

Telling Giselle:
Reworking the Ideologies of a Canonical Ballet

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the process from conception to analysis of *Telling Giselle* which was performed February 7-9 2019 in the McLean Studio as the performance component of Patricia Allison's MFA thesis at York University.

This paper starts by contextualizing Théophile Gautier's *Giselle*, the original ballet that this production was based on, and outlines the ideological elements of the storyline that would be addressed in this reworking. This paper then summarizes the theoretical framework that informed the creation of this work included key concepts from Linda Hutcheon, Vida L. Midgelow, and Darko Suvin. It summarizes the core methodology used and how the theoretical framework influenced its creation. Finally, this paper includes a scene by scene analysis of the performance and a conclusion which points towards the potential for future research on this.

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Introduction

This project was conceived out of a desire to expand upon canonical counter-discourse within the field of dance. To do this, I endeavored to create a reworked version of a canonized ballet that examined how the patriarchy is represented within the storyline and characters. The goal for my research was to foster a methodology for reworking canonical works by using adaptation theory and reworking theory within the ideologies of my feminist, queer, disabled gaze. In particular, I examine the tension between *invariants* and *variants* (a concept outlined in Chapter 3) as a framework for dissecting the *central structure* of a canonical work and how it could be leveraged to create contemporary, progressive works. I chose Theophile Gautier's 1841 ballet *Giselle* as source material. The patriarchal oppression of women that features in *Giselle*'s storyline, its position in dance history as one of the very first ballets choreographed, and its ongoing importance in the ballet canon as one of the classics continually remounted by large ballet institutions make it an ideal choice for this research.

The first section of this thesis, "Chapter 1: Contextualizing *Giselle*," establishes a contextual basis for the ballet *Giselle* that will be used through this research. In this chapter I start with a brief synopsis of the plot and outline the archival materials that I use to study the work. I then contextualize its creator, Théophile Gautier, within the social climate of Paris in the 1840s, when the work was originally created, and explore Gautier's source material. This historical context allows me to establish the significance of *Giselle* within the ballet canon and build a framework for the ideologies I am arguing against. I conclude this chapter by highlighting other critical voices on the work, looking at "Redeeming Giselle" by Jody Bruner and "Ballet as Ideology: 'Giselle', Act II" by Evan Alderson, sources that corroborate my views about the storyline's problematic ideologies and establish the need for reworking the piece.

In “Chapter 2: Theorizing *Giselle*” I cover what I came to understand as the key concepts of adaptation theory and how they influenced the methodology of my adaptation of *Giselle*. My review of theoretical concepts from Linda Hutcheon’s *Adaptation Theory*, Vida L. Midgelow’s *Reworking the Ballet*, and Darko Suvin’s *Weiss’s Marat/ Sade and its Three Main Performance Versions* is organized into sections on form, proximity, and canonical counter-discourse. In particular, I examine how the three authors offer different tools to dissect the theory of adaptation. I also briefly investigate the potential ideological problems involved in deciding to adapt a canonical work and explore the power of canonical counter-discourse.

In “Chapter 3: Creating *Giselle*,” I condense the theoretical concepts listed in Chapter 2 and the historical relevance of *Giselle* listed in Chapter 1 into an outline of the methodology and creative process for *Telling Giselle*. This chapter specifies how the key tension of *invariant* vs. *variant* manifested in the development of this work throughout its various stages. It highlights how this piece went from a proximally close outline of a physical theatre adaptation script to a much more abstract dance theatre telling of *Giselle*. It provides a detailed outline of the methodology used in writing and developing movement material in collaboration with my dancers, and shows how I developed the work, drawing on historical relevance and theoretical parameters, to fit into my personal ideologies.

In the final section of the thesis, “Chapter 4: *Telling Giselle*” I examine the details of my adaptation. *Telling Giselle*, my adaptation of *Giselle* based on the research and methodology described above, was performed February 9–11, 2019 in the McLean Studio at York University. It starred Miyeko Ferguson, Corynne Bisson, Raine Kearns, Jamee Valin, and Kylie Thompson. The music was composed and performed by Rachel Peacock, with lighting design by Logan Cracknell, and the stage manager was Hannah MacMillan. I outline in detail the choices I made in

creating this piece as the culmination of my research. I lay out a scene by scene analysis highlighting, what I consider to be, the successes and short-comings of this work.

Within the conclusion of this thesis I summarize how contextualizing the history of *Giselle* highlights its need for a reworking in order to align the storyline with my own ideological views. I reinforce how adaptation theory and reworking theory was used in cultivating a methodology for creating *Telling Giselle*. I also outline, in a self-reflective way, how I would move forward with this work. In particular, what areas I would deepen within my continued research.

Chapter 1- Contextualizing Giselle

In order to contextualize *Giselle* and establish a basis of understanding for the work and future analysis within in this paper, I will begin by summarizing the work, based off of the libretto published by Marian Smith. I will then contextualize the creator of the work, Théophile Gautier, the time in which he created this ballet, and the source material that he used for inspiration. Through this historical contextualization, I will establish which ideologies within the original clash with my personal ideologies. I will then outline how Jody Bruner and Evan Alderson express similar sentiments towards the ideologies in the original storyline to highlight how this supports my findings.

Synopsis / Sources for Study

Based on the libretto in Marian Smith's *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle*, which claims an accuracy to the original libretto, here is a brief and simplified synopsis of the ballet: In Act I, we are introduced to the character of Giselle, who lives in a small village with her mother and loves dancing everywhere she goes. There is a local man, Hilarion, who loves her, but she does not love him back. Giselle falls in love with a man named Albrecht, who turns out to be a prince and engaged to Bathilde, a fine lady. Giselle and Albrecht love dancing together. Hilarion uncovers the double life of Albrecht. Giselle, distraught by this betrayal by Albrecht, dances herself to death.

In Act II, Giselle wakes up in the land of the Wilis. Hilarion arrives to Giselle's grave but, as the Wilis are about to show up he flees as they are known to dance men to death who appear on their land after midnight. The Queen of the Wilis enters and then all the rest of them. We meet a sisterhood of women who have all suffered similar fates and died before their love was

consummated. When Albrecht enters and the Wilis try to get him to dance himself to death Giselle chooses to go against her newfound sisterhood and try and save him. In an act of defiance against the Queen of the Wilis and the other Wilis, Giselle saves Albrecht. In the final action of the ballet, Albrecht marries Bathilde, with Giselle's implied blessing as her hand gestures towards Bathilde.

As I am unable to study an archival video of the original presentation of *Giselle* as archival videos did not exist in 1841, I had to rely on two sources for study. The first source that I looked at, as discussed above, was the libretto found in the appendix of Marian Smith's *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle*. This gave a scene by scene breakdown which claims to be very similar to the original libretto (Smith 229). For my second reference, I watched the American Ballet Theatre's 1969 dance film version of the ballet, which sticks close to the original storyline as outlined by Smith's libretto. I thought it was prudent to include a danced version of the storyline, to ensure that I was experiencing the medium of dance in my research.

Théophile Gautier/ Source Material.

Giselle was conceived by librettist Théophile Gautier and premiered on 1841 at the Paris Opéra (Nebel 90). Though the ballet was developed by Gautier, the libretto was co-written by Vernoy de Saint- Georges (Bruner 109). Gautier was a predominant figure in Paris in the late nineteenth century. He was "the first critic and theorist of ballet of his time," (Nebel 94) and by the time Gautier envisioned *Giselle*, he had written a novel, a play, several short stories, and had been working as a ballet critic for five years (Nebel 90–91). In her essay "Théophile Gautier and the Wilis", Cecile Nebel theorizes that Gautier, as an established ballet writer in his time, "had probably already seen too many trite stories in plays and ballets to be tempted to add another one to the repertory" (Nebel 91). However, through his collaboration with Saint-Georges and pressure from the Paris Opera, the classic love story of *Giselle* was created.

Gautier based his ballet on two sources, as Doris Hering outlines in her book *Giselle and Albretch*. The first source was Heinrich Heine's *De l'Allemagne*, which is where Gautier came to know about Wilis (Hering 10). They were described in the two-paragraph text by Heine as, "those deadly- beautiful creatures who emerged from their graves to torment hapless males. They were the spirits of maidens whose marriages had not been consummated" (Hering 10). Gautier's adaptation of the Wilis only accounts for the second act of the ballet. While the Wilis from Heine's tale were the main inspiration for the ballet, Gautier was pressured to make the work more like the character-driven two act ballets that French audiences were accustomed to in the late nineteenth century (Nebel 91). To fill the gap of needing a main character and a storyline, he turned to a separate work: *Les Fantômes*, by Victor Hugo. (Hering 10) In this poem, Gautier was inspired by the main character who he ultimately made into Giselle. Hering continues to explain "Gautier also knew Victor Hugo's poem, *Fantômes*, in which the poet lamented the death of a frail girl who had lived only for dancing and was killed by a chill wind after an evening of revelry" (Hering 10). Combining these two narratives, *Fantômes* and *De l'Allemagne*, gave Gautier and Saint-Georges enough of a storyline for a two-act ballet.

