly, I hope to see you all again soon! I also hope your thesis is going well!!! Woo!*

*I wanted to start this e-mail by thanking you for opening up a space in which this type of collaboration can happen. When I think about pieces like this, it has always felt to me that it's less about the metaphorical "construction" of something, but rather that there's some kind of invisible theatre or metaphysical room that one opens and that we all step into, and bring things to share (not unlike the potluck metaphor I've discussed with you before, I think!)*

*With these projects I believe takes someone (or some group of people) to at least define what that space is that we're all stepping into. What are the dimensions of the space? What is it made of? What are the rules in this space? In this particular project I think you did a wonderful job establishing the rules of the space (even when they...shift!) and defining what can, does, won't, wouldn't, etc. exist in the metaphysical venue you created. In the future, I'm wondering if it's possible for a singular person to NOT be in that role. Of course, this having been your Master's thesis, it's important to have a degree of control and have your "name" on it! In the future, though, it makes me wonder if the parameters of the "space" we all step into can be decided upon and adhered to in a kind of peaceful anarchy...maybe it's not possible! I'm not sure...just curious...*

*Anyway, having opened up a space like this that was so open from the very start, it became a labor of love to craft (cook) something for the group to enjoy artistically in the context of such a potluck. I wanted to provide the BEST stuff for my collaborators to work with...elements that were rich and varied and malleable and stretchable...value systems are no longer placed on accuracy in the same way that scripted works are. Instead, the value is on immediate experience and sensation when interacting with the contributions of others. Perhaps there's no doing it "right" or "wrong" but somehow there is a doing it "better" and "worse" ...and that seems to be a personal responsibility of the performer. In this situation I was happy to take on that task, though I'll say at the end of the day I was very, very happy in this particular project to have a director to "answer to" and to provide feedback as an ultimate creative force in the work to which I contribute.*

*Even then, the idea of performer living up to a document or intention that is outside him or herself doesn't apply in something like *Though It May Shift*. One is not trying to pluck a really nice-looking apple from a tree...one is planting one's own tree. The questions that arise for me in this work, to sum it up, is WHO has decision making power in the work and is there a hierarchy? In *Though It May Shift* that hierarchy was simple, and made a lot of sense for the creation of the work, and regardless of the hierarchy in works like these the performer/contributor certainly has AGENCY in a way that they don't with most canonic scripted or scored works.*



*In a nutshell, through the process I felt like a creative agent who had a huge amount of control over what I was bringing to the potluck to share with everyone. Once I brought it to the potluck, maybe some people liked it, maybe some people didn't, maybe I go home with leftovers and try to make something else for myself or maybe I just try to go home and hone my recipe and try to bring it to the next potluck! The most important thing you did, I think, in this work was to put together a cast of people who love to cook and who are also hungry...folks who contribute but don't want to taste of the contributions of others don't help these processes, I don't think. I think we all have to come hungry and bearing food for it to work...and we did that :)*

*I think that'll be it for now! Sorry about all the rambling, but I'd be happy to discuss this more in person over a beer or coffee if you have any questions about my meandering thoughts!*

*Take care, good luck on your thesis, see you soon, and THANK YOU for TIMS!*

*Best,*

*KB*

*Kyle Adam Blair, pianist*

*D.M.A. Candidate in Contemporary Music Performance, University of California,  
San Diego*

The structures for devising give the performers agency.

*Though It May Shift* was built using a collaborative devised process where “despite the fact that the director(s) / choreographer(s) had the final word, we were all building a dissecting the piece, from scratch, together” (Profeta 12). The responsibility for the creation of content was disbursed amongst the playwrights, musicians, and performers and therefore gave them a certain degree of authorship within the work. Duhigg writes “giving employees a sense of agency—a feeling that they are in control, that they have genuine decision-making authority—can radically increase how much energy and focus they bring to their jobs” (184). Therefore, my role function as director / choreographer was about providing a catalyst and then responding to what came from the impetus. Certainly I was in a leadership role, but I agree with Profeta’s argument:

What’s needed is a more sophisticated conceptual toolkit for understanding existing collaborative systems, so all such creative relationships do not snap immediately to a two-dimensional grid, in either a vertical relationship of served and servile, or a horizontal relationship of fifty-fifty authorship, neither of which feel familiar to my working process. (21)

Instead of acting as an auteur, as director I created assignments from which the content was generated, and I responded, created context, and edited. I shaped the content as it was being made in rehearsal and provided vision and structure for the work. This method for creating allowed my team to have a certain degree of ownership and responsibility for what was being made.

