
Theses and Dissertations

Spring 2019

Three completely distinct duets with absolutely nothing in common

Meredith Stapleton
University of Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd>



Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

Copyright © 2019 Meredith Stapleton

This thesis is available at Iowa Research Online: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/6861>

Recommended Citation

Stapleton, Meredith. "Three completely distinct duets with absolutely nothing in common." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2019.

<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.d5w8-ynfj>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd>



Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

THREE COMPLETELY DISTINCT DUETS WITH ABSOLUTELY NOTHING IN COMMON

by

Meredith Stapleton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts
degree in Dance in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Rebekah Kowal

Copyright by
Meredith Stapleton
2019
All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

In working separately with three different pairings of performers, I intend to investigate contradictions within the duet form. I believe that any body can hold multiple paradoxical feelings, thoughts, or sensations simultaneously, but societal pressures all too often confine the individual to illusory, singular states of being. I want to employ methodologies that resist a seemingly harmonious universality that I have encountered in dance, particularly within the overdone heteronormative *pas-de-deux*. To frame three unique duets, grounded in complex autobiographies and intricate interactions, I will consider the following research questions: how does one simultaneously embody polarities, such as the comedic and tragic? How is intimacy revealed between a pairing, shedding light on human form/function? How can the duet manifest, break, or sooth internalized contradictions? How might choreographic structures illuminate the ways we think/feel/do, creating embodied, verbal, and energetic dialog between individuals?

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25820/bxjw-9f19>

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

To study pairs of people is to study how individuals establish senses of self, other, and us. Every time two individuals meet, they confront their intersections; they align, collide, refract, reflect, and maybe even absorb one another. I am interested in a third element of betweenness created at the intersection of one-to-one interactions, and how that betweenness holds relationships between individuals in constant dialogue. In choreographing and directing *Three Completely Distinct Duets with Absolutely Nothing in Common* (TCDDwANiC), I investigate contradictions in the duet form in order to mine and frame a betweenness loaded with awkward aesthetics. In a world in which awkwardness is often shamed, I seek to illuminate its presence in my art-making.

In this manner, *TCDDwANiC* immediately questions whether it is or is not what it says it is. In an attempt to conceptually and choreographically destabilize some of my contradictory relationships to my own trainings in Western concert dance forms, I rigorously conceived of the production through its framing, character developments, and re-distributed narrative layers. Having set up specific working procedures with rigid creative boundaries regarding time and space, I have come to recognize ways in which my research actively disallows a certain amount of pleasure in its making. Demanding the watching, witnessing, and participating spectator to engage with complex layers of contradiction, *TCDDwANiC* reflects its own making, and carries social implications more relevant than the production itself or its most direct communal reach.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25820/bxjw-9f19>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS	3
FOUNDATIONAL STRUCTURES	4
CONTRADICTIONS	7
Do you think she is okay?.....	7
What are your plans for the future?	8
Did anyone bring us flowers?.....	11
CONSTRUCTING & DESTABILIZING THE FRAME.....	13
APPROACHING CHARACTER	16
AMBIVALENCE GENERATION	20
THE PROXIMITY OF COMEDY & TRAGEDY	22
RUPTURE: FEMININITY & THE DOMESTIC ACT.....	23
CONCLUSIONS: DEVISING DUETS BEYOND THE DUETS	25
REFERENCES	28
THESIS II FOREHAND/STAPLETON CONCERT PROGRAM	29

INTRODUCTION

Every time two individuals meet, they confront their intersections; they align, collide, refract, reflect, and maybe even absorb one another. I am interested in a third element of betweenness created at the intersection of one-to-one interactions, and how that betweenness sustains relationships in constant dialogue. In choreographing and directing *Three Completely Distinct Duets with Absolutely Nothing in Common* (TCDDwANiC), I investigate contradictions in the duet form in order to mine and frame betweenness locally for three primary duets, and distally between the spectators and performers.

TCDDwANiC immediately questions whether it is or is not what it says it is. The work's title emerged as a literal choreographic problem. To this end, I devised an intentionally disjointed rehearsal process for three separate duets. This structural limitation encouraged me to suspend my own preconception of how the duets would eventually cohere as a singular production, which I hoped would create awkward scenarios. At the forefront of much of my choreographic research is a dedication to awkwardness, which undoubtedly grounded my motivation to approach my research in this intentionally awkward format. In a world in which awkwardness is often shamed, I seek to illuminate its presence in my art-making.

In each duet, *TCDDwANiC* explores contradictions which were then framed in the latter portion of the rehearsal process. The first duet for Quincey Scholz and Christine Howe presents a tender yet tension-filled relationship framed by one of the production's opening scenes, concluding with Quincey's symbolic final words, "I'm fine." The second duet for Kaitlin Craven and Lauren Vasilakos presents a mostly mirrored relationship between autobiographically

devised characters who share fears of the future. They are witnessed, repeatedly, in the act of revealing the act. The third duet for Sarah Olson and Bennett Cullen is mediated by a carpet which is imbued through the duration of the production to contain residues of earlier scenes. After negotiating their territory, they are left looking at the carpet in an economy of looks.

In making *TCDDwANiC*, I utilized approaches to character development which carry weight within Western concert dance formations. In an attempt to conceptually and choreographically destabilize some of my own trainings, I rigorously conceived of the production through its framing. The spatial and time-based rehearsal limitations created a meta-frame for the process of developing characters tied to each duet, but within unknown territory regarding the larger context of the production. As I began to consider the duets within a singular production, I became more invested in a duet between the performance and the audience. Having set up working procedures with rigorous creative boundaries, I framed the piece to actively disallow a certain amount of pleasure in its making.