Nebel outlines the lineage of the Wilis: for example how Heine was inspired by Slavic myths such as those about the Rusalky, who were female sea creatures whose voices would lure swimmers into deep water where they would drown, as well as the Bechlerinnen of Ancient Greece, who would accidentally force men to dance while being sexually assaulted (Nebel 89). Understanding where Heine got inspiration for the Wilis, and in turn where Gautier did for his ballet, helps to frame the historical ideologies that went into creating the ballet.

Oppressive Ideologies

Within the storyline of *Giselle* that I will be referencing, drawn from the libretto in Smith's book and the plot from the American Ballet Theatre film version, there are two main ideologies that I find problematic: class and female oppression. Class tensions reflect the political climate of the bourgeois in Paris in the 1840s, and female oppression was deeply entrenched within the ballet's source material. To support my findings on these problematic aspects of the work's core structure, this section will outline critical voices that preceded my research. In outlining these critics, I further prove the need to continue contemporizing the work, and specify in which aspects of the work my adaptation should focus on.

There are three key aspects within the ballet that speak most clearly to the oppression of women. The first is when Giselle dies because of heartache at the end of Act I, and the second is when Giselle betrays the Wilis and saves Albrecht at the end of Act II. In both of these examples, we see how Giselle's femininity is tempered and tamed by the power of a man. The two most significant plot devices in the storyline present a woman powerless against the influence of a man—even when she is surrounded and supported by a pack of female support. As Evan Alderson outlines in “Giselle, Act II,”

Giselle's ultimate gift to Albrecht is that despite her newly found sisterhood, she does not finally dance him to death. The fullest mark of her love is that she denies her own power in helping him to survive. Her femininity remains in the service of the male.(Alderson 294)

This depiction of Giselle represents a victimized portrayal of her character and her motivations, removing any autonomy from her character and entrenching the ideology of weak women into the ballet.

The third problematic representation of women within *Giselle* is, unfortunately, a narrative about women that Gautier inherited (knowingly or not) from the myths on which her character and the Wilis were based. Nebel speaks to the historical representation of women in the ancient oral myths of women who died before their wedding days, who return to “suck the life force” out of men or dance them to death (Nebel 92). She then reflects how these themes carry into the Wilis of *Giselle* and the harmful representation of women that the Wilis present within this ballet:

It suggests that men’s libido, or life energy, is limited while... women’s libido is so strong that if it is not tamed or reined in, it will explode and wreak havoc on society. Only when women are totally in love as is *Giselle*, or become mothers, is their libido no longer a danger. (Nebel 92)

An example that typifies the social climate that Paris was seeing during the late 19th century can be seen in the presence of “The Jockey Club” at the Paris Opera. Though I was unable to find a clear definition of what The Jockey Club was, their influence dominated my readings of the Paris Opera. For example, in his “The July Monarchy,” H. A. C Collingham describes the following scene: “In the ‘devil’s lodge’ select members of the Jockey Club gathered to ogle the dancers and admire the bared shoulders and glitter of the diamonds” (Collingham 284). This suggests how the bourgeois would have had special privileges within the Paris Opera. Collingham’s description parallels Smith’s: “the Jockey Club, [who had a] reputation for regarding ballet performances as voyeuristic free-for-alls...” (Smith 68).

Though never directly stated in any source that I found, I see this boisterous group of men as representing the bourgeois influence within the Paris Opera. The role of Albrecht, being of a higher social class, may have been created to satisfy this club or allow their social status to be reflected within the work. With the special privileges that they got, I do not assume that they would

see themselves in the character of Hilarion, the lowly villager who could not gain Giselle's love. This sense of privilege in the wealthy class is something which persists in our society today, and which I personally deem as a problematic ideology. The character of Albrecht represents both female oppression and class oppression within his single character.

In her essay "Redeeming Giselle," however, author Jody Bruner makes a case for the *jouissance* of *Giselle*, arguing that the censoring of female oppression and class issues within the work ultimately does it a disservice. She asks in the concluding paragraph of her work for more of a grey area in depicting the work: "why not embrace a critical practice that allows for *jouissance* as well as cultural and psychological difference?" (Bruner 119). She remains critical of the form of ballet, as seen in the following paragraph, describing it as:

a tradition that doesn't question or explore the political agenda it explicitly and implicitly supports. This leaves modern audiences with a dilemma: either they allow themselves to be transported by the power of the dancing in *Giselle*, or they adopt critical distance and see the oppression this beauty demands. (Bruner 107)

It is my personal belief that in 2019 and the current political climate that we are living in, we have to resist oppression of women and social classes now more than ever. While I support Bruner's sentiments on complicating the critical voice without censoring it completely, I do believe an ideological line must be drawn. More feminist and progressive representation needs to exist within the adaptation and re-visioning of canonized works. This is what I do in my version of *Telling Giselle*, while still aiming to create *jouissance* in the work. Within the final chapter, the scene by scene breakdown of my work, I address how social movements such as #Metoo and the representation of a 21st century woman manifests themselves in my work.

Chapter 2- Theorizing Giselle

In this chapter I examine the key concepts from adaptation theory that influenced the methodology I developed for my work. In particular, this chapter outlines how I generated the main tension of my work: *invariants* vs *variants*. This chapter considers my findings from Linda Hutcheon, Vida L. Midgelow, and Darko Suvin. Hutcheon influenced my research leading into the creation of *Telling Giselle* and Midgelow, and Suvin reframed my theoretical structure post creation. Within this chapter the conceptual categories I will examine are form, proximity, and canonical counter-discourse all of which served to inform the methodology I developed to create *Telling Giselle*.

Form

I predominantly relied upon my study of Hutcheon's work throughout the creation of *Telling Giselle*. I appreciated her explication of adaptation theory and dissection of form and the influence that changing mediums has on adaptation. This section discusses two main topics that Hutcheon outlines in the negotiation of adaptation across forms: first, the limitations that a change in medium presents, and second, the classifications of the different forms of adaptation into three categories: telling, showing, or interacting, and how this influenced the development of my concept.

In her chapter "What?" Hutcheon outlines the theoretical conversations surrounding form-changing adaptations. A piece of visual art changing into a poem, or a film being adapted into a video game universe, will confront different levels of limitations and obstacles in their transposition. Of particular interest to me was how Hutcheon outlines how the most drastic form of adaptation being the change from literature into any of the performative arts, as she states that

it is often received “in negative terms of loss” (Hutcheon 37). She continues on to describe how this is predominantly due to the fact that “it usually takes longer to perform an action than to read a written report of it” (Hutcheon 37). In the aforementioned quote she is referencing how fans of a novel are often disappointed by a film adaptation because of all the detail that is missing. However, I was inspired by this concept and honing in on the idea of duration in text vs. gesture (a reframed thinking of “performed action” which is the terminology Hutcheon uses in her text), I was inspired to choose physical theatre as the departure point for my form of adaptation for *Giselle*. In particular, I was curious as to how introducing written language and text could further the storyline of *Giselle*. In turn, getting the work to align with my ideological values more clearly.

Hutcheon breaks down adaptation into three categories: telling (written form), showing (performance), and interacting (video games) (Zaiontz 3). Although she expressly says that adaptations that stay within the same form (for example, performance to performance) do not enter into “medium-specificity debates,” I was keen to challenge this when looking at adapting a ballet into physical theatre (Hutcheon 35). This shift in medium represents what Hutcheon would categorize as Showing to Showing. However, due to the introduction of text and language within my work, I decided to take a small departure from Hutcheon’s definitions of medium shifts and go with Showing to Telling. I did this not to discredit Hutcheon’s theory but to highlight how I, personally, believed in a large linguistic difference between ballet and physical-theatre.

After the completion of *Telling Giselle*, which, as I said, had been inspired by the theoretical framework of Linda Hutcheon, I discovered the text *Reworking the Ballet* by Vida L. Midgelow. This publication became a foundational text to further the development of my ideas in adaptation theory. It helped reframe concepts that I discovered intuitively and provides the theoretical framework to ground them. In responding to Hutcheon’s theory, I was dissatisfied with

the conclusion that redoing a work from one style of dance to another did not warrant investigation into the specificity of closeness. (Hutcheon 35) However, Midgelow's work provided a different theoretical way of reshaping the terminology and the framework for thought: reworking. "The term reworking, in that it is an active term, implies a process, a rethinking, a reconceptualizing, and a revising of the source in order to bring about some new resonance" (Midgelow 13). I adopted this new term to be the specific term of what I was trying to accomplish under the larger umbrella of adaptation. In truth, had I met this work of Midgelow sooner, I probably would have titled the piece "*Reworking Giselle*" to situate the work closer to Midgelow's theory, or "*Retelling Giselle*" to appropriately situate it between both theorists.