An email from Dina Apple:

*...how is the writing going?*

*I keep trying to write some things for you, but I'm better in person! If you would like a break from computer time and wanna get a tea or a meal and talk, I can give some more (precise) words about my TIMS experience. I've got time.*

*Here are some random bits for now:*

*Marinate in the vibrations*

*Complication--honoring it.*

*Ownership of all the magic*

*Chasing the vulnerability...informed mistakes*

*I'll be on campus Friday for the incoming candidates audition, maybe I'll see you?*

*Dina*

At the top of each rehearsal, I would give the performers an assignment to respond to or contend with. Annie B Parson of Big Dance Theatre describes an assignment as “an artistic errand, a task both generative and strict. A construct with limited rules directing the assignee to create materials addressing a certain element of dance” (2). This idea of creating circumstances under which a dancer is invited to respond is one that Pina Bausch is often credited for innovating. Andre Lepeki notes the revolutionary moment when Bausch “dared to ask dancers a question” and goes on to say:

The shift proposed by Bausch was not only compositional, aesthetic or dramaturgical. Its maximum impact was primarily epistemological: by asking questions and listening to answers, she transformed the field of dance by redistributing the position of "who detains the knowledge". (30)

I will discuss a few of the assignments with greater specificity later in this paper.

An email from Rachel Torres:

*Hi Erin,*

*I apologize that this email is coming much later than I meant. I've been feeling pretty ill the last few weeks and recently found out that I have pneumonia. I miss everyone and hope that we will all be able to make a reunion happen in the near future. I hope that these thoughts are not too late and that your writing has been going very well!*

*This process was different from any process I have ever been a part of. I have never had the opportunity to work in a 'one-on-one' nature generating, shaping, and re-shaping material with guidance. I'm so used to being part of a collective and being asked to **set** and **define** movement that has been taught to me, so there was something very freeing (while at times also challenging) about being a part of generating the movement and being open to whatever questions or changes arose from working with you or the musicians. I had to learn how to not get attached to anything or make anything too precious, while also learning that there is something so precious about being able to discover and adapt movement in an ever-changing environment. Even if the movement was technically the same, there was an opening for difference each time it happened -- whether the approach of the movement, the intention, or the movement itself.*

*I enjoyed working in this new process and feel like it asked me and allowed me to bring much more of myself into the piece than I have for any other*

*piece I've worked on in the past. In turn, it felt like a much more honest "performance" on stage and it made me feel really invested in each show.*

*Rachel*

As director or choreographer, I empower my performers to fully contribute their specific knowledge and expertise to the process thereby them a certain degree of agency. This was especially important in the development of *Though It May Shift* because my collaborators had such varied backgrounds that for me to be the ultimate authority on all the fields would have been nearly impossible. I knew enough to respond, guide, and shape the work, but often I was relied on my collaborators to use their own problem solving abilities to execute my direction. One slightly unexpected outcome of this way of working in varying degrees outside of ones area was that people brought more of themselves to the process than their particular skill set.

Musicians were game to dance, dancers sang and made sound, and just about everyone ended up performing some kind of language. With everyone in the room good at something slightly (or dramatically) different, there was not a lot of shared knowledge or judgment around good or bad technique. Quite possibly because my leadership set the tone, there was freedom to be everything from expert to amateur, which is related to agency as well.

An email from Nicole Javier:

*Revisiting Home*

*Dear Erin,*

*When I was told to imagine my body as my house,*

*I had no idea what to do.*

*Dance the question, the answers will find you.*

*This mantra continues to fill me as an artist.*

*This process for me was a reawakening of things I had forgotten.*

*Everything you've ever lost come back to*

*I had forgotten how to be simple*

*How to have fun*

*How to work with just myself*

*How to move and dance- at the same time!*

*How to relax my judgment*

*How to be patient*

*I had forgotten how I got here*

*My family*

*My struggles*

*My accomplishments*

*My art form.*

*It is not lost on me that my response mirrors one of my speeches.*

*You created a space in which art reflects life, and vice versa*

*And brought artists together who translate each other's languages*

*Into something even more beautiful and rich.*

*Lily wrote words that I found difficult to say*

*Because they rang so true.*

*We had no idea what *Though It May Shift* would look like*

*Not even during the last week of rehearsals.*

*But once we all stepped into our new space*

*Our community*

*It was like magic.*

*It was like this secret show that you always knew was there,*

*And wanted to surprise us with it.*

*One of your many delightful wishes...*

*I continue to be in wonderment of this experience,*

*for reasons I am still discovering.*

*Somewhere between December and a BIG TRANSITION*

*I found a grace*

*an ownership*

*a discipline*

*a process*

*permission*

*new friends*

*and new ideas...*

*The part that I hold dear about this show*

*is that it is so much more than a show.*

*We created these movements and sounds, and words.*

*The eight artists on stage,  
along with the many more off stage,  
Shared a part of themselves from the very beginning.  
I loved that I was introduced to everyone's art first  
and then we became friends.*

*It took courage,  
and no one was immune to being seen.*

*Thanks for keeping us honest!*

*Though It May Shift was my debut to the UCSD stage*

*And it reminded me of who I am.*

*Elements of self that got buried from not working*

*Or working on things other people put on me.*

*But from the very beginning,*

*from knowing I had to be in two places at once,*

*I was hooked.*

*Time keeps moving,*

*Shifting,*

*But some things just tend to stay with you.*

*And thank goodness for this one.*

*So much love and gratitude,*

*Nicole*



I bring snacks.

