Creating Contemporary Choreography through the Post-Traumatic Lens

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ABSTRACT

Creating contemporary choreography through the posttraumatic lens

As a professional Canadian dancer-choreographer, I have recently observed unpremeditated elements of dissociation arising in my choreography. This has led me to question the possible links between my history of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and my recent choreographic practice, and to speculate on how the embodiment of trauma as a material-generating source and a lens for staging dances may inform the choreographic praxis. My practice-based Master of Fine Arts research focused on developing and analysing my choreography from a PTSD point of view. Over the course of three distinct creative processes, I have tracked emerging insight on the potential and pitfalls inherent to developing choreography from places of traumatic memory, and how those vary from context to context in regards to performers' level of training and group sizes. This led me to devise what I now understand to be the basic constants of trauma-based choreography and its necessary considerations.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Personal Context

I have now lived with the aftereffects of psychological trauma for ten years. I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) a full fifteen months after the overlapping events that traumatised me had come to a rest. At that point, I consulted a mental health professional for complications I was experiencing in developing new personal relationships. The *DSM-5*, the latest edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, identifies "the trigger to PTSD as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation […] The disturbance, regardless of its trigger, causes clinically significant distress or impairment in the individual's social interactions, capacity to work or other important areas of functioning".

The PTSD diagnosis came as a relief. During the period between the traumatic incidents and the diagnosis, I had felt detached, depressed, misunderstood, judged, unable to relate, emotionally unstable, physically dissociated. It was reassuring to hear that, contrary to what I had burdened myself with believing, it was not "my fault". I had not been manufacturing my feelings and behaviour for self-destructive purposes, but rather had simply been suffering from a condition also affecting countless others. With the help of a cognitive-behavioural therapist, I learned to make new sense out of life moving forward.

That is until recently. As a dancer-choreographer by profession, I began to notice elements suggestive of dissociative states arising in my choreography. Dissociation is a

common post-traumatic symptom from which I used to suffer, characterized by “feeling detached from one’s own mind or body, or experiences in which the world seems unreal, dreamlike or distorted” (American Psychiatric Association). This led me to question the possible links between my history of PTSD and the changes in my recent artistic practice.

It is important to note that it was not the traumatic events themselves that appeared to manifest in my choreographic work, but rather my long repressed post-traumatic symptoms. As such, it was deemed unnecessary in this context to provide further information on the nature of those events.

1.2 Choreographic Context

A dancer in the last months of my professional training at the time of the incidents, the trauma had a significant impact on my physical performance. I experienced a noticeable technical regression due to, among other things, a loss of proprioception, a sudden weight fluctuation, a shift in my centre of gravity and the inability to concentrate. Prospective employers lost interest in me as a result. This was devastating at the time, because I had trained for a career as a performer since childhood, and did not understand what was happening to my body. My psychological distress was aggravated by the fact that I was now being treated as though I had been regressing out of laziness by people influential in the Toronto dance milieu who used to praise me. This destroyed my confidence as a performer, and to this day, I feel the somatic repercussions of what happened to me then. Knowing that dance remained my

way of existing in the world in spite of it all, I went back to the drawing board and recovered professionally in the following years by focusing on choreography instead of performance. I went on to create a contemporary dance company, *Forcier Stage Works* (FSW). FSW employs a returning group of collaborators on a project-to-project basis and performs my choreography as the core of its programming.

During my early years of developing as a professional dance creator, my aesthetic preferences were strongly based in athletic movement, which I approached from a mechanical standpoint. Creatively back then, I was little concerned with states: those particular mental conditions of being that affect the quality, the physical origin and the very purpose of human movement; those particular mental conditions of being that add essence to a performance.

Compositionally, I prioritized structure over malleability; I created technically polished works and directed dancers in ways that ensured exact duplication. My creative means were more directorial than collaborative; I did not provide the dancers with a lot of freedom to follow their impulses, in process or in performance. Everything was calculated, rigid and exact; in hindsight, this was somewhat a reflection of the control issues I was experiencing in my personal post-traumatic life. I worked in hierarchical ways, in the tradition established by ballet, at a time when the creative trend in Western contemporary choreography was established as a democratic platform — dancers were invited to co-create with choreographers.

This style predominated in my work until the summer of 2011 when, lacking inspiration, I recognized that I had been stagnating creatively and had reached a

developmental plateau career-wise. To remedy my lingering sense of professional stagnation, I challenged myself with a project revolving around the creation of solo pieces, the form for which I feel the least natural affinity. As a result, I began to create a series of one-person studies as part of the initial developmental phase for a new full-length group work, eventually titled *Lab Rats*.

Following my usual creative habits, I initiated the first of these studies with an output of technical movement that followed musical structure. Two or three days into the creative process, I had an uncharacteristic moment of clarity about my work while watching my dancer rehearse. My choreography revealed itself through a new lens, as though I was seeing it clearly for the first time. I saw it as a *forced* expanse of energy, executed with no impetus other than obeying a randomly imposed set of physical rules. In processing this new perspective, I recognized that my body of choreography up to then had been little more than an exercise in virtuosity designed to impress, while devoid of genuine communicative substance.