One of the outcomes of my research was a proliferation of ambivalence. I am fascinated by the ways in which ambivalence may stem from a political agenda to undo what is known, particularly in regards to my desire to interrogate Western concert dance codes. Demanding the watching, witnessing, and participating spectator to engage with complex layers of contradiction, *TCDDwANiC* reflects its own making, and carries social implications more relevant than the production itself or its most direct communal reach. *TCDDwANiC* became a dance for the nuanced, eccentric pedestrian. Concluding within an anticlimax, an empty tragedy, a lingering intervention is attempted.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Awkwardness is revealed when the body knows something the mind is not ready to comprehend, like when I find myself impulsively announcing, “I’m fine!” when I’m not. I am attuned to the ways in which awkward feelings or expressions are often shamed. In response, I have developed a personal and artistic practice to suspend judgement, offering instead a sense of gratitude, humor, or empathy within awkward scenarios. The practice is rooted in allowing awkwardness to invite a careful, attentive listening. I employ this approach to awkwardness in my research to illuminate contradiction, cultivate an alternative aesthetic, and connect kinetically with spectators.

I set out to conduct my thesis research with several conceptual and choreographic foundations to deepen my understanding of awkwardness in new contexts. I have come to understand awkwardness as a state which may be felt or observed at a point of discomfort, embarrassment, or difficulty, illuminating a sort of boundary. In a previous solo work, *Pretty good. Close enough.* (2018), I began testing my personal theatrical boundaries as I performed a remembrance of a previously performed solo, which generated an aesthetic of awkwardness. Having pursued several solo choreographic projects that had blurred my understanding of performing autobiography and character development, I was interested in inviting a similar creative conundrum into a collaborative process for my full cast.

Exploring contradictions within awkwardness seemed a natural conceptual priority to consider in generating material from a specific angle, which could later be manipulated and shaped to generate fuller layers of contradictions in the production. One of the primary

contradictions I set out to investigate was between comedy and tragedy, which I suspected to be a curiously proximal relationship as I considered how quickly a laugh could become a cry, or how easily a laugh could be misinterpreted as a cry, for example. In previous choreographic works, I had become increasingly invested in humor as a tactic of dealing with that which is always more complicated than it seems, and I was interested in aligning this phenomenon with perceptions of the tragic.

Lastly, as I reflected on my training in Eurocentric Western dance forms such as ballet and mainstream concert dance, I felt an obligation to challenge the codes which continue to permeate contemporary dance cultures. By employing postmodern dance and collaboratively devised theater practices and principles, my research prioritizes a resistance to the heteronormative codes stemming from ballet's *pas-de-deux* to offer a politically charged sense of "duet" beyond its mainstream understandings. These foundational concepts became working principles for a seemingly nonsensical yet intimate opportunity to investigate complex relationships between bodies in conventional theatrical spaces.

FOUNDATIONAL STRUCTURES

In order to suspend my own choreographic and theatrical manipulations of the eventual fully-produced performance, I decided to construct three parallel processes by scheduling three separate weekly rehearsals for three separate duets over the first semester of studio-based research. I questioned whether working with more than two performers would undermine my ability to facilitate unique, individualized character developments at the nuanced, personal level

within which I strived to work. In solidarity with my previous project proposal to only cast two performers, I came to rigorously honor each of the three duets as if it were the only one. The rehearsal layout was intentionally designed to create a choreographic problem that I knew I would eventually need to confront in bringing each duet into a singular production, which operated on several levels. First, it was meant to increase the cast's experiential intimacy, alliance, and individuation for each duet. Secondly, it provided a framework to generate unknown territory for all parties, which I suspected would be critical in distributing collaborative engagement as we would eventually tackle the creative problem together. By loosening my preconceived notions of how the three duets would eventually interact in this format, I also presented the cast with character dilemmas so that they would have to constantly re-interpret their own relational existence within evolving externally devised scenarios.

With that, I decided to begin each of the first rehearsals with the same creative prompt to build a duet that would generate awkwardly matched tactile interactions. I based this procedure on David Parker's "Point-Connect Duets" because I anticipated that the score would require of each performer to participate with shared choreographic agency, and most significantly, because I perceived an awkwardness in relational movement languages that the score generates. The essential components of this procedure are to first name a body part of your own which your partner will then connect to with a different body part of their own, and then take turns, always tracing back to the initial connection in order to accumulate a series of connections. After each duet had generated their own variation, I asked each performer to write out an interpretation of their own internal monolog. After sharing the interpretations with one another, I became fascinated with their varied approaches to the assignment, and varied interpretations of the same

choreographic moments. The mismatched quality of movement vocabularies and interpretations of those vocabularies primed the choreographed material for considering the roles of contradiction, awkwardness, and autobiography.

From there, through discussion and devising of relevant improvisational scenarios, I developed each of the duets' unique relationships to the themes explored. My focus at this stage was to develop a sense of journey. My primary tactic was to theatrically direct the performers through transitional sequences that would physically, mentally, and emotionally solidify their journey through the already devised scenarios. Often, this entailed defining relationships to space and time, increasing a sense of live presence within every shifting scene, however contrived.

In the first full cast rehearsal, I conducted a showing of each duet with extensive writing as spectators of the other duets. Before discussing, I then invited those watching to improvise their own version of whatever they had witnessed. This experiment revealed the most salient materials from each duet and complicated the identities attached to each journey, which we discussed in relation to the manifestations of awkwardness.