This feels pretty self-explanatory, but it is one of my values is that if people are working for free, the least I can do is feed them.

Having snacks at a table or area in the rehearsal room also makes for a more social environment during breaks and therefore helps to build a sense of ensemble amongst the cast.

## Process II: Making, Always Making

*“...intelligence is a matter of “guessing well”. Guessing well involves a natural tendency people have to predict. Training is an attempt to make predictions more accurate in a given environment. But as the environment changes (and it always does), what you need is versatility, the ability to perceive what’s really happening and to adapt to it.”*  
- Laurence Gonzalez, *Deep Survival*

*“By positioning the dancer in the place of producer of knowledge rather than passive recipient of previously elaborated steps, and by allowing the dancers' expressivity to escape from the self contained realm of "pure movement", Bausch was changing the entire epistemological stability of the dance field.”*  
- Andre Lepecki, *“Dance without distance”*

In this section, I will discuss movement, music, language, design and structure.



### Movement

One of my intentions for this work was to create material that would highlight each performer while also allowing them to be as complex as they really are. Sometimes I would work from an ever-evolving phrase I had made for each performer; sometimes I would deeply attend to their behavior and choices in the rehearsal room and use that to augment any assignments or material. Especially before the introduction of the other collaborators, it was important to me that individual movement material was shaped and influenced by the community in the rehearsal room. After using the first portion of rehearsal to devise movement individually, we would work with the movement material in three ways: show the phrase alone, work with others to shape the material, and then perform the choreography again imagining the others as ghosts and remembering their physical influences. This was an early way I began to weave the work

and the performers together. As we got further in to the process and began to add musicians and playwrights (which would further shape the work in their own ways) often I would save the end of rehearsal for sharing, but not necessarily shaping.

Examples of phrases I worked with:

- Issa: A home is a home is myself.
- Rachel: Exploring the unknown reveals me.
- Nicole: My body speaks with a soft voice. I can listen.
- Dina: Accumulation is the language of complexity.
- Erin: Gestural resonance is a spiritual act.

Issa: A home is a home is myself.

While talking about the ideas that inspired this work, Issa and I discussed the fact he had two childhood homes—one in Jordan and one in California. In an early rehearsal, I asked Issa to use movement take me on a tour of one of his childhood homes while letting his body be each of the rooms. He started with his home in California. After seeing the movement phrase he made, I asked him to retrograde it. Once he had figured out the retrograde version of the phrase, I asked him to make another series of movements using just his upper body to take me on a tour through his home in Jordan. Then I asked him to combine the two so while he was taking me on a tour of his home in Jordan with his upper body, he was taking me on the backward tour through his home in California with his lower body. I noticed that even though the phrase was a home tour, it took up a relatively small amount of space in the rehearsal room (this may have been a product of each performer working somewhat individually in a shared studio) and I

wanted Issa to have the experience of taking the phrase in to ever expanding space. When we came together to shape, I asked the other cast members to stand in a circle very close to Issa. His task was to perform the phrase while giving us high fives, meanwhile we would expand our circle in to the furthest reaches of the space, requiring him to cover much more ground than in his initial version of the choreography. The result was very powerful. In having to manage both choreographies and ever-expanding space, the dance became much more aerobic and challenging and therefore felt like the visceral experience of trying to live between two worlds. In subsequent rehearsals, we would continue to use this choreography to play with this idea of expanding and contracting space.

This *memory house* assignment is one I ended up using for all of the performers but in different ways, augmented to reflect their individual experiences.

As I continued to work with Issa, I focused on complicating his initial responses to prompts—especially asking him to reframe his ideas around choreography, technique, and the quality of self that arrives in each moment of a performance.

Dina: Accumulation is the language of complexity.

Dina was the performer with whom I was most familiar at the very beginning of this process. Knowing about her capabilities, I asked her about her relationship with virtuosity at the start of this work. She responded that as a performer she would often ask herself “Is it appropriate to bring out my virtuosity in this situation?” Because of this, I wanted to give Dina the opportunity to be both inappropriate and virtuosic. I started by giving her a basic devising exercise I call starting and switching. I made a series of

movement-based assignments where she would accumulate choreographies with different prompts to build a phrase. An example of this is: unpeel everything add gypsy add gravity problem on a large scale. Once Dina had made a few starting and switching phrases, I had a desire to create a more diverse series of landings and departures in the material so I asked the group to use their bodies to give Dina shape as she moved through her phrases. This choreography would later become her movement vocabulary for when she was “outside of the house” in her duet with Wilbur and Deb.

Throughout the process, I set intentions for Dina’s material around using all the skills to which she had access, and focused on giving her permission to transgress in to areas she had not yet experienced.