Proximity

The topic of form transitions nicely into proximity as the form, or medium, in which the adaptation takes place often limits the potential for proximity within the adaptation, in particular if looking at a novel to film adaptation. However, as discussed in the previous section, this was something I confronted when looking at a change of medium from ballet to physical-theatre (although in completion of the work I would describe it as dance theatre). In dance-theatre I would have more access to language, so in fact a greater potential for proximal closeness. I knew going into this adaptation, which I have now reframed as a reworking for my case, I wanted to keep as close a connection as possible to *Giselle*. Singularly to leverage its position within the canon, which I saw as boldly meeting the source material head on. I wanted the connection between my work and *Giselle* to be clear while encouraging the comparative discourse that reworking engages the viewer in. Within this section I explore how Hutcheon illustrates the pitfalls of proximity within an adaptation (which I took as a challenge), and how Midgelow's text introduced me to the writing

of Darko Suvin who offers key terminology in discussing proximity. I highlight how Suvin's theoretical framework and terminology structured the methodologies that would allow me to realign the ideologies of the original storyline. The tension created by proximity is ultimately the heart of an adapted (or in this case more specifically) reworked piece.

If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works.
(Hutcheon 6)

Although I did want the work to stand alone as a piece of theatre, I also wanted, for those who knew the original, to reinforce the relationship between the old vs. new and contrast both works against each other. By comparing my work to the original, I was striving for an intertextual reading of the inherent ideologies of each work. In turn, highlighting the areas that I found problematic in the original. As Hutcheon describes the relationship between an original work and an adaptation to be hanging over it like “a shadow”, I interpreted this as a challenge.

To continue the excavation of the title *Telling Giselle*; the former half having been discussed in terms of “form”, the latter half was chosen within the parameters of “proximity”. What I discovered as my team and I moved through development on this piece is that I could steer the work further away from the original storyline but ultimately by keeping “Giselle” in the title, the relationship between it and the original was solidified in an undisguised way.

While I found freedom in steering the work away from the original storyline, what became apparent was the importance of the ways in which it connected back to the source material. This is where Middelton's text, once again, furthered my theoretical understanding of reworkings by introducing me to the work of Darko Suvin. In particular, the concept of *invariant* and *variant* which he outlines in his essay “Weiss's Marat/ Sade and its Three Main Performance Versions”.

Suvin defined an *invariant* as being a parameter from within and having a family likeness to the central structure of which the world of the adaptation is created. (Suvin 396) Alternatively, "...a *variant* is an interpretation observing the central structural features (*invariants*) of the text being interpreted." (Suvin 410) Thus, any deviation extrapolated from an *invariant* is a variant. That precise point of *invariant* becoming variant is where I found the potential to realign the ideologies of the original storyline within my own while being able to track its proximal closeness. The distribution of content between these two opposing forces is what determines how the adaptation, or reworking, sits in proximity to the original. While Midgelow states that this framework outlined by Suvin "is not easily adapted for dance" due to the fact that "he relies heavily on the written play text as a fixed anterior source to establish his *invariants* or central features" (Midgelow 13) I was able, in this reworking, to utilize Suvin's framework by using the libretto as text source to determine the *invariants* and central feature.

Canonical Counter-Discourse

In order for a work to be canonized, it inherently has to be accepted and celebrated by the hegemony. As such, reworkings should, by default, fit into canonical counter-discourse. I first encountered the term canonical counter-discourse in my feminist theory course at York University, and have since found its direct relevance to adaptation theory and my endeavor to rework *Giselle*.

As Richard Terdiman describes in his book *Discourses / Counter-Discourses*, "counter-discourse constitutes [the] mapping of the internal incoherence of the seemingly univocal and monumental institution of dominant discourse" (Terdiman 77). As such, counter-discourse, true to its name, speaks directly to a text that holds a dominant voice in culture. Although, Terdiman speaks to the canonical counter-discourse of the nineteenth century predominantly from a literary

perspective, this theory is applicable to my investigation of reworkings. Terdiman also outlines how “Counter-discourses are the product of a theoretically unpredictable form of discursive labor and real transformation. No catalogue of them can ever be exhaustive” (Terdiman 77). Which I interpreted to mean that as long as there is a marginalized voice speaking against the dominant voice, then the potential for canonical counter-discourse is infinite. The definition of who is in power and who is the marginalized voice might shift over time, but the theory follows the voice of the suppressed, not a specific group or people.

In the following quote Midgelow outlines a more in-depth definition of reworkings, which supports a canonical counter-discourse within its core values:

one of the purposes of reworkings is to alter the convention, and, while not all revised texts are progressive, the basic premise evident in these dances is that the source needs to be gone over or re-examined. (Midgelow 13)

From the line “while not all revised texts are progressive” I extrapolated that this is the main difference between an adaptation and a reworking. An adaptation can sit in close proximity to an original source without addressing the major ideologies of the piece, while reworkings demand a critical undoing of the hegemonic overtones of the work.

From my understanding of canonical counter-discourse, it does not define a certain type of work that needs to be created, but solely speaks to a critique, while overt or not, of the source material to take place. In this, I intended to create a piece of canonical counter-discourse which spoke to the oppression of woman within Giselle.

An Examination of Other Adaptations

The choice in how much *invariants* and how much *variants* to execute from the original source material ultimately significantly dictates choices in areas such as movement vocabulary, style, and contemporizing of ideologies. I will briefly reflect upon adaptations from predominant voices

within the world of dance to further contextualize *Giselle*, establish comparisons to my own reworking, and to further incorporate the theories of Hutcheon, Suvin, and Midgelow.

One of the most popular adaptations of *Giselle* that came up in my research is Mats Eks' (1982). Not only is it readily available online, it also appears significantly in critical discourse. Eks used a lot of *invariants* to the original work. It is actually easier, in this case, to list the few *variants* he did make within the work than to list the *invariants* he kept. Although he crafted a masterful movement vocabulary that had the dancers gesturing and moving through space in a vibrant fury of modern dance vocabulary, he left the ideologies of the oppression of woman and social classes unchallenged. In his retelling of the tale, Mats Ek's "removes the supernatural elements of the dance and locates the tale in a Freudian-inspired, symbolically painted stage" (Midgelow 18). Eks places the Wilis in an insane asylum, which causes one to wonder if they are "truly mentally ill or ... are women society would rather ignore" (Midgelow 19). This adaptation, appeared to me, to highlight the inherent male gaze present in the work. I borrow the term male gaze from feminist film theory which was originated by Linda Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey outlines how heterosexual men represent women as sexual objects within art through the view of the male creator and/or the male characters within the work. In this case female sexualization is expressed through purity and virginity in the case of both *Giselle* and the Wilis. While Ek's adaptation of *Giselle* it is a fantastic and feverish piece filled with the type of *jouissance* that Brumner spoke of in her critical analysis of *Giselle* adaptations, it was too close in proximity to the original storyline without addressing the ideological representation of women and as such perpetuates the male gaze.

A work that appears to step a little further away from the original than Eks, is Akram Khan's *Giselle*, set on the English National Ballet in 2016. I was unable to see a live performance

or video recording of this piece, so my impressions are based primarily on two written sources. The first is an analysis of the work in Midgelow's text, and the second is an interview Khan about the piece by Royona Mitra in *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*. Although Khan's work was still created within the male gaze, it challenged representation within the western canon by infusing the movement vocabulary with inspirations from Kathak. This is particularly transgressive because of the institution where it was created predominantly focuses on classical ballet.

Khan's approach with the ballet dancers was to allow them to discover their own ways to embody a movement or even a principle, giving them the agency to transform his material, in order to own the gestures as their own (Mitra 33-34).

From a canonical counter- discourse perspective, the style of Kathak in the colonial institution of the English National Ballet is a strong statement on its own. This alone would constitute the active restructuring that would make it a reworking over an adaptation.

However, it appears that Khan's representation of women within the work still sits on the wrong side of representation in relation to my ideologies. From what I could surmise in the two sources that I looked at, Khan version represents a traditional portrayal of femininity, situating his version close in proximity to the original storyline and therefore representing a version of femininity that exists solely to serve men.

The final adaptation that I will examine Vida Midgelow's *The Original Sylph* (1997) provides the most *variants* from the original work. As no archival video exists for this work I relied on the description by Midgelow herself in *Reworking the Ballet* for my analysis. Including Midgelow in this section is not only because of its extended *variants* from the original, but also because I was surprised to see how many of her choices related to the impulses that were central

to my work. Midgelow describes the opening of her work: “[it] begins with the overture to *Giselle* by [Adolphe] Adam. I lie under a mound of earth...as the music reaches its climax I burst from under the mound of earth gasping for air.”(Midgelow 16) Her brief description specifies two choices that I found similar to my instincts—the first being that I had originally intended to use the overture at the start of my work and only through collaboration with Rachel Peacock (the composer on my adaptation) did I move away from this choice (I will discuss this at length in Chapter 5), and the second being that my dancers start in a pile on the floor, with the directive that they are to feel as if they are under the soil and coming up through the earth like a plant. Midgelow describes how the choice to begin under a pile of dirt reflects the desire to unearth an original and also connects to the supernatural motifs of the work (Midgelow 17). Midgelow describes how she stumbles out and recites a poem about love in direct address to the audience. This seems similar to the prologue of my version which is discussed in the next section. Aside from my personal resonance with her piece, I was impressed that in her reworking of *Giselle*, which was titled *The Original Sylph*, Midgelow addressed the ideologies of the female oppression through giving both agency and voice to the lead female character.