After a month away, we returned to weekly full cast rehearsals and I continued to meet for an additional hour each week with each duet. At this point, I began intensively experimenting with framing devices and generating transitional material, which we continued to adjust as the meaning of the work evolved. My methods of framing included storytelling and speech, juxtaposing simultaneous events, manipulations of the proscenium stage space and props, and manipulations of time alongside scripting the work to complicate shared or withheld information. Imagining spectators began to play a pivotal role in my choice making. I wanted to put the audience into my own position as a spectator of my own work, in the sense that I had created a

world that I, too, was trying to figure out. Though the title, *Three Completely Distinct Duets with Absolutely Nothing in Common*, had been composed months earlier, I finally began to unpack its more literal invitation. I had devised three duets that were unique to themselves and related, both within and beyond my control due to the methodological boundaries and invitations which defined our collaborative working procedures.

CONTRADICTIONS

In my thesis research, lived contradictions have repeatedly fueled the way I conceive of, choreograph, and direct dramatic action. The following discussion considers each of the three primary duets in this realm.

Do you think she is okay?

From the very beginning, tension is set up between Quincey and Christine, who are dressed in monochrome velour outfits that coordinate with their hair. Their first interaction is a dispute over who gets the flowers at the fault of a contradictory act of Ben and Sarah. As Christine sets the flowers aside, Quincey finds herself in an unwanted spotlight, nervous and panicking. As the cast banter from the wings, “Do you think she’s ok? Wait, what is she supposed to be doing?” she finally takes a step and Christine is immediately at her tail. Just as the moment seems it could dissolve, as prior scenes have ended with brevity, Quincey turns to the corner and asks “Did you hear?” which catalyzes a valley girl-esque banter of gossip with nothing to gossip about. This touch of competitiveness lingers as they begin to lean into one

another with hesitation, continuously rerouting their attempts towards tenderness. Eventually, Quincey makes for an escape, but Christine catches her in a moment of caring so brief that it's missed in a blink. They cover it up with a lame party dance, throwing the phrases "I don't know" and "I'm fine" into the air as if trying to brush off their realities. They land on the floor, standing and looking out in the same direction with attention over the shoulder towards one another. As they grasp at nothing, gradually tangling passive aggressive limbs, they stubbornly confront the issue at hand, "I thought they were mine." Quincey falls, and Christine regresses to the gossiping banter, this time without Quincey's voice.

In the making of the next moment, I began to notice the ways in which body language does not always align with speech. Having identified the characteristics of this state within my own being and in discussion with others, I offered physical and vocal structures to Quincey to be exaggerated towards a comedic and tragic end. As she lies on her back having fallen, alone, convulsing herself through catatonic shapes, she states, sings, gossips, chats, and talks up the statement that "I'm fine, no really, oh my god. No way. I'm totally fine!" She chuckles urgently as her body finds stillness. The cast lifts her onto the carpet and folds her up to remain between the stage and the audience for the entirety of the next duet.

What are your plans for the future?

There is a pre-show installation conducted by Kaitlin and Lauren as the audience enters the house. Seated in matching thrown-like chairs, they hold notebooks and write with shimmering gold gloves. They ask spectators, "What are your plans for the future?" and take note of each response, offering varying degrees of follow up questions to hold the conversation a

little longer than the spectators find comfortable. Meanwhile, they are progressively slouching to the point of sinking in their seats.

Later, Kaitlin and Lauren return to help Ben and Sarah move Quincey on to the apron. As Ben and Sarah prepare Quincey to remain where she has been set, Kaitlin and Lauren make their way up to the back of the house. As this at least somewhat somber scene dissolves, they interrupt with one-liners of plans for the future, all sourced from the audience attending in that evening. This shift marks a subtle but dark irony in the juxtaposition of Quincey's symbolic death and Kaitlin and Lauren's hijacking of plans for the future. As they barely return to the formal stage space, they slide out at full length onto their bellies. A crew member leads them unknowingly across the edge of the stage as she places pairs of high heels in a row. Kaitlin and Lauren follow, staying low to the ground and close to each other as if they could hide. A recording of the opening question is triumphantly announced, "Would anyone like to ask me about my plans for the future?" as Kaitlin and Lauren bring their full lengths to a vertical, only to retreat away from the audience, as if being sucked into the upstage corner. Castmates poke their heads out from unexpected wings as if to suggest a dissociation from Kaitlin and Lauren. They remind the audience of their presence, but they remain actively separated.

What follows is a rather literal interpretative dance, scripted from the interpretive language Kaitlin and Lauren each used to understand their initial duet material. This moment offers casual contradictions and divergences amidst an otherwise matching experience between this pair. The collage of auditory interpretations sounding over an otherwise unremarkable dance challenges the way we understand the "aboutness" of any given action. Some, like Lauren, are inclined towards the imaginative dramatic arc, while others, like Kaitlin, are drawn to the

sneakily coined phrases which jump from literal actions to surprising points of detail. The scene functions by revealing a disagreement despite otherwise sticking to sameness in their every act.

Finally, a familiar tune chimes in at full blast. “The Limbo Song” by Chubby Checker transforms the stage floor into rainbows of slowly circling shapes. Kaitlin and Lauren perform a highly repetitious sequence of symmetrical moves that take them rapidly into and out of vertical and horizontally square orientations. Occasional misalignments and shriveling out of full extensions become more and more rapid, until they lower themselves under their own, absurd limbo arms. The familiar tune begins an enduring fade as they flop through lofted traveling sequences, landing from time to time in tangled collapses. They climb up one another onto their tip toes, remembering the high heels which have guarded their dance. A distant oppression ceases as they bury the shoes with Quincey, carefully stacking each pair on her visibly breathing, but still body.