Rachel: Exploring the unknown reveals me.

Out of all the performers in this piece, I had the least history with Rachel. Because I was relatively new to Rachel but had a sense of her practice with the more traditional style of rehearsing and performing dance choreography so I needed to give assignments that would allow me to get to know her better as we built movement. Her first assignment was to come up with five responses to each of the following prompts:

The work of living is \_\_\_\_\_.

The joy of living is \_\_\_\_\_.

Example: The work of living is clarity. The joy of living is humor. She would find a move or moves for clarity and then for humor, and then both together. I then had her pair one response from each column and make a small movement phrase for a total of five movement phrases from this assignment. A lot of the material Rachel initially generated

felt too familiar to me—in part, because her body has been choreographed very specifically by a certain technique, but I wanted to bring some of her lovely uncertainty and shyness in to the work. During one rehearsal when we came together, I asked the group to give Rachel some information or influence that would allow her to be uncertain or unfinished in her movements.

This was my work with Rachel throughout the process. Specifically, I wanted to bring more of her own essence in to the dances and to call her on the movement patterns that I already knew something about. In essence, I wanted to have to attend to her movements in a special way as opposed to seeing a single kind of virtuosity from her for the duration for the work.

Nicole: My body speaks with a soft voice. I can listen.

Nicole came to the process as an actress that was interested in movement. When we started rehearsal I was in Acting Process and Alexander Technique class with Nicole so I was seeing how she embodied text and movement in those arenas. I didn't really know where to begin with her so at the outset I gave her a few assignments that weren't fruitful. We then had a one on one rehearsal where we were able to discuss what I was seeing and her experience of being in her body in a more abstract way than she was accustomed. I mentioned to her that the moments when I really saw her moving from an embodied place felt quieter and subtler than when she was moving from a theatrical place. So I had her play the "two truths and a lie" game with movement. Essentially, I wanted her to make two moves that felt honest to her body, and one that did not. We shaped this work by using other bodies to help her play with facings and timing.

This became the foundation of my work with Nicole, the idea that she could be honest and that her honesty was compelling enough to hold the stage.

Erin: Gestural resonance is a spiritual act.

Three other actresses from the Graduate Acting area wanted to collaborate on this process and we began to work together before they were told there were too many scheduling conflicts to participate. This created a challenge for the work inasmuch as I needed performers that were experienced with performing text. After I lost these three performers, I decided I would perform some of the text in the piece. It was a difficult decision to make—to be “in” and “out” of the work alternately, but I felt it was the best way to honor the language (and indeed my graduate school experience, where I have practiced a great deal of performance). The assignment I later worked with for text was an extension of this physical phrase and embedded in the concept of gestural resonance.

For my own experience, and as the maker of the work, I was fascinated by resonance and interpretation. After building my own *memory house* phrase, I gave it away. I taught it to each of the performers and had them each make seven other versions of my house. Some examples of those versions are—just with the eyes, in sound, with narration, as a martial art, and with upper body only.

One of the most successful ways I found to create a safety around generating outside one’s comfort zone was the use of a flash devising assignment that felt like a game, which I call Shake and Bake. A couple of months after the musicians joined the process we had a particularly tough rehearsal. It was nothing specific, just low energy

as we had reached our limit for working individually. When we took a break, I went in to the office and wrote everyone a set of little slips of paper with prompts on them.

I wrote things like:

*Attic!*

*Who is at the front door?*

*Help someone.*

Everyone received the same five mini assignments or cues in a different order. I folded the papers so they carried the excitement of a secret note. I set a revolving order for when each person would open his or her prompt. Then we built each cue one number set at a time. For instance, we would build everyone's number one prompt starting with the first performer in the order. They could respond in any way they wanted. I gave the musicians the option of responding musically, though to our shared delight they chose to dance their responses instead. The rule for their response was that they had to intersect with the other performers' responses in some way.

I thought Shake and Bake would be a good way to at least alleviate some of the tension in the room and at best it would build some movement material I could use in the transitions for what was an increasingly fragmented work.

During the first Shake and Bake, there was so much joy in the rehearsal room I realized that this form had more to offer this group of performers than I initially anticipated. There was something about the delight in the charade-like game and the speed at which we could build sophisticated organization that created a new realm of freedom. It also allowed everyone in the room to compose together, which ended up being very important to building community. Throughout the process, I continued to host



Shake and Bakes, which ended up serving a dual purpose: they enhanced the experience of freedom and community and they created choreography with a dis/organized texture for the work.

### Music

The musicians joined the process a few months after we had begun generating movement material. I partnered the musician with a dancer or dancers and gave them assignment to generate sound such that it would relate to the movement material in a dynamic way. I also wanted the partnership with the musicians to build a sense of relationship within the work. Below are a few examples of those assignments.