I squat and begin to untie the ribbons. Whether this is a rejection of the shoes or an inability to conform to their requirements is ambiguous. Either way I assert myself/ *Giselle* as flesh not fantasy, real not ethereal. (Midgelow 17)

Though I cannot speak to the majority of the piece due to lack of resources that I was able to find that reference it, the above quote, alone, details a level of agency that is a large departure from the original storyline. I included Midgelow in my analysis of other *Giselle* adaptations due to this quote. From what I can tell, Midgelow’s *Giselle* would be more in line with my feminist ideologies than the other two listed here.

By looking at adaptation theory through the outline of form, proximity, and canonical counter-discourse I established a theoretical framework for the development of my own adaptation. I applied a sample of this framework to other adaptations of *Giselle*, which not only helped to clarify the application of my theory but also contextualized my own adaptation of *Giselle* in relation to others. As I move into an explanation of methodology in my next section, I not only carry this theory forward with me, but also the storyline and ideologies of *Giselle*, moving closer to an analysis of my adaptation, *Telling Giselle*, which is the culmination of this research.

CHAPTER 3- Creating Giselle

This chapter outlines how the theory outlined in Chapter 2 influenced the methodology I used in the creation of my reworking of *Giselle*. In particular, I illustrate how the original idea for a physical-theatre show became a dance-theatre creation. I begin by outlining the process for writing the initial script and then detail how that was abstracted into prose which were more suitable for a dance-theatre narrative. I then describe the choices around casting dancers in this work and how that influenced the movement vocabulary. The purpose of this chapter is to establish the material we were working with as well as how and why we approached the material in the way we did.

The Script

Telling *Giselle* was originally conceived as a physical-theatre piece, based on Linda Hutcheon's concept that I repurposed into Telling vs. Showing, as described in Chapter 2. I had planned to pull as far away as I could from the ideologies of the original storyline, while creating a scene by scene depiction of the libretto. Within the original script that I created, I realigned the ideologies predominantly through character development representing queer characters and rewriting the ending to be a morality play about loving one's self rather than dying for love. For this stage of development, I worked closely with the libretto to ensure that I had an accurate breakdown of scenes, and the American Ballet Theatre video to ensure I was reviewing the storyline through the medium of dance. You can see an example of the dialogue written in the original script in Appendix A.

From here the work started to shift and there are two causational reasons for this. Firstly, I made the choice to collaborate with a team of dancers as opposed to a team of actors. It should be noted that within my career I typically work with actors on movement-based narrative/ physical theatre pieces more than I work with dancers within the dance-theatre genre. For this work, I chose to work with dancers because I wanted to challenge myself to push the physical limits of narrative based storytelling. In particular, I worked with dancers who had ballet and modern dance training because I wanted the potential to have codified ballet movement in the work. The second reason why this work shifted once we hit the rehearsal studio is because I wanted to try a different approach to working with a script. Instead of starting the rehearsal process with a table read of the script, I started generating movement material, partially because I wanted to start the dancers with an exercise that they were comfortable with, and partially, as I stated previously, to challenge my own way of working.

As we moved into the rehearsal process, I also introduced writing prompts into the daily warm up. This is a ritual-based practice that I have used for years partially as a meditative practice and partially to generate material in the room. Mirroring my own practice, I would base the writing prompts on the material that we would be working with in creation. In this case, I introduced writing prompts based on *Giselle*. As most of them did not have a working knowledge of *Giselle*, it was fascinating to see how the content deviated from the original storyline, but remained tied to the work by the *invariant* of the theme. I decided to follow this line of insight and started developing the movement vocabulary based on the material developed in the writing prompts. Gradually, I let the script disappear from the rehearsal room. We did try working with certain sections from it but the only scenes from the initial script that remained in the final show were the Prologue and the Symptoms Scene, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

Movement Creation

Within the next chapter of the work, “Chapter 4 *Telling Giselle*” I do a scene by scene break down of the work. Within that chapter I will speak to the creation methodology used within a specific scene but there are three major areas I wanted to dissect in this section: the choice to work with dancers over actors and self-generated vs. imposed movement. This will establish my intentions behind the physical movement within the work and contextualize my praxis outside of this piece.

Throughout my career I have predominately worked on pieces with a movement narrative structure. As such, I have had the privilege of working, actually mostly, with actors who move and on occasion with dancers who act. This creation process was the latter. I have always enjoyed witnessing the distinct difference in approaches to material that come from each group, and chose intentionally to work with dancers for this piece. Partially because I have found that dancers are not given enough opportunity to try acting roles, while I found, in my experience, that actors are more likely to get cast in physical theatre roles which require a fair amount of moving. Also, partially, as mentioned in the previous section, my goal for this work was to push the physicality of the movement, prioritizing it over the narrative story structure, and to subtly codify the work with ballet movement as a type of homage to the original. It was interesting to work with this cast on the text they were given, some were more comfortable than others, but all embraced the challenge. Ultimately, I was very pleased with the acting that they did within the work and felt that the choice to work with dancers for this piece was a successful pursuit.

For the generation of movement, as a choreographer, I have always been more interested in working with the bodies that I have in the rehearsal room rather than setting movement on my own and imposing it on others. This practice paired well with the idea of adaptation. I structure

the room around the idea of Telling vs. Showing but dictated the text of the work to the dancers and having them adapt the language into movement. I challenged myself to remain seated throughout the movement creation process, resisting the urge to demonstrate a movement even when describing a certain quality that I wanted the movement executed with. I explained to the dancers that the goal was to infuse the methodology with adaptation theory, and that I wanted the generation of movement itself to be an interpretation of my words to their movement. The most profound way that this had an effect on the work was in the vocabulary style that was created, which was very outside of what I would have created. To push this concept, I encouraged variation in their movements even when learning material peer to peer, allowing a reworking of the movement which was based on an adaptation of text to movement.

Choosing to work with dancers over actors within the work was a fruitful experience which ultimately lead to my reworking, *Telling Giselle*. Due to this process the piece had strong *invariant* roots into the original source while allowing the dancers in the room and physicality/ movement to inspire where I moved the *variants* towards. The following chapter breaks down the work in a detailed exploration of the devices found within the piece.

Chapter 4- *Telling Giselle*

I begin this next chapter by analyzing the overarching devices used in *Telling Giselle*: projection, costuming, hair, and music. Each of these artistic choices was developed within the theory and methodology discussed in the previous sections. I outline how these elements tie the work together on an aesthetic and/or thematic level, acting as the structural backbone of this adaptation.

Subsequently, I offer a scene by scene analysis of the work. For reference throughout this section, consult the archive video listed at <https://youtu.be/DqciNC16HR0> and follow the corresponding time code.

Overarching Devices

Each scene in *Telling Giselle* is rooted in a different theme as *invariant* to the original *Giselle* and each uses a different methodology for extrapolating the material towards *variation* with the artistic intent of realigning the ideologies of the storyline within my own values. The projection, costuming, hair, and music act as overarching devices that provide a cohesive framework which holds these scenes together. Each of these devices has its own relationship to *invariant* and *variation* which I will outline in this section. I start with one of the most predominant and obvious: the projections.

The use of projection was a *variation* from the original *Giselle* as this technology was not invented in 1841, and, as such its use contemporizes the work. The content of the projection could be considered *invariant* to the original as it is analogous to scenography which would have been used in traditional staging. Aesthetically, I attempted to create a layering effect through the use of projection onto the cyclorama, curtains, and costumes. This endowed the audience with different

levels of information, at times challenging their attention by layering materials onto each other and at other times allowing them to focus on a simple projection. Within this layering effect there were separate ways that the projection relayed information to the audience which I will outline in the following scene by scene analysis of the work.

The way in which the content of the videos that were projected unified the work was through the use of video static during transitions. On a functional level, the static helped to disguise the transitions, not only within a single projection video from clip to clip, but also from one projection video to another. When one projection cut to another, the static at the top of the projection made the transition appear to be a continuation of the same video. This allowed flexibility in the timing of the dancer, by not forcing them to sync with the timing of the video but allowing the stage manager to advance through the videos based on the dancers' movement. The choice to add static to the transitions of video was predominantly inspired by the VHS tape that introduced me to *Giselle*, a personal detail that I infused into the work. To support the abrupt transitions that an abstract narrative requires it also, at times, read like a television changing channels.