Something Lauren, Kaitlin, and I bonded over in the making of their duet was sharing situations in which we caught ourselves shriveling beneath our full heights. While this initial interest arose out of my own noticing of ways in which I have often felt too tall to be a dancer in certain settings, it became more of a psychological interpretation, and then a relatable existential crisis. The fears we shared regarding our lack of exciting plans for the future, mostly in relation to measly career outlooks in the performing arts, are real, yet we continue to support each other to support ourselves. Tying back in to my ultimate question of contradiction, this duet is yet another study of the ways we build ourselves up, faking it 'til we make it, saying “I’m fine” until we are fine.

Did anyone bring us flowers?

The third of the three primary duets, between Sarah and Ben, seemed to be particularly in tune with the politics of negotiation that I have come to understand as stemming from contradictory states. My proposal for this duet was to resist the classical heteronormative *pas-de-deux*, of which we each have played part, time and time again. Much of their choreography remained improvisational until the final days of production, and still it sustained. Within the first weeks of rehearsals, I introduced a third party to this pair, a carpet, which became a critical player as mediator of all their interactions.

As the final primary duet in the production, Sarah and Ben are already familiar to the spectators, and the carpet has also been introduced in varying scenarios. Sarah and Ben enter as the boldest characters. Wearing high heels so that their footsteps ring louder, mirroring their equally robust vocal interactions with spectators. Sarah tells a story in a spotlight, Ben sighs, and after the early false ending of demanding bows, they are the first to approach the audience requesting flowers. When I, the plant, offer a bouquet of artificial red roses from the front row of the house which I express are intended to be passed on to Quincey, they sneakily reply with an over-the-top negation of my request as they verbally negotiate “Quincey” into, “OK, we’ll give them to Qui...ristine!” Then, the unruly hosts exit to return moments later, confronting an unruly guest, Kaitlin, who is vacuuming. All of this and more has occurred by the time they set the scene for their not-so-culminating final duet.

The carpet has also developed a significant presence in the production by this point. At first, it seems merely an attachment to the vacuuming scene, which climaxes as Sarah and Ben

pathetically argue for attention as they attempt to glamorously clean up. Alongside their battle over the performative vacuuming, Quincey and Christine's duet ends tragically as Quincey has symbolically died due, in short, to never having received the flowers. The carpet has been constructed to hold memories of these scenes by the time it becomes Sarah and Ben's island in a sort of closing ceremony.

The island is their guide. They listen to it for sensorial and nostalgic motivations. They take turns, negotiating their roles in this newly defined and defining space while gliding across its soft surface and picking dust bunnies out of its corners, but eventually they are each left alone on top of the carpet for a suddenly self-reflective moment. Sarah continues sharing her opening monolog, and Ben is left wondering "You brought us nothing? Nothing at all?" referring to the flower gathering scene. As the cast, now watching from the apron as the audience watching their watching, offers a collage of one-liners from earlier scenes, Christine puts a halt to the clamor of voices with the question, "Why are you looking at me?" Her question seems to cue the loudest vacuum's power switch to on, hidden in the wings, controlled by an unknown operator. The vacuum sustains a final fade out as Sarah and Ben encircle the carpet, marking its boundaries and crossing into shared space. They begin to establish near alignments, flutter their lashes, coordinating delicate tangles that tumble into a forgotten gravity in the next moment. Ben symbolically falls off the island, but they retain an over-the-shoulder awareness to one another. As they approach uncharted stage space together, their feet hit the floor unlike previous interactions of either balancing above or anchoring through the floor. They look back to the carpet, which now feels separate from themselves. A duet between the carpet and their bodies with all of their looking and phenomenologies, side by side, resonates in silence. Having

negotiated spaces with the carpet, it seems that both everything has changed and yet nothing at all.

CONSTRUCTING & DESTABILIZING THE FRAME

I am interested in the disallowance of pleasure in viewing as a strategy of demanding the audience to question what they are in the process of unknowing. This strategy operates under the assumption that every spectator arrives at a performance with some sort of expectations based on past experiences. Instead of allowing those experiences to flow seamlessly into yet another, *TCDDwANiC* demands a closer attention. With this, the framing of *TCDDwANiC* aims to both configure and dissemble itself in a feedback loop which thrives within the unpredictable liveness of the event.

As spectators enter the performance venue and find their seats, perhaps having interacted with the pre-show installation, and after a brief opening narrative, they witness three remarkably short duets. Following familiar signals of an ending, the lights fade and the dancers line up to bow. Only five minutes in to a thirty-minute production, the audience is somewhat forcefully invited to applaud if they recognize the conventional theater codes at play. My instruction to the performers was to stand anxiously waiting in character through whatever felt like an awkward, pregnant pause, which is a direction I repeatedly utilized as a timestamp. The final scene of the performance also involves applause, but without the conventional invitation offering the audience to join.

I have always been drawn to art works which construct and destabilize the frame through which they are experienced, demanding the spectator to consider not just the work, but how the work is being perceived in real time, identifying a separation between the subject and art object. Peggy Phelan's chapter "Spatial envy: Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women*" theorizes the effects of framing devices in film which provoked my approach to framing *TCDDwANiC*. For example, Phelan considers a relationship to a theoretical spectator in Rainer's film, concluding, "The effort at the heart of the film is as engaged with throwing you out as it is in settling you in" (Phelan, 75), which is an effort I adopted in my objectives for my thesis research. Particularly in the final production period, my choreographic efforts were rooted in blurring and distinguishing social boundaries. For example, I scripted questions for the performers to ask spectators to simultaneously invite interaction and illuminate boundaries present between their positions. By disorienting conventional meaning that is coded in theatrical frames, such as giving flowers to the artist to signal a culminating end, a manipulated relationship between the performer and spectator distinguishes an economy of knowing and unknowing.