#### Kris and Issa

Because Issa and I had experimented with the scope of his “house” piece, I gave this duo the assignment that Kris would use the duration of the tones he was playing on the violin to define the amount of space (spatially and temporally) Issa was to take up for each successive move. This assignment served two purposes: (1) it gave a framework for Issa to experience large and small scale within the choreography and (2) it fostered a specific kind of attentive listening and spontaneity in material that had begun to feel overly introspective and lacking in a responsive presence.

#### Kyle and Nicole

When Kyle came to the process, he and Nicole had never met. Knowing this, I sent them in to their own studio with the assignment that Kyle was to “listen” and

respond musically to the choreography we had generated for Nicole. Knowing that they both had a tendency to want to discuss the work, I asked them to make the rough draft of this assignment while speaking to one another as little as possible. When I came back to check on them, Kyle was actively concentrating to Nicole while playing the piano as a percussive instrument. He was not looking at her, but his full attention was focused on her. The material read as a very intensely devoted relationship—but they had not spoken at all.

### Hillary and Rachel

Both Hillary and Rachel are classically trained performers who exude seriousness and virtuosity in performance. As soon as I paired them together, they somehow gave one another permission to be nerdy and awkward. I wanted to use this partnership to encourage them to vacillate between form and presence in this way—allowing for moments of laughter and secret handshakes and inside jokes. These assignments required a special kind of attention from me as I had to patiently wait until something authentic happened while they thought I wasn't watching and then ask them to pepper it in to the what they were constructing.

The force and commitment with which the musicians entered this process was one of the biggest windfalls for the show. Their presence and willingness to play allowed me to deeply develop the musical sections. All three musicians commented to me at different times how the length and camaraderie of the process were a special luxury for them coming from a world where everyone would learn their part on their own, show up for a rehearsal or two, perform, and then move on.

As I continue to work on *Though It May Shift*, I will emphasize developing the material with the musician because these sections and partnerships were the richest and most dynamic.

### Language

The playwrights were the last collaborators to the process. Similar to the musicians, I would create assignments for the playwrights based on giving a particular performer an opportunity to display a part of themselves they might not usually express in performance. The difference in this layer of collaboration was that I was the intermediary between the performers and the playwrights. I would share rehearsal video of the movement and assignments, but due to limitations and with the exception of a couple of visits, the playwrights were not in the room with us.

Language also found its way in to the work through moments we devised in the rehearsal room with the musicians, but I will focus primarily on the scripted material.

### Lily and Dina

When I first met with Lily, I shared video of Dina's most complex accumulation phrase and we discussed how text might be an opportunity for Dina to work from the perspective of a character expressing anger. This was Dina's first foray in to monologue and I wanted to give her the chance to explore the text in a different way than she had been afforded in her dance experience.

After watching the video and reflecting on the prompt, Lily wrote this text:

*No I wouldn't say I'm angry*

*Not angry angry*

*I'm not one to get*

*I'm not prone*

*I am not prone in that way*

*Good quality for a forest ranger*

*Immovable*

*Like the trees*

*Witness to centuries*

*But I didn't get to be a forest ranger*

*Cuz cuz cuz*

*There's a test*

*A big long ABCD*

*And I don't think that can really test*

*HOW GOOD YOU ARE AT BEING WITH FUCKING TREES*

*HOW GOOD YOU ARE AT BEING WITH FUCKING CHILDREN*

*HOW GOOD YOU ARE AT BEING WITH FUCKING CHILDREN WALKING*

*THROUGH TREES AND SAYING THAT IS A TREE IT'S CALLED*

*Sequoia*

*American Sequoia*

*Dwarf Sequoia*

*American Fern*

*Wild Oak*

*Royal Oak*

*Poison Ivy*

*Fairy Moss*

*Forest Algae*

*The trees are labeled on the tours*

*The trees are labeled on the tours*

*I can memorize a script*

*Just don't give me an ABCD*

*Wilbur says I need to get the cobwebs outta my brain*

*Wilbur, I says, what if I can't find em*

*What if they just feel like brain*

*What if they are brain*

*Nah. He says. Can't be. That's not like my brain*

*Some spider musta gotten in there,*

*Laid some eggs.*

*Well fuck you Wilbur.*

*Fuck you.*

*Wolf Spider*

*Recluse Spider*

*Orb-Weaving Spider*

*Australian funnel web spider*

*Brazilian Wandering Spider*

*Huntsman Spider*

*Nursery Spider*

*Pirate Spider*

*Dolomedes*

*Missulena*

*Mesothelae*

*Sicariidae*

*I CAN KEEP GOING WILBUR*

*You want me to keep going Wilbur?*

Lily wrote this text fairly early in the process and so I was able to layer it in with musical collaborations. The monologue would come out of a music and movement score with Kyle and Dina, and Dina and Hillary made the lists, which read to me as lyrics, in to songs. Of all pieces of text, this was the most traditionally theatrical and therefore possibly at odds with the nature of the rest of the work, but I liked the juxtaposition it created. If I continued to develop this section, I would further complicate the relationship of the text to the musical score and I would experiment with losing the use of character in performance.