Next, I discuss the use of hair as device. The dancers' hair loose indicated that they were representing the characters of the Wilis, and when their hair was put up, it signaled that that performer was now the character of Giselle. First and foremost, the decision to include hair as a character device throughout the show was sparked by my desire to have all of the performers take turns playing Giselle. While we pursued different costuming pieces which would have been passed between each of the dancers (Ex- a wrist band or hat) to indicate this choice, we landed on the use of hair due to its simple nature which was seamlessly integrated into the action of the piece. This device was conceived out of a desire to realign the ideologies of the oppression of woman, which

I found in the libretto, by contemporizing the idea of feminine victimization. In particular, being influenced by the #Metoo mobilization which was popularized in 2017 as social movement unearthing sexual harassment in the film industry. (Harris pg18) The hashtag was started by Tarana Burke in 2005 which was then popularized by Alyssa Milano who used it to speak out against a Hollywood producer who sexually harassed her and countless other celebrities came forward to share their own stories. (Harris pg1) I wanted to create a singular voice which represented the shared experience of being female. I did this by having each of the performers sharing the role of Giselle to represent multiple woman that came forward in society. I acknowledge that the #Metoo movement is not exclusively female, it affects men and non-binary individuals as well, but the predominant voice has been female. It seemed appropriate that in my adaptation the single character of Giselle, who has traditionally been victimized and denied a voice, should be played by the whole cast, highlighting the shared experience of women in society, and how there can be a strength in numbers when we support one another.

Though it is not mentioned in the original libretto, and only briefly represented in the ABT version (00:54:11), it was important to me to evoke the classic veiled entrance of the Wilis in my adaptation. In Giselle, the corps de ballet enters in ACT II in veils depicting the Wilis and the backstory is that they are all women who die before their marriages have been consummated; as per Hein's original poem. Before pursuing the hair draping down in front of their faces we tried many variations on the veils. We tried everything from lace fabric to cotton sweatshirts but nothing felt aesthetically appropriate for the world we were creating in our adaptation. It was our costume consultant Kari Pederson's recommendation that we use loose hair over the head. She had seen me use this technique for an assignment in our MFA choreography course in Fall 2018, and thought

it would be an appropriate translation of the image. I was also glad to include a dancer who has short hair, in this work, to indicate different expressions of femininity.

Although we were working with an abstract narrative, tracking Giselle's journey through each of the characters as they put their hair up revealed a powerful journey that read like a set of trials before judgement. Unfortunately, the hairstyle did not always succeed as signifier of the lead character to the audience as powerfully as I had hoped it would. It was my intention that it would be a little ambiguous, but I hoped that by the end of the work it would have become obvious.

Costuming involved, possibly, one of the most surprising choices in the work and one of the most substantial contributions from a collaborator. Pederson first made the suggestion that the dancers should be all in white. The aesthetic of my work tends to be more pedestrian (jeans, t-shirts, running shoes), so my first instinct was to reject the suggestion. Pederson's reasoning supported the tradition of the Wilis as women who died before their marriage was consummated as the color white evokes weddings and purity. White also supported the projections, and facilitated my desire to layer surfaces on top of surfaces, symbolizing the layers of adaptation within the work. When the dancers were upstage the projections would layer on top of them. This effect was only mildly successful. In the future, I would make sure that there was at least one more projector that covered the dancers directly, and would include a front scrim. These two additions would solidify the layering effect of projections that I was seeking.

When I first started to develop this work, I was working off of the idea of distorting the original musical score. It seemed appropriate to the alternate world I was creating. This, however, did not pan out in the fruitful nature that I was hoping it would. Instead, through an open call for a composer, I found Rachel Peacock who created an original score. I chose to work with her because she has a history of working within theatre as a sound designer and her instrument of

composition is the harp. I was intrigued by the potential dissonance the harp would offer to an edgier movement vocabulary. The only main *invariant* to the original score that I wanted Peacock to keep was the idea of a repeating character motif that is found in Adolphe Adam's version. As the Wilis were the central character of my version, Peacock created a motif for them which is played in different variations throughout the piece. After going back and forth throughout the development with recorded sound, we eventually decided that Peacock would play live. This gave me more flexibility on my choreography, as Peacock could slightly shorten or lengthen sections as needed and the audience was able to both see and hear the harp.

Scene Analysis

The following section considers *Telling Giselle* scene by scene to analyze the application of theories and methodologies used in the creation of the sections and to critically determine their success. The following analysis outlines the show as it appears in the presentation of the work. The abstract narrative that I created allows for an intertextual reading of the themes. The scenes chronologically based on the original libretto would have been: Home, to Love, to Betrayal, Death, Female Dynamic, and finally, Four Corners. I outline the dramaturgical choices for the particular order of the scene within that section.

Scene 1- The Prologue

Time: 00:00:00 – 00:01:50

The lights come up on a single Wilis, standing, facing the audience. She delivers a direct address. Although she herself is an *invariant* to the original work, the audience may not yet recognize her as a Wilis. The speech she delivers establishes the structure of the work, identifying

that it will be a narrative structure, but that the narrative will be told out of order, a large *variation* from the original.

In order to take this back, we're going to have to go way back. Or as far back as it needs to go to feel like it's the start. ... it's hard to know where to begin this story. I suppose the end is as good as any. It might be too painful to begin chronologically. Yes, we'll tell this narrative out of order.

Throughout this section, the Wilis is lit by a white projection onto the back cyclorama (with additional face lighting for added visibility) and the projection is flashing static intermittently. This establishes the VHS tape editing that references my personal connection to the work, and will carry through the whole piece.

Scene 2- Opening Credits

Time Code: 00:01:50- 00:08:25

As the musician strikes her first chord we transition into the second scene of the work. Here we see the introduction of the music, itself a *variation* from the original, and we see an *invariant* to the original video, developing the VHS motif further.

The photo that comes into focus is an *invariant* to the original work. As described in the original libretto, Giselle lives in the country, and the first scene opens at her farm house. You can see the credits of the ABT version I was reworking here (00:00:00- 00:01:40).

As the credits project across the screen, there is the opportunity to listen to the music on its own. This provides the audience time to settle into the sounds of the harp which starts with a spacious plucking of individual chords. I wanted a very slow build in this section, to ease the audience into the soundscape of the harp.

As the credits conclude, and the music moves into a more melodic section, the Wilis start moving. This begins a slow unfolding of the introduction to their character. There are 4 phases in this Wilis development; the first phase of development is the slow waking up. This section of movement was developed from a piece of writing which we created as a team. Starting with the writing prompt “When I thought I couldn’t, I started again” that the dancers and I, in studio, wrote in free form. I constructed this writing prompt based on the theme of resilience, a theme that would establish a strong Giselle, rather than a victimized one. Originally, the resilience prompt was intended to cultivate Giselle’s character, but as we started piecing it together, it seemed more appropriate for the Wilis. We worked from the following text which we developed together in the studio through the writing prompts:

When I thought that I couldn’t I started again.
Hows and whys and whats
When I thought that all the fight had left my body I stopped and gave it time.
I listened.
Restrict Constrict constrict constrict
Become slow, soft- easy.

The deep quiet took its time to sink into my bones.
Take care of yourselves
Petals fall and are replaced with another round
I let my bones get old in this state of unmoving.
Water. Water. Water. Sunlight. Heat.

The projection shifts from stars to clouds. This is our first indication of a sort of timelessness in the world on stage. The dancers begin to change their hair, indicating their phasing between characters (00:05:36- 00:06:24). Each take a turn switching from Giselle to Wilis. While this may not be clear initially to the audience, it will be clarified over the next few scenes.

Once all five have put their hair up, we have established the Wilis ability to switch the Giselle role amongst themselves. This portion of the scene was under-developed and cut from the

show. It appears in Appendix B and footage of rehearsal video is available: <https://vimeo.com/306827902/ad803cbe5e> The Wilis' ability to be interchangeable, along with their ability to phase in and out of the Giselle character, enforces the belief that "we're all in this together."

From here we see a transitional image, with historical images being layered on top of an image of veiled hair which signifies layers upon layers of adaptation. The flickering projection establishes the history of the piece and introduces the veil hair. We also see the Wilis who performed the prologue retreat back into an altered version of the monologue which is based more in movement. This section of choreography foreshadows the final scene of the piece, wherein the story resets to the beginning, this compositional choice supports the cyclical nature of storytelling within the world of *Telling Giselle*.

The final section of this opening sequence is a quick movement across the stage by three of the Wilis. This is to further abstract away from any linear form of narrative and is to act somewhat like a radio tuner. The audience hears fragments of sentences not whole thoughts. This section includes the most layering of devices including the hair, costume, projection, and the use of text and is setting up a nice juxtaposition to the preceding scene.

Scene 3- Death/ Symptoms

Time Code: 00:08:25- 00:14:15

As this section starts we see the curtains being moved for the first time. By closing them, we create the sort of darkness that exists in moments of mourning. The projection persists into the beginning of the scene, layering images over images, offering context to the performance, until it finishes and leaves the audience in a moment of quiet. The creation of this scene was motivated

by the themes of death and illness within the original work. This was my way of addressing the trope of fragility and weak women within the piece by leaning into the themes and ultimately giving voice and agency to the character of Giselle.