My efforts in framing the arc of the piece, beginning with a conventional ending and ending with an anticlimax, was to construct a relationship to time that is incongruous with a conventional dramatic arc. The shift from applauding as a celebratory declaration of gratitude that might otherwise stem from a pleasurable experience of seeing a show shifts, instead, towards interpolation for the spectator. My interests in incongruity, contradiction, and awkwardness largely reflect an active disallowance of pleasure which I recognize in Phelan's scholarship as an alignment with feminist theory. Phelan's analysis that, "Rainer disallows the pleasurable illusion of a visually polished art piece and forces in its stead a reconfiguration of the traditional

architecture of the frame” (Phelan, 73) provoked me to consider this tactic’s potential for the concert dance stage. This tactic operates by demanding an awareness to one’s own position, which may have otherwise been overlooked amidst Phelan’s stated pleasurable illusion, that is so present in my experience of many Western concert dance works. Phelan continues to note, “Rather than beginning with a ‘feeling of form,’ Rainer’s film begins with underlining the incoherence of form” (74). *TCDDwANiC* attempts to set up a form that is incoherent with conventional theater forms in order to productively disorient all parties.

Perhaps even more aligned with Rainer’s destabilizing of the frame are the ways in which *TCDDwANiC* dissects the proscenium stage space through the simultaneous happenings of events. Performers enter from the house doors and backstage crew members become visibly part of the act. In the first of the three primary duets, the remaining cast members blatantly interrupt the scene with a series of vacuuming tasks. At first, the sound of the vacuum is heard from the hallway just as Christine and Quincey have begun speaking in a manner of gossiping, but without any gossip to share. Having to yell superficial enthusiasms like, “Did you hear?! Oh my god! No way. That’s wild! And then!? Woah. Yeah!” over the sound of the vacuum, the scene freezes its frame momentarily as the other cast members offer assistance to the vacuuming individual, who by this point has distracted the audience, having entered through the house doors, and is now illuminated in the space. It is Kaitlin, a performer already familiar to the audience from the pre-show. The painter’s jumpsuit she had been wearing all along takes on a more literal labor-oriented significance as she performs a dysfunctional (yet functional in terms of its role in the production) cleaning routine. The cast assists Kaitlin backstage, where they are sure to interrupt the scene again.

This interruption ignites a series of happenstance yet clearly orchestrated, simultaneous events which were inspired by some of our first duet rehearsals during which the custodian was often vacuuming in the hallways beyond our doors. Something about the sound of the vacuum was immediately compelling to me, inducing a sort of vacuum of time as I perceived the choreography at the focal point of my attention to take on a quality of floating aimlessly through a warped zone. In the context of framing, these vacuuming scenes were one of many ways in which the proscenium stage space's fourth wall was reconfigured as a reflection of the more literal spatial framing of our rehearsal process. Through extending the locomotive agency of the performers through the house, apron, and wings of the theater, the conventional frame of the proscenium stage was meant to be illuminated and disheveled in its own performance of tidying up.

While a theatrically destabilizing process is visibly, audibly, and spatially constructed and underlined in the beginning and end of *TCDDwANiC*, it serves as a quiet, underlying disassembling agent throughout the middle portion of the production. Throughout the performance this meta, self-awareness aims to consistently place the spectator in a state of unease.

APPROACHING CHARACTER

Exploring contradictions has served as a vital force in the process and production, particularly as a mode of approaching character development. Amidst the work's initial conception, I had reflected on my career in dance and noticed patterns of tension in the varying forms I was taking part in, particularly in relation to the role of the gaze, expressions of

femininity, and reflexivity. It became curious to me that I was so fluidly finding myself in simultaneous creative processes that contradicted one another. I started to question how it was that I could, even in the same day, attend one rehearsal for a project concerned with dismantling problematic hierarchies of power relations, and then go to another rehearsal for a project that seemed to thrive gracefully within the very hierarchies which the first was attempting to problematize. How could my body hold both of these worlds?

Instead of picking apart my personal experiences of contradiction, I find it helpful to adopt the term “idioverse” which the American Psychological Association dictionary defines as, “n. in postmodern discourse, the totality of a person’s unique sensations, perceptions, and understandings; that is, a person’s unique lived world.” I first encountered the term in reading Victor Turner’s “The Anthropology of Performance” in which Turner values the idioverse in the way it allows for social dramatic action within a culture (70-71). Although we developed a cast of characters in *TCDDwANiC* by hyperbolizing parts of selves, it was critical to approach the working process from the position of the idioverse, valuing the whole person as well as the fluidity of the whole person for each individual cast member. With particularly repetitive choreographies, considering each individual’s living totality allowed for the repetition to remain in negotiation. I am drawn to the idioverse as a framing of living contradictions, which I have come to believe we all contain. In resistance to the compartmentalizing of contradictory notions of self, the idioverse embraces the entire individual as a fluidly adapting body of contradictions. The process of assessing personal contradictions resonated for each performer beyond the performance itself by allowing their character explorations to extend awareness in their personal lives. I am proud of the ways in which my cast willingly practiced new performative notions of

being in their own bodies. The social imprints and residues of these experiences are a subtle but deeply settled outcome of our approaches to character development.