Erin and Kristin

*Though It May Shift* was my eighth collaboration with Kristin. I sent Kristin video and we talked about my fascination with embryology. Specifically, I shared that I had learned that the same mesenchyme that develops in to limbs also creates the cartilage for our vocal apparatus (Yonei-Tamura, Endo, Yajima, Ohuchi, Ide, and Tamura, 133–43).

This paper is not intended to elaborate on or prove this claim but instead to share how this idea was an impetus for devising language. *If the voice could be considered a limb, what if language could be gestural? What if it could move choreographically?*

This is what Kristin wrote in response to that question:

I built a house for all the trees to live in.

I made it out of air.

Air made out of promises I tried to keep:

I love you.

I'll never hurt you.

Everything is beautiful.

I climb into the sky as I build.

It's cold up here, but so clear.

I can see everything I've ever lost.

It's all still there, just beyond my reach.

The trees point in every direction.

Their secrets echo in my ear.

*wind wind which why what whoosh wind branch branch*

*creak creak crack scratch skin smack snap slap slather swish*

I fashion a roof out of the clouds.

Clouds made out of particles from the beginning of time.

Before these particles there was nothing.

I try to build a chimney out of nothingness, but I don't know how.

*where air air snare skin soft sweat sweet shwoosh*

*which what breathe breath branch branch branch skin*

*rip tear skin bones crunch where air air*

I climb down out of the sky and walk through the house.

One tree sleeps in my childhood bed.

*Shoosh swish soft tear rip skin soft sweat sweet*

Another tree plays hide and seek

in the secret cupboard behind the linen closet.

*howl rage rush roar remember remember remember remember*

*remember remember remember what was what was ripped apart*

One tree looks through my parents' record collection.

Another one brought home a load of laundry.

*rage rage rush swoosh sweet remember sweet skin shoosh*



*branch breathe rush howl howwwwwwwl which was what why torn to pieces*

They extend their root systems deep into the floorboards.

*reach what swish rip rage why did you why did why why why why  
remember breathe remember breathe breath brought why howl rage  
why why why why why air why wind every memory howls harder  
shwshhhhhhshwwwwwwshhhrrrrrrrrsshhhhhswwwssshhh  
hhhhhhhoooooooooooooowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwllllllllllllllllllllll*

The bed is too small, the mirror cracked, the table covered in faded receipts.

Everything is

*huuhhhrrruuhhhhoowrrrr*

the same and some

*shwshhhhhhshwwwwwwshhhhswwwssshhh*

how different.

I ask them how

*why how why why why air why howl wind  
skin bark break broke broken branch  
speak spoke broken skin why breathe why was it*

they like it and they reply:

Everything that was old

*breathe break blow bend*

will be

*branch shush rage sky skin sky speak*

young again.

Everything

*why why why why*

that was broken

*howl hush hhhhooooowlll*

will be

*huuusshhhhhhhh*

made

*remember remember remember what was cracked open*

whole

*rage rage rage rush swoosh sweet remember sweet skin rage*

*branch breathe rush howl howwwwwwwl which was what why*

*remember why was it when why why air where breathe howl hush*  
*shwshhhhhhshwwwwwwshhhhhrrrrrrrrsshhhhhwwwssshhh*

This text proved difficult to perform and ultimately felt like it needed more space and time to unfold than it had in *Though It May Shift*. The idea of language as gesture is one I am still curious about and will continue to explore in future work.

At my request, Kristin also wrote a series of texts for me as guide / narrator / curator for the work. We went through several versions of this language and continued editing through dress rehearsal. Ultimately, the premise was I was giving a tour of the memory of a house. I was struggling to find a way to frame the work in a theatrical way that wouldn't shut down the abstract imagery of the choreography. After this particular experiment, I'm not sure language like that exists, and I would either remove the text from these interlude / transition moments in the future or reimagine it as less literal and more choreographic language.

I did keep one section of an early version of the narrator text and I gave it to Nicole to perform at the end of the work while the musicians were all playing and the dancers were all dancing.

Kristin wrote:

*Hi.*

*Hi.*

*For this next moment, I really wanted to create a piece of movement with no gravity.*

*So, I'd like you to imagine that there is no gravity anymore.*

*And that this movement is a backpack filled with everything you've ever lost come back to you, every spare sock, every missing key, the lanyard you made at summer camp, your first best friend, your last lover, your IRA, your sanity, your self-confidence, the ring your grandmother gave you, and that it's all safe and sound.*

*And imagine that this movement is outside during a rainstorm, but you're not cold, and you feel like the rain is washing all the sadness from you, and inside of you, you discover a part of yourself that has never disappointed you, and it is made out of beautiful white light that is emanating from every pore so that you are now also made entirely out of light.*

*Yeah, so, imagine that what you're about to see is all of that.*

The synthesis of text, movement, music, and moment helped to make this the most powerful text for the piece.