This segment opens with movement from the assignment I created in the MFA choreography class which gave me the hair motif. For that assignment I created a short solo based on archival footage. I chose a drone video of the hills of Scotland. There was something eerie about the high viewpoint of a drone camera over a landscape that I wanted to piece together for this moment and the hair over the head lent itself to the image of death nicely by creating an image of facelessness for the performer. We see the dancer, Miyeko Ferguson, die in reverse, indicated by the fact that she puts her hair up halfway through the solo, transitioning halfway through the solo from Wilis (hair down/ dead) to Giselle (hair up/ alive). I decided to do this in reverse to stay true to the abstract narrative. Throughout this death section the other Wilis are sitting as if they are stalking her from above. They are all lined up, like in the 1:02:15 mark of the ABT video. We made the choice to not have any traditional music within this section so that the focus would be on the dancers and their performance, Peacock rubbed on the wood grain of her harp thereby adding ambient sound to the landscape.

As this scene begins we see a Wilis acting as the Queen of the Wilis. The Queen of the Wilis comes up several times throughout the work, but she is never indicated by name or a costume change; she is simply always the leader of the pack. I mirrored the image of Giselle meeting the Queen of the Wilis: you can see the choreography in the ABT (01:02:53- 01:03:24) and my version (00:11:10- 00:11:30).

Instead of giving Giselle a heart defect, or having her kill herself for love, I decided to create a *variation* by giving Giselle Multiple Sclerosis. This influenced how I conceived the

character, but also influenced the potential for content, as I was able to write from a place of personal experience as I have MS. In particular, I drew on a strength in living with MS, which provides a dichotomy between being physically weak and mentally strong. I developed the text for this as part of the original physical theatre script. In translating it to dance, we first conceived of a solo piece, then expanded to a group piece to abstract the narrative. It was important to me that this was done in voice-over, to add another layer of artifice to this moment to give it an otherworldly or supernatural feel. The movement among the four Wilis was intentionally delayed and distorted in a canon effect which each of the dancers moving one at a time to heighten the vertigo outlined in the text. This was done to heighten the text. The movement was developed predominantly by Raine Kearns, and translated to the rest of the group. As in the rest of the piece, the dancers were free to perform an adaptation of Kearns's movement rather than learning it directly. Giselle speaks at the end of this scene indicating that she had landed in the space and the world of the Wilis by having her interact with the Wilis for the first time live on stage.

Interlude- 1

Time Code: 00:14:15- 00:14:45

The interlude was inspired by the Greek Chorus and references the Bacchanal myth / Slavic story that was outlined by Hein and adapted by Gautier for *Giselle*. I did this by having the dancers pose ornamentally in marble like statues, evoking the image of Greek Gods in their positions. The tableau was intended to juxtapose dynamically the scene that come before and after it acting as a palate cleanser for the audience.

Scene 4-Female Dynamic

Time Code: 00:14:45- 00:18:16

This scene is a duet between Giselle and Queen of The Wilis. As the duet starts, we can see tension between them, a concept I recreated from a brief image in the ABT video (1:03:15). I intended the moment Giselle meets the Queen of the Willis to be a comment on the relational dynamic between women in society. I took that small moment from the video and had the dancers work through it in a mirroring exercise. After a few passes we set the material in a way that highlighted the power dynamic between women, with the Queen of the Wilis wielding power and influence over Giselle.

For the physical contact duet work, I created a list of verbs based on the theme of this scene and had the two dancers go back and forth, one verb at a time, to create the duet. I gave The Queen of the Wilis more offensive or direct verbs and Giselle more defensive or passive verbs. You can see an example of the list here:

QW: Arrive.
G: Resist.
G: Resist Again.
QW: Reassert.
G: Readjust.

Once again, Giselle was demarcated by her hairstyle, with her hair up. Although the Queen of the Wilis had no costume or text to signify her character, it was established by separating her from the other Wilis, who sat to the side and waited for the duet to unfold.

When contemporizing the narrative, it was important for me to maintain an aspect of female to female suppression. I believed it was important that we show women overpowering other women or holding them back, as this persists in the modern day with bullying and competition.

Interlude 2

Time Code: 00:18:10- 00:18:47

Similar to the last interlude the function of this scene was to clear the energy of the space and indicate a shift in perspective, time, and place. The clouds of the last scene gave way to stars, although this is hard to see in the video. The dancers walkthrough the space with a pedestrian dynamic to indicate a busy side walk or lobby to evoke the image of everywoman. Highlighting how the themes and dynamics expressed within this work (home, love, betrayal etc.) are fairly universal.

Scene 5- Betrayal

Time Code: 00:18:47- 00:21:50

We had difficulty translating the theory and methodology used in developing this scene into the staged performance. In development, we considered the theme of “woman” and the “female role” within society. We had a giant blue tarp which dancer Jamee Valin walked silently across. At the end of the scene she crumpled the tarp and started whipping it around, making a significant amount of noise. It was beautiful, but in the end after weeks and weeks of trying, I could not justify the tarp on stage as it did not support the overall concept of the show. I even tried to incorporate the tarp into different scenes in an attempt to establish it as a metaphor for women in society, as well I considered it as an alternative projection material. In the end we kept the same quality of movement and the same general arc, but without the tarp, setting it on a horizontal track across the stage to give it a journey and a place on the stage. I then used projections to amplify the theme of betrayal or a “trial by fire” by having the projections shift from water to fire from stage right to stage left (the same direction that Valin was moving). When we started to work this scene, it became less about women in society and more about my deep frustration with the patriarchy,

which to me read more like betrayal, a prominent theme we had not yet worked into the piece. In this scene I had two dancers at the front as benevolent Wilis, seemingly trying to coach and support from the sidelines, as women often do to support a friend who is going through something—you can't do the work for them, but you can be supportive. In this scene I used the voices of the Wilis to echo the sounds that Giselle was making, echoing back to Giselle the validity of her experience feelings.

Interlude- 3

Time Code: 00:21:50- 00:22:58

The running back and forth running in this piece was used to evoke the image of team work and solidarity. Reminiscent of a team warming up for sports (ex- a soccer team warming up). The intent behind evoking this image was to show how the sisterhood of the Wilis all worked together. As they transition from the running into the frenzied dynamic jumps and turns across the stage this was to evoke the energy of the bacchanal spirits showing *jouissance* in their movement. This frantic energy cleared the space of the previous scene to establish a new time and energy for the next scene.

Scene 6- Home

Time Code: 00:22:59- 00:32:28

This piece was a solo improvised by dancer Kylie Thompson. Based on audience feedback, this was arguably the most successful scene of the show. It occurs just past the halfway mark in the piece, and had the least technical needs and projections. I assume that part of the success of this scene was the fact that it sat in contrast to the rest of the work, providing a rest for the senses.

Based on the original, *Giselle*, Thompson's solo was developed around the theme of home and being home. This is an example of work being translated from ballet to dance-theatre, following to Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, and signifies a change in the form of story-telling. We went from "showing" the narrative to "telling" it through spoken word. To contemporize the work, I distilled the first few scenes of the ballet, including the village scene, into this singular improvisation. This improvised scene provides, the most contemporary moment of the work, as it is updated and changed every night. In this scene, we worked with a very simple score. Thompson was instructed to improvise in response to a text about "home," allowing the words to influence her body, staying within a roughly eight-minute time frame. Her improvised monologue tended to be about her childhood home, while maintaining enough ambiguity to preserve Giselle's character, indicated by hairstyle, and leave the audience unsure if the dancer was discussing her home or Giselle's home.

Interlude 4

Time Code: 00:32:28- 00:33:48

"The grounding", as we called this transition, was based on a meditative practice of highlighting areas of the body and shifting the awareness of one's mind to that body part. This is an improvised moment between two of the performers that is set in a simple improvisational score; the dancer Corynne Bisson was to choose different body parts and Thompson was to place her hand and her awareness on those parts. The length of this transition was undetermined and was ended by the stage manager when she felt that the two had solidify fulfilled the score.

Scene 7- Do you love?

Time Code: 00:33:48- 00:36:19

In contrast with the original libretto, where Giselle appears as a village girl with nothing to live for but love, it was important that we develop a more independent image of the character of Giselle. As such, dramaturgically, the concept of romantic love was only introduced within the latter half of the show. This led us to reframe the love narrative at the end of the work. By focusing the story on the Wilis, a band of women who live outside of the world Giselle inhabits, we removed Giselle from her patriarchal, heteronormative world.

Within this scene, I wanted to keep who Giselle's love interest was up for interpretation. I intended for the audience to be guessing whether she loved a man or a woman. I did not want to indicate the sex of her love interest as I wanted the character of Giselle to present as Bisexual. Unfortunately, in hindsight by not overtly indicating a love interest, or in turn the sexuality of Giselle, I acknowledge that the reading of this scene could have been heteronormative, or worse, that Giselle was insecure in her sexuality. Within the conclusion of this paper I indicate which areas I would dive deeper into for research, and this would be one of them.