I feel it is worth noting that the cast of characters in *TCDDwANiC* are, beyond their characters, real people who I have come to know within and beyond our shared creative processes. They were each cast because I perceived some degree of interest in participating in a process that would be self-referential to the point of potentially undoing their previous perceptions of an artistic process in dance. I felt confident in casting these people because of my intuited perception of their whole person, not just because they possess bodies that can do the moves I want to do and are available to do those moves when I am also available to choreograph those moves. Casting these individuals, before they were even in the studio together, was already a political move in the sense that it reconfigures a certain system of priorities which effect who ends up on our dance stages. While I do not actively avoid casting trained actors, I have been particularly interested in working with trained dancers for the sake of offering a critical approach to the field that is my home base. Working with trained dancers in a theatrical manner allows me to test the boundaries of our shared trainings. My position as a dance artist who participates in theater has housed internal contradictions that are at the core of my thesis research, so I cast trained dancers in order to create a work from some degree of a shared position in the performing arts field at large.

Valuing the individuals in my cast as their own unique persons is still only part of the equation, which leads me to a question I'm asking upon reflection of my working process having to do with thingliness, as coined by Andre Lepecki. Lepecki recalls Fred Moten's note that "some want to run things, some things want to run," which problematizes the way art objects are

considered as singular, static, and even reproducible by inducing “a regime that is immediately subverted by dancers who are not made to move by some instrumentalized equipment but that give themselves as things, a regime undermined by things that refuse to be merely producers of effects or proxies for human bodies, and rather run from being run” (Lepecki, 52). I believe the challenge in choreography that Lepecki is suggesting here is relevant to the challenge I faced as I built an incredibly contrived, specific world of a piece. Soon after the duets were finally united and framing was built up around them as a nearly evening-length production, the piece was suddenly overwhelmed by what I attribute to my own manipulations of the world. In my approach to the final rehearsals before the production period, I actively tried to give my cast tools and strategies for dealing with indeterminacy, laying the ground work for their characters to be able to run. One way in which I feel I was able to enhance the performer’s autonomy in the making of the work was by coaching them to run based on their internal sense of timing, feeling, sensing, and being. For example, I could have cued Ben and Sarah to conclude their vacuum battle with a light change, or something obviously manipulated externally. Instead, their vacuum battle ended as the vacuum was turned off, making it a true battle with many performative tasks layered over the meta-task. Beyond the setup, this freed me from controlling their experience to a certain extent, and in this example, it allowed the vacuum to run. I believe the piece was successful in this thingy sort of way, if only in glimpses, in that it consistently attempts to free the performers to run as their own characters in their having to confront unknown territory, if only in their heightened relationships to other duets of which they were not initially part.

AMBIVALENCE GENERATION

One of the problems I encounter as I work with contradictions is the effect of ambivalence, which I suspect often results in complex environments. Recognizing ambivalence as a result of the current political climate helps me to place my research process alongside the contemporary moment. In a previous project, which I choreographed to live radio, generating ambivalence became a familiar performative state in confronting the inevitable yet unpredictable information overload. I find it useful to place the premature bowing scene in *TCDDwANiC* within political dimensions regarding ambivalence generation, alongside other contemporary works which are engaged in a similar manner.

In addition to its inappropriately timed arrival, the referenced scene inappropriately gives credit to a different stand in choreographer in each performance. Prior to the start of the show, I convince an audience member to participate in this role and walk them through the space before anyone else is aware. For example, in one of the performances I invited my brother, who had little to no direct contact with my creative process, to perform this role. After the cast takes their bow, they gesture towards the assigned seat for the guest who files into a spotlight for his own bow where he is given flowers. Moments later, his receiving of flowers becomes the motivation for the cast to request their own. They argue, “The choreographer got flowers, did anyone bring us flowers?” They joke that they, “just did a lot of dancing.” This moment exemplifies, first, a shift and debunking of value judgments in that it illuminates assumptions regarding who is rewarded and for what in conventional theater operations. By directing a stranger to receive the

conventional symbol of credit in *TCDDwANiC*, my research problematizes dominant views of authorship in the field.

In “Rehearsing In-Difference: The Politics of Aesthetics in the Performances of Pina Bausch and Jérôme Bel” Gerald Siegmund aligns Bausch and Bel’s work by attributing political implications to their undoing of what subjects have learned socially. In articulating the implications Siegmund notes, “First, it shifts and debunks our value judgments and experiences by destabilizing the very grounds on which we judge and perceive,” which I have articulated in the previous example, and “second—and this is the riskier suggestion—while being a social practice by dint of the performative process of repetition, training, and rehearsal, it goes beyond the social by making its subjects unlearn the social and professional skills they have acquired” (Siegmund, 4). It is my hope that in my and my cast’s own processes of repetition, training, and rehearsal, that previously learned conventions from our social and professional skill bank shift. For the cast, otherwise familiar dance-making procedures in the rehearsal process are actively neglected as an effort of undoing their own knowing and inviting new territory to be explored in character and in relating to the audience. Compared to the audience, the cast is always in a position of knowing, but in crafting a performance of their own unknowing, I intend to invite the audience to do the same. This perspective allows me to experience ambivalent feelings towards the production itself, not as a failure, but as a curious result reflective of systems much larger than my own participation.