Nicole and Lily

The first text Nicole received to work on was the imagine text above. While giving her direction, I expressed my desire for her to simply deliver the text as though she were telling the truth, not needing to overly act the text or strive to make it interesting.

This was the impetus for the text Lily wrote for her as well.

This is the text Lily wrote for Nicole:

*When I come home*

*I don't expect*

*Like candles or anything*

*But a hello*

*Would be nice*

*Never mind*

...

*Who was I before I started making all these decision about who I am?*

*I am a neat person*

*I am an energetic person*

*I am a happy person*

*I am a sexual person*

*I am good at having fun*

*I am good at getting drunk*

*I am good at talking to people at parties*

*I am good at making soap*

*I am good at giving presents*

*I am good at waking up at the same time each morning*

*I am good at being studious*

*I am good at being serious*

*I am good at holding space*

*I am too much for people*

*I am too short for this ride*

*I am too young to wear makeup*

*I am not allowed to shave*

*I am not allowed inside*

*I am not allowed to speak up*

*I am not allowed to complain*

*I am allowed to give up*

*I think when I walk into a room*

*People think*

*says what they think*

Lily wrote this text in a rehearsal where I was working one on one with Nicole on movement. Ultimately, this language was performed with Nicole swinging on a bench while Rachel moved slowly and silently across the stage opposite of her.

Of all the areas of this process, the language was the one most lacking depth in development. Because both my playwrights worked from afar, they were not able to respond and revise in the same way as the musicians. Due to my inability to fully communicate the kind of language I needed and the lack of immediate response, the transitions were clunky. I knew it and proceeded with what I had for this version. Ultimately, what I find myself grappling with time and again is the problem of meaning. How much is too much to give an audience? How much do they need to participate? Often the audience themselves fall in to two camps: those that are grateful for the

scaffold of meaning and those that are not. An ongoing question for me is whether or not language can partner with movement in a supportive way like music did in this piece. The musicians' work was *embedded* in to the movement. How do I *embed* language in the same way? I think the collaborators working with language have to be participating and available in the same way the musicians were—to be directed, to be egoless, and to be in immediate response. We did not have that luxury for this process, but as we continue to work on this piece in to the future, I will approach language as another living entity in the room, instead of one that is only connected to the process through me as director.

### Design

From the outset, the material for *Though It May Shift* was sourced from the performers and I wanted the materiality of the design elements to share this value. Therefore, the design was built so the performers were responsible for the live magic of the work. There was nothing prerecorded or amplified. If something moved onstage, it was because a performer moved it.

This particular collaboration left me wondering how to set better expectations from the outset with a team of designers whose training does not necessarily emphasize devised work, though all of my designers ultimately embraced these concepts to varying degrees. The scenic, lighting, and costume design contributed beautifully to the material. The projection design was a slightly more problematic experience. Going forward, I would lose the use of live feed video in favor of more use of the overhead projector. Here is a collection of live images from the work where some elements of the design can be seen:

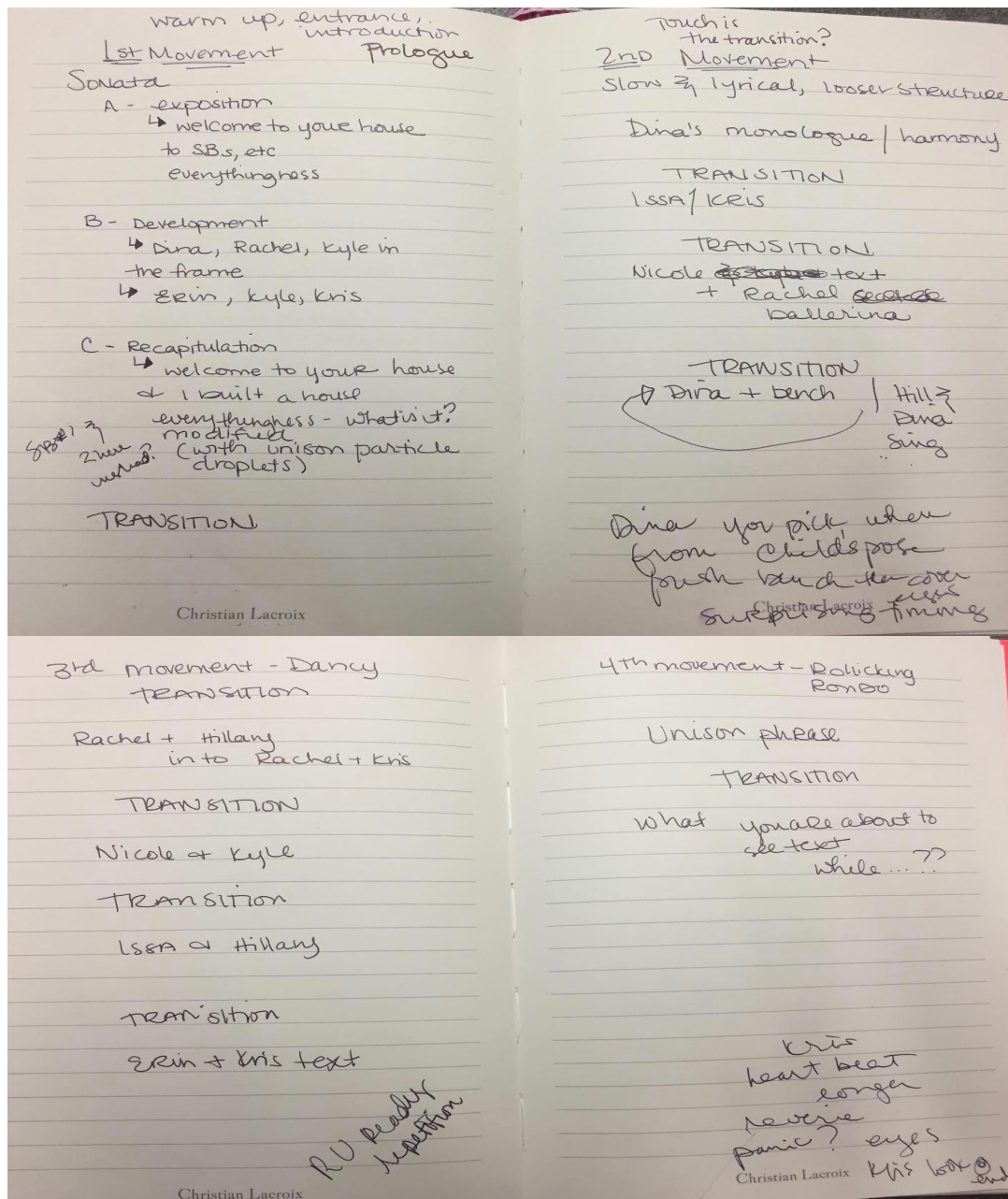


**Image 3:** *Though It May Shift* design element photographs by Jim Carmody.



Structure

Macro structure:



Images 4a and 4b: Photographs of structure as initially recorded.



## **Performance and Reflection: The Uncertain Mirror**

*“Art, like life, is understood through experience, not explanations. As theatre artists, we cannot create an experience for an audience; rather, our job is to set up the circumstances in which an experience might occur.”*  
– Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares*

*“Theater is an unstable particle, dancers dissipate in to real life, but the mind’s eye is eternal.”* – Annie-B Parson, *Dance By Letter*

My interest in making work using these ideas and in this way is based on an fascination with live performance that offers an experience of “aura” to the audience (Benjamin 29). By intentionally crafting how I lead the process, the work inherently had a mysterious, intimate undercurrent of individual expression held within a strong sense of community. This enabled us to create an ecosystem through which we could make material that required a special degree of consideration and left space for the audience to participate in the creation of meaning. In this way, the performance was about quality of attention to presence—both from the audience and the performers.

The use of acoustic live sound and material that required a certain degree of consideration from the audience combined to create quiet, focused audiences. This degree of attention felt particular to this work and thrilling to perform to.

Because I had strategized to gain time to devise in the space, this show had only four performances. The performers felt fully engaged and “in” the work for each show, though I couldn’t help but wonder how the work might have continued to develop over a longer run.

Language and its place with choreography was and continues to be an elusive question, one I am lucky to have to keep me company over extensive research to come.

Closing this work and leaving the community we had created was especially hard. Together, we have a Facebook page (named “The Shifters” by Dina Apple and Kyle Blair) and we have attended each other’s subsequent shows. This loss is related to the biggest success of the work—how leading this group of very different individuals through the creation of the show allowed us to transform and to become a company.

After the show closes, what remains? Certainly, *Though It May Shift* will have this writing as imperfect record and a video as concrete documentation. But I would also argue that the ramifications of the piece extend in to the community who made and witnessed the show. I’ve learned that the people can influence the work and the work can transform the people in powerful ways that live on to be examined, reimagined, and remembered beyond the last performance.

## Postscript

*“So then I as a contemporary creating composition in the beginning was groping toward a continuous present, a using everything a beginning again and again and then everything being alike then everything very simply everything was naturally simply different and so I as a contemporary was creating everything being alike was creating everything naturally being naturally simply different, everything being alike.*

*– Gertrude Stein*

Coffee shops and cafes I visited to write this paper:

Downtown Bakery & Creamery- Healdsburg, CA

Starbucks- La Jolla, CA

A different Starbucks- La Jolla, CA

Peet’s Coffee & Tea- La Jolla, CA

Zumbar- La Jolla, CA

Tender Greens- La Jolla, CA

Pannikin Coffee and Tea- La Jolla, CA

Caroline’s Seaside Cafe- La Jolla Shores, CA

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