Scene 8- Four Corners

Time Code: 00:36:19- 00:39:00

Within this scene we see the full group moving together as a cohesive group evoking the image of feminine power and comradeship. The goal of this scene was to portray the Wilis in the full strength of their physicality and supernatural world. We return to the same photo from the credits to indicate that a return to the beginning is eminent and to return to the forest image of the trees which is described in the libretto as being where the Wilis live and is shown in the ABT version in the scenography.

The dancers assumed agency over their soundtrack in this piece by stomping out a rhythm. This was done not to negate the use of the harp, but to create a collaborative task between the dancers who are portraying the Wilis. By stomping out the rhythm together we not only see but we hear them as a group.

The image of female solidarity within this scene is directly juxtaposed in the following scene, where the Willis are reluctantly re-set to the beginning of the piece; a reminder of the cyclical perpetuity of female oppression.

Scene 9- Redo.

Time Code: 39:00- 39:59

The cyclical narrative structure that this final scene evokes frames the cyclical oppression of women today. The moment when they are seemingly dragged back to the opening positions symbolizes how little has changed for women in their patriarchal position between 1841 and today. I intended for it to look like the Wilis would continue to live in this cycle until the cycle of oppression of women in society is broken.

CONCLUSION

Telling Giselle is a thoughtful and informed reworking of the classic ballet *Giselle*. In this thesis paper I have shown how I realigned the ideologies of the original *Giselle* storyline to align it with my feminist, queer, disabled lens. I did this by finding thematic and image *invariants* within the original storyline to root into and then expanded upon the work allowing variants to take place.

With the feminist portrayal of *Giselle* and the sisterhood of the Wilis that I established in this first iteration of my reworking, there are three areas that I would now like to expand upon. In future advancements of this work, for the purpose of deepening my research into *Giselle*, I would dig into the characters of the Mother, Albrecht, and have a larger cast. This next stage of research would foster these *invariants* from the original while continuing to entrench my ideologies into the work in the following ways:

Having *Giselle*'s mother represented within the storyline would extend the representation of complex women in the piece by adding a matriarchal presence to the storyline. In particular, I would emphasize the portrayal of a single mother (as no mention of a father is portrayed in the original libretto) to empower alternative representations of family over the traditional nuclear family.

For Albrecht, I would seek to develop an image of personal integrity. In the original work Albrecht represents social order and female oppression, however, I think there is potential for an alternative reading of the character. Specifically, if you read his character as having the desire to be seen for who he really is, then a possible coming out or Trans character could be developed through this. I would seek collaboration with an artist who identifies as Trans to flush this idea out and ensure that an authentic Trans voice was guiding this section.

I worked on this initial phase of research with five performers, but I would like to continue into further research with a cast of fifteen performers minimum. Firstly, having more bodies on stage would allow for expanded representation of womanhood through diverse bodies (Ex- age, race, ability etc.). Secondly, through this magnitude of presence on the stage, I would also expand on the idea of chorus that I touched upon in *Telling Giselle*. The multitude of individuals would allow larger scale images and formations to amplify the representation of society vs the individual.

In Chapter 1, I outlined the history of *Giselle*, indicating where in the storyline I found it oppressive as well as theorized how the cultural context of its time may have contributed to the patriarchally oppressive storyline. Chapter 2 highlighted the key points of adaptation theory drawn from the writing of Linda Hutcheon, Vida L. Midgelow, and Drako Suvin that informed my methodology for developing the performance. Through Chapter 3 I described the application of the methodologies used to create *Telling Giselle* and offered insight into the process. Finally, in Chapter 4, provided an in-depth analysis of *Telling Giselle* outlining the choices made within each scene in support the adaptation theory that informed the work.

From 1841 to today, *Giselle* has undergone countless adaptations and reworkings with endless possibilities for research on this work. As examined in this thesis, realigning the ideologies of the storyline to fit within my own resulted in *Telling Giselle*. This research has been profoundly fruitful and I look forward to continuing my investigations of reworkings and canonical counter-discourse within the field dance.

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Appendix A

Telling Giselle

February 7th- 9th
McLean Studio Theatre
8pm

Telling Giselle

Created and Curated by Patricia Allison
Music Composed and Performed by Rachel Peacock
Lighting Design by Logan Cracknell
Stage Managed by Hannah Macmillan
Costume Consultation by Kari Pederson

Created in collaboration and Performed by
Corynne Bisson
Miyeko Ferguson
Raine Kearns
Kylie Thompson
Jamee Valin

A note from the creator

Thank you for making it to *Telling Giselle* this evening.

This project fulfills the presentation requirement of my MFA in Dance at York University. These past two years of study have flown by and I have enjoyed researching the history and theory which has gone into the content and methodology of this piece.

The predominant goal of this piece was to create a work that sits in canonical counter-discourse to the original ballet by contemporizing the piece and adapting it to a dance-theatre form. This was done in response to large dance presenters who continue to produce antiquated narratives in the guise of "tradition". *Telling Giselle* is an alternative story based on the original which revises the work through a progressive feminine lens.

While this piece was created in direct conversation with its original source my hope is that it stands on its own being enjoyed even if you have no previous knowledge of the ballet.

There will be a brief talk back after the presentation and I look forward to answering your questions or hearing your thoughts.

Patricia



(Performer) **Corynne Bisson** received her undergraduate Dance degree from the University of Calgary. She began her professional arts career in Toronto three years ago. She has co-founded GALPAL Productions and has thus begun to produce, direct and choreograph dance films. She co-hosts a podcast 'Being an Artist is F**king Killing Me'. Corynne continues to actively seek out opportunities to make connections in the arts community and collaborate in as many settings as possible.



(Performer) **Miyeko Ferguson** is a Toronto based artist. In 2016, she received her BFA degree in Performance Dance from Ryerson University. She has performed works by Ohad Naharin, Chuck Wilt, Hanna Kiel, James Kudelka, Kate Hilliard, Apolonia Velasquez, Alysa Pires, David Earle, Robert Glumbek, Jera Wolfe, and Ryan Lee. Miyeko recently performed with Red Sky Performance in their world premier of *Trace* and is continuing work with Nostos Collectives and Kate Hilliard of Granite Motion Gallery.



(Performer) **Raine Kearns** is an independent dance artist, choreographer and teacher. She is a graduate of The University of Calgary's Dance program and is currently receiving her Masters Of Fine Arts in Dance York University. Raine is the co-founder of Gal Pal Productions and co-hosts a weekly podcast titled "Being an Artist is F**king Killing Me. You can catch her next on stage in *(in)dispensable by* Madison Burgess at The Commons February 15th- 17th.



(Performer) **Kylie Thompson** is originally from Barrie, Ontario. Kylie holds an honours degree in Kinesiology from McMaster University. She has performed in contemporary and commercial works by Hanna Kiel, Gadfly Dance Company, Alias Dance Project, Keren Rosenberg (IL), Mate Meszaros (HU) Marie Lambin, Ljuba Castot (US), Jennifer Mote, Vanessa Li, Rebecca Zizek and more. Her choreography has been presented at the VideoSkin Film Festival (Yukon), 40North Film Fest (San Diego, CA) Toronto Fringe, New Blue Festival and many more. Her most recent works by her company Kylie Thompson Dance presented "33/33" and "Versus" (dance film) in January 2018 at the Winchester Theatre. She is a passionate educator, having shared at over 50 studios and conventions across Canada.



(Performer) **Jamee Valin** currently works as a solo dance artist, choreographer, educator, performer and producer. Jamee trained at York University and George Brown College as well as mentored with Dreamwalker Dance Company, Across Oceans, The Chimera Project, Project CPR, MascalDance, PuSh Festival, National Artist Program and the Cultch. She has performed and choreographed for a variety of dance festivals and companies throughout Canada for more than a decade. Jamee is an avid producer of small-scale events moving dance to unconventional places. She loves her pets and dancing for Patricia!



(Stage Manager) **Hannah MacMillan** is a stage manager for dance and theatre, and frequently works in audience relations. She recently graduated from the Ryerson School of Performance Production program. Recent credits include: Assistant Stage Manager – *The Philosophers Wife* (Paradigm Productions), Apprentice Stage Manager – *The Wolves* (Howland Company/Crows Theatre) Stage Manager- *PunkRock* (Howland Company), *Hello Again* (Artillery Collective), - *String Quartet no.14 in G Major and fantasyllover* (Rock Bottom Movement), *Gray* (Theatre Inamorata). Front of House Coordinator – The Toronto Fringe Festival 2016-2018



(Creator) **Patricia Allison** won a Dora Award in 2018 for Best Director in Independent Theatre for a physical theatre piece she co-created with Jill Harper (*Pool (No Water)*). She is a choreographer based in Toronto and is currently at York University completing her MFA in Dance. Patricia graduated from L'école de danse contemporaine de Montréal in 2007 and is known as a choreographer, movement coach, and performer. She produces original work and dance films under her company LastName FirstName Productions.