THE PROXIMITY OF COMEDY & TRAGEDY

I am drawn towards employing an illusion of nonsense (i.e. a nonsensical logic) in order to land any given theatrical moment in a murky puddle in which comedy and tragedy lose boundaries, containing both. A pivotal moment in *TCDDwANiC* in which this takes place is Quincey's monolog of "I'm fine's" from a lonely prone, distorted position. Her tone and situation are triggering, and spectators respond viscerally in varying manners. Some blurt out brief laughs, some hold their breath, and yet others cringe. My instinct is to tie this conundrum back into a confusion of the performative act. She is performing, yet for brief moments the veil of performance fluffs open and we experience at least a glimpse of empathy and fear, despite humorous inflections due to the oddly oriented relationship between her physicality and her voice.

In my research I have come to understand laughter as a result of the deconstructions happening on stage. In *Comedy*, Andrew Stott notes of Jean-Luc Nancy's view that, "Instead of thinking of laughter as the opposite of gravity and intellectual seriousness, Nancy asks it to represent a fundamental contradiction that affronts modes of understanding grounded in reason. As such, laughter is a kind of metaphysical contradiction encountered at the boundary of reason" (Stott, 143). This is the kind of laughter I noticed most potently from the audiences of *TCDDwANiC*, which I conclude is a sign that the production is actively interested, like much of my choreographic work, in the limits of reason, which are not unrelated to my choreographic obsession with awkwardness as a similarly expressed state at the edge of comfort.

I do not think I'd feel capable of approaching humor in my work if it weren't for the exposure I've had to devised theater. Tony Perucci defines three axes for devised theater in "The New Thing" which are, briefly, the drama of the material, dream story and poetic (il)logic, and becoming a problem. In retrospect, I recognize the ways in which devising *TCDDwANiC* at least touched upon each of these axes. The decision to include Sarah's opening narrative for example, grew out of my interests in devising along these three axes. Having opened up the creative process with a focal point of setting choreographic material, separate from actively attempting to represent a particular viewpoint, much of the choreography grew to become more so about its own performance as opposed to the aboutness of whatever it could be about. The illogic of dream-space pervaded the process as the three duets were merged as one, in turn becoming the problem or question at the core of my research. Sarah's story, which is eventually distributed to Quincey as she uses a flower from the guilt-ridden Christine to telephone for help, is an offering of yet another way in which the question of contradiction in the ways we say "I'm fine" when we are not plays out in a world that is real, beyond the confines of the proscenium space. Her story is real, and it tells of a real moment in which her body, in her words, experienced an instant, knee-jerk reaction, not unlike the immediacy of laughter, nor the immediacy of awkwardness as it is triggered in the body and vocal tones before the mind can comprehend its message.

RUPTURE: FEMININITY & THE DOMESTIC ACT

There are several performative acts in *TCDDwANiC* which I constructed to create ruptures in relationships to femininity as it is constructed and deconstructed on the concert dance

stage through discontinuities in aesthetic engagement. From interrupted vacuuming scenes which culminate in an especially performative battle of vacuuming between Sarah and Ben, to the Vanna White-esque signaling of each of the short, opening duets, femininity functions as a performance of a defamiliarizing familiar nature. It is always recognizable, but contextually relocated. Most importantly, it is always aware of itself as an active act. For example, as Christine and Quincey argue over nothing in their valley-girl voices, the nonsensical nature of their speech is amplified. In its dislocation from any actual content to gossip about, it is isolated as what it is without referentiality. Similarly, as Sarah and Ben perform a desperate negotiation of sharing a vacuum, they mirror a nostalgia of 1950s housewives transplanted onto a contemporary concert dance stage. For several years now, I have somewhat jokingly been interested in coining the phrase “domestic performance” as I recognize the ways in which I have come to design my sense of home through a process of performing, however privately, in my home. In “Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic” Jessica E. Lee writes, “By emphasizing aesthetic engagement, one is able to shift the focus from the object of aesthetic judgment to the practice of engagement and the participant, forming a continuity between body and environment.” The difference between *TCDDwANiC* and my literal home life of domestic acts is that only one is purely for me and my pleasure. For Sarah and Ben, in the context of this performance, there is a much thicker agenda that has little to nothing to do with their functional experience as humans trying to actually clean. Their performative chaos of cleaning manifests in a complete divergence towards a messy, almost violent end. Later in the work, they decorate their gaze with fluttering eyelashes as if the earlier chaos could be forgotten. Instead of following through with a notion of engagement as forming continuity between body and environment, *TCDDwANiC* attempts to

dislocate and fragment bodily relationships to domesticity and femininity through performative acts.

With the above example and other moments in mind from *TCDDwANiC*, I would like take note of a choreographic obligation I have taken on as someone interested in making art that takes part in feminist discourse. Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis write about the politics of art-making in “Textual Strategies” in which they identify four obligatory strategies. The fourth is one of artistic practice situating “women at a crucial place in patriarchy which enables them to play on the contradictions within it. This position regards activity as a *textual* practice which exploits social contradictions...In these works the image of women is not accepted as an already produced given, but is constructed in and through the work itself” (70). It is my hope that the spectator who witnesses and participates in *TCDDwANiC* recognizes the constructions of femininity as it is, at least in moments, hyperbolically performed, in parallel with the performance of “I’m fine” in parallel with the performance of the making of the performance itself, dislocated from its origins, and even from its author.