(Composer) **Rachel Peacock** is completing her MA in composition at York University. Rachel holds an Honours BFA in music (York University) and an FRSA in Dramatic Arts (Rosebud School of the Arts). Winner of the 2016 York University Concerto Competition, Rachel performs as a lever harpist and as a flutist with the Toronto based flute ensemble *Flute Flight*. Rachel has worked as a composer, musician, musical director, and sound designer for numerous theatre companies including, The Canadian Badlands Passion Play, Rosebud Theatre, Pacific Theatre, Swallow-A-Bicycle Theatre, and Rosebud School of the Arts.



(Lighting Designer) **Logan Raju Cracknell** is a Toronto based Lighting Designer and graduate from York University's Theatre Production program. This season Logan will be going to the Stratford Festival as an Assistant Lighting Designer. Select lighting design credits include: *GA TING* (Next Stage Festival), *Agit Pop* (Pearle Harbour), *Judas Noir* (BDB/Obsidian), *Everyone Wants a T-Shirt* (Toronto Fringe Festival), *Silk Bath* (Toronto Fringe/Next Stage Festivals), and being the Associate LD for *Orpheus* (Against the Grain Theatre)

Gratitude

First and foremost, thank you to William Mackwood and Wesley McKenzie for going above and beyond to support this project. Thank you to Aria Evans, Lauren Runions, and Jenn Edwards who helped develop this work in its early research phases. Thank you to my parents, Jim and Liz Allison, for making this entire MFA possible. Thank you to my wife, Tamara Protic, and all of the friends and family that supported this entire team. Thank you to Megan Watson, Sebastian Oreamuno, Alison Russell who supported this project with keen insight into the work. Thank you Kari Pederson, and Lisa and Chrissy Brkich for your unconditional everything support. Finally, Thank you to my supervisor Freya Olafson for answering my 5,000 questions (and counting...)

Donate

Want to empty that annoying change out of your pocket? Have a spare \$50 bill? Well! There are two ways to support this project.

- 1) Find the duct tape jar on the sign-in table. Throw your nickels and dimes in the hole.
- 2) Find our indiegogo campaign "Telling Giselle" online! It runs until Feb 12th. Type in the following link into any web browser: <https://igg.me/at/tellinggiselle/x/992009>

100% of the donations goes directly to the cast / crew who have graciously donated their time to this research. A little goes a long way!

Appendix B- Physical Theatre Script Excerpt

Act 1- Scene 2

A kitchen. Eclectic with visible knick knacks. Mother is cooking. We hear a door creak open

Mother: Elle, is that you?

Giselle: Hi, Mom.

Mother: Oh- you never visit enough. Look at you.

Giselle: I was here on Monday.

Mother :-but look how the week has changed you. I don't even recognize you.

Giselle: Mom.

Mother: Call more. I just want to know you're safe.

Giselle: Mom.

Mother: Don't 'Mom' me. It's literally in my job description. Speaking of which I took next Tuesday off to come to your appointment.

Giselle: Why?

Mother: You shouldn't be alone.

Giselle: It's a routine check up.

Mother: A 'routine' check up for a very serious condition.

Giselle: It's a condition. Don't label it as serious.

Mother: In my day-

Giselle: Mom-

Mother: Don't "Mom" me.

Giselle: - In your day they didn't catch it as early. They catch it early now. It's less serious. I promise.

Mother: Still.

Giselle: Fine. But the only reason I'll allow this is because my therapist said I should accept support even if I feel like I don't need it, because unless it negatively affects my mental health it might be something that the other person needs to feel like they are contributing to my life and wellbeing. "Because an MS diagnosis is hard on everyone in your life"

Mother: Perfect. I'll pick you up at 9.

Giselle: I'll meet you there at 9:30.

Mother: Great. Speaking of serious conditions...how is Hillary?

Giselle: She's is fine, I think. I heard she's working down at the yards.

Mother: I saw her at the grocery store the other day. She seemed low..

Giselle: You know we're not really speaking right now.

Mother: But Elle- Hilary has been your closest friend since you were young.

Giselle: Was my closest friend. It's complicated.

Mother: Because she's obviously in love with you.

Giselle: Mom!

Mother: Ok. I deserved that one. The truth is- your Mommy and I have always thought the feeling might be mutual. And obviously- as lesbians ourselves. That is not only accepted but embraced.

Giselle: I am not having this conversation.

Mother: Elle-

Giselle: This isn't why I came here.

Mother: I just thought there are a lot of feelings here surrounding an old friend of yours who might need someone right now. A friend. As a lesbian I-

Giselle: Well. As a bi woman-

Mother: Bi?

Giselle: Yes.

Mother: Since when?

Giselle: Since always.

Mother: Now wait a minute- as lesbians-

Giselle: Exactly. As lesbians. My whole life you scoffed at anyone who identified as Bi and you said they made it up. "Pick a side" you would say.

Mother: Now that's not fair.

Giselle: It's true.

Mother: We can talk about your sexuality-

Giselle: MOM

Mother: Don't mo-

Giselle: I'm not having this conversation with you right now. It's been nice catching up.

Mother: Gis-

Giselle: I'll see you at my appointment next week. Love you. Love Mommy. Love to you all.

(exits)

Mother: Bye!

Appendix C- Three Monsters Excerpt

Telling Giselle - Act II

Scene 4

The actors switch character in-between character 1,2, and 3.

Character descriptions:

- 1- Youngest / innocent.
- 2- Middle Child/ sassy.
- 3- Oldest/ wise.

Raine: 1: The pendulum. The pendulum has swung right. And its stuck like that. Right there- do you see it? The pendulum has swung too far right. Do you see that? / Sisters. Do you see that?

Miyeko: 2: Don't concern yourself with it one way or the other.

Raine: 1: But- what's happening down there?

Jamee: 3: One way or the other, it's of no consequence to us. Like a synovial sack we move where we fit.

Miyeko: 1: Well, that's kind of dark.

Raine: 2: It's practical.

Jamee: 3: It's how we find our space in the world.

Miyeko: 1: Ugh.

Raine: 2: Now imagine if every time the pendulum swung right, we couldn't find our space to exist. Left or right. In the light of justice or none- here we are.

Jamee: 3: Come on.

Raine: 1: That's just so defeatist.

Miyeko: 2: It's actually quite heartwarming if you think about it. We sit-

Jamee: 1: In a sack of reality that cuddles into earth.

Raine: 3: Exactly.

Jamee: 1: Like a magic bag full of ghost beans.

Miyeko: 2: If you're going to put it so eloquently.

Raine: 3: Moving along helps, you know. To experience the concept instead of intellectualizing it.

Jamee: 1: That's some cult like thinking if you ask me.

Miyeko: 2: Ok. We're not going to get her to budge on this one.

Raine: 3: Ok. My dear, sit down. We- as a collective- we all hold a delicate-

Raine: 2: More like precise balance. It's more thick and hearty than delicate.

Jamee: 3: Collecting together one by one until we smash through to a higher level of understanding.

Raine: 1: This is so archaic. A weird pack of ghosts destined to dance slowly until the world gets it?

Miyeko: 2: Well- exactly. Its literally an ancient practise. We'll get there. Eventually.

Jamee: 3: Do you remember way back. When I was down there. Or over there- depending on where we were at the time. In having the soft energy, the fluid, the feminine all I was pursued by a god like being- or a god type thing before humans forgot their inner energy.

Raine: 1: "Inner energy"? This sounds like a puberty ad.

Jamee: 3: It's the language. We're processing in English, the heavens knows why (*slow look to audience*), and it's the language that limits us in our vocabulary. But to my point- remember when this god, thing, masculine type in trying to woo me-

Raine: 1: 'Woo me'?

Miyeko: 3: You know what I mean. In trying to take my hand in marriage they gave me the gift of prophesy. And there it was- everything that would happen. From where I was standing in time and space to- forever. And definitely through this moment of time. But when I refused him again- it was an obvious attempt to use his power to control me. I knew the moment it happened that if he was willing to give such gifts- unprovoked and unwanted- what would he be capable of destroying that I did desire? Where I had intended to go. Well. In that last refusal of him, I saw the answer. Removing the gift? Wiping my memory clean? No. That no human would believe a word I told them. "Your son is going to crash in transport today?" was meet with laughs. "The

jack pot and riches beyond your wildest dreams is in the other box.”- anger that I would be deceitful. “He took my agency and free will and sold it to the fates for revenge.”- you’re just looking for attention.

Jamee: 1: Sister.

Miyeko: 3: Don’t sister me. You see me. You hear me. You know me. For now, that’s all I need to keep moving.

Raine: 2: What a stupid trick on his part. The energy expended in pulling you down is the exact energy that will propel forward. It’s to his disservice that he gave you the supply to undo him.

Jamee: 3: Slowly. One day.