CONCLUSIONS: DEVISING DUETS BEYOND THE DUETS

From the position of devising, choreographing, and directing *TCDDwANiC*, my focus shifted from the boundaries of three duets towards making visible some of the broader duets at play. First, a duet between the genres of dance and theater, and secondly, a duet between the audience and performers. Both seemed to produce a certain amount of uncharted territory in my working process, and indeterminacy in the experience of the production itself. I have come to

understand that working in this fashion has a heightened potential of leaving the audience in a state of un-dealt with dissatisfaction. At first, this response is a disappointment for my choreographer ego, but it follows with a political charge that excites me as an artist making art that is critically at risk within its own systems.

In my dance and compositional training and practice, I feel that I have learned much about theatricality without ever having specifically studied theatricality. Reading Diana Taylor's "Acts of Transfer" illuminated understandings I have developed of conventional theater as a "constructed, all encompassing sense of performance" (7) that is not without a particular valence. Taylore writes that theatricality, "differs from 'spectacle' in that theatricality highlights the mechanics of spectacle... Thus, as I write elsewhere, it 'ties individuals into an economy of looks and looking' (1997: 119)" (7). I have come to recognize ways in which I employed theatricality and spectacle in an interrogative manner in my research. I have never felt more aware of the economy of looks and looking than in this process and can feel its effect extending beyond the layers of looking in the final scenes of *TCDDwANiC*. As the performers applaud the props and the space which housed the world that has been constructed and dissolved, the space is swept clean. Not with a vacuum this time, but with their agency, performed gratitude, and detachment from its ties.

With a collage of my final thoughts, I notice how the same words have surfaced over and over again across the thematic content touched upon in *TCDDwANiC*. Be it in the verb category of constructing or destabilizing, or the nouns of reason or limitation, or the adjectives of contradictory and theatrical, all of these junctions of action, object, and tone are at a constant intersection in both the making and performance of *TCDDwANiC*. Most saliently, I am left with

a sense of choreography as an illusion of control, which I jokingly acknowledge in the production's program note as having learned at the age of four. Lepecki's notion of thingliness reminds me, again and again, that although the frame is thick, there is a thing somewhere in there, and at any moment, if given the proper set up, that could run. Choreography is therefore more likely an art of contriving indeterminacy, particularly as it actively holds itself at the edge of understanding so that it may demand attentive questioning from all who are willing to consider their participation in its mapping.

REFERENCES

- Barry, Judith, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. London & New York: Routledge 2003.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. London & New York: Routledge 2003.
- Lee, Jessica J. "Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic." *Contemporary Aesthetics* Volume 9, Issue no. 1 (2010).
- Lepecki, Andre. *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge 2016.
- Nancy, Jean-luc. "The Inoperative Community//1986." In *PARTICIPATION*, edited by Claire Bishop, 54-69. London & Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel & The MIT Press, 2006.
- Perucci, Tony. "The New Thing: Three Axes for Devised Theatre." *Theatre Topics* Volume 28, Issue no. 3 (2018): 203-316.
- Phelan, Peggy. "Spatial envy: Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women*." In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Siegmund, Gerald. "Rehearsing In-Difference: The Politics of Aesthetics in the Performances of Pina Bausch and Jérôme Bel." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, edited by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, Randy Martin. Online: Oxford University Press, Feb 2017.
- Stott, Andrew. *Comedy*. New York & London: Routledge (2005).
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986.

THESIS II FOREHAND/STAPLETON CONCERT PROGRAM

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25820/bxjw-9f19>

Three Completely Distinct Duets with Absolutely Nothing in Common

Choreography & Direction: Meredith Stapleton in collaboration with the performers

Performance: Kaitlin Craven, Bennett Cullen, Christine Howe, Sarah Olson,
Quincey Scholz, Lauren Vasilakos

Music: The Limbo Song by Chubby Checker

Reload by Michael Wall

Costume Design: Juliana Waechter & Meredith Stapleton

Lighting Design: Will Borsch

When I was four years old in my first dance class, I leapt over another toddler in an itsy-bitsy-teeny-weeny-yellow-pokadot-bikini. I got upset with my classmates because they didn't seem to understand the difference between hop versus jump, two feet vs one. Perhaps that was my first lesson in choreography as an illusion of control. Several years later I glued plastic rhinestones to my scalp, did a few splits to a cinematic tune, and called it a dance, but the real dance happened during the anxious moments of preparation, and car rides home in celebration or relief. A year ago, I got off stage and a mentor told me, "Well, you're just full of contradictions!" And I thought, yes, yes I am. And aren't we all?

Thank you Kaitlin, Ben, Christine, Sarah, Quincey, and Lauren for your endless professionalism and wild contributions to this dream team. You've deeply enriched my time here and I think we should start a company/tour the world tomorrow. Thank you to my brilliantly enthusiastic committee Rebekah Kowal, Jennifer Buckley, Christopher-Rasheem McMillan, and Melinda J Myers. I am so grateful for your astute insights throughout this process. Thank you to my colleagues for daily reassurance that everything is going to be ok, maybe even great. You are my rocks. Thank you Eddie for your collaborative spirits. Thank you to my forever duet, William Schwaller, and our bear, Bear. You're my everything and I wish you could be here. Thank you to my family for your constant support, near and far. Thank you to the Halsey Hall custodian, Ty, for inspiring our work in more ways than anyone could have planned. Thank you to my anonymous next door neighbors for leaving two working vacuums on your curbside. Thank you for participating, or at least considering your participation.

TCDDwANiC is a product of your imagination brought to life by conventions of the theater and the people in it. This work has challenged me to question the ways I hold myself together, and in turn, to interrogate how performance reveals or covers realities. In my research, the frame of the proscenium stage has seemed to grow thicker and thicker. I'm left wondering, is there even a picture to be exposed?