In response to that artistic epiphany, over the following eighteen months, I went on in my studio work to create the remaining choreography, dramaturgical arc and staging of *Lab Rats*, this time experimenting with creative methods that encouraged the expression of my dancers' and my own instincts within an established frame. I found it surprisingly natural to trust my unconscious mind's suggestions.

The experiment resulted in a creatively freer work; a work lucid enough for me to discern elements of PTSD when I first saw it performed. For example, in one section, the dancers looked straight through the audience with a vacant focus while performing

the physical movement. This was breaking the established choreographic convention where the dancer's eye is trained to go where the body goes. In watching my dancers, I realized that I had directed them to perform dissociative states characterized by this vacant focus.

In the winter of 2013, shortly after the professional presentation of *Lab Rats,* I was back into a creative process for a new piece, working on *Portraiture/Wreckage* as part of my academic MFA course work. After being in the studio for less than a week with my dancers, undergrad students involved in the York Dance Ensemble, I noticed that my choreographic practice was insisting on guiding them to perform dissociative states. Without premeditation, I was repeating certain of the directorial demands I had placed on my dancers in *Lab Rats.*

In retrospect, I seemed bent on staging dissonance. Although I was aware that I was carrying imagery over from one creative project to the next, which I usually think of as being unoriginal artistically, the impetus was too strong for me to set aside. More specifically, drawing from *Lab Rats*, I was striving to repeat the same type of visual disconnection with one's own moving body and environment. I was also punctuating eerily calm energy with bursts of violent action over the course of *Lab Rats*: another insistent choreographic pattern.

A few days after presenting *Portraiture/Wreckage*, I was back in creative process, again for a course assignment, with new undergrad student dancers. For *Pool Party,* I deliberately chose to direct the dancers to perform dissociative states. I staged the action among a series of large inflatable props and guided the dancers to interact with

their props and one another by focusing on an unstated purpose, in visually vacant ways. I was compelled to investigate this new choreographic direction in a less intuitive, more thought-out way. By this point, I knew with growing certitude that my experience of trauma and PTSD had been seeping through in my work, and my creative instincts compelled me to let the phenomenon happen and to consciously develop it as far as I could take it artistically. While I found it challenging to guide dancers to perform dissociation, I was truly interested in the aesthetic dissonance it could create for the viewer. By the end of the creative process for this new piece, I had made the decision to dedicate my MFA thesis investigation to the expression of PTSD through contemporary choreography.

Since surviving trauma changes one's outlook on life, how does it affect the choreographer's work? Publications such as Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* investigate works of literature, performance art and music as archives of trauma, or investigate the impact of childhood trauma on the artist's work, as does Lenore Terr's *Too Scared to Cry*. However, as far as I know, there has been no research on the effects of psychological trauma on a contemporary choreographer's work.

1.3 Methodology

Throughout the summer of 2013, in preparation for my practical research, I consulted a number of publications on psychological trauma, varying the sources and disciplines as much as possible in order to get a comprehensive picture of the work being done in the field. This enabled me to make comparisons, and to recognize the

symptoms of PTSD most closely related to what I had been noticing in my own choreography.

This literature review also enabled me to identify the disciplines and theories most pertinent to the exploration I was interested in pursuing creatively, narrowing a massive body of work down to the elements most relevant to my creative drive.

I realized from the onset that the focus of my investigation did not rest on the contributions made by dance therapy. Expressive arts therapy is incontestably valuable in theory and in practice — I agree with professional dancer and expressive arts therapist Daria Halprin when she proclaims “When we work on something in our art (whether a dance, drawing, poem, or performance), we are also working on something in our lives” (Halprin, 20). However, it became obvious through my readings that the questions I wanted to answer academically were concerned with the use of PTSD as a lens for staging dances, and not with the investigation of choreography, whether in creation, performance, or viewing, as a means to achieve catharsis. The dividing line between the *deeply personal* and the *artistically universal* is very thin, and it is important for me as a creator not to tip over the edge where artistic expression plummets towards self-indulgence. I had no interest in forcing my audience to voyeuristically witness a personal breakthrough; that would be a selfish act and, to me, art should foremost be an altruistic act. So, rather than helping me find commonalities between dance therapy exercises and choreographic methodologies to develop a hybrid form, my readings helped me refine my understanding of psychological trauma’s effects on the mind and body to create informed choreographic worlds. This theoretical knowledge, paired with ten years of my own post-traumatic somatic embodiment turned out to be the choreographic fuel for *Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely*, *Levity as IN*

(absentia) and *The Snow Globe*.

In this paper, I outline creative processes for these three pieces and within each, the discoveries I have made in regards to my own artistry and to the various ways in which the embodiment of PTSD can be used to generate choreographic meaning. More specifically, from my practice-based research for *Little Guidebook,* I expand on the work's intent, my creative trajectory, the use of text as a choreographic element, the juxtaposition of culturally dissonant ideas and the interconnection of choreography and performance in autobiographical work.

From my experience with *Levity as IN (absentia)*, I elaborate on the original piece's creation context, on the challenges in recreating existing work, on the presentation context and on the use of strong signifiers in choreography. Finally, I discuss *The Snow Globe*'s point of departure, my creative path and its chronology, the use of the vertical space in a proscenium environment and the challenges inherent to developing state-based works with student performers.

CREATIVE PROCESS

2.1 Autobiographic Solo: *Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely*

2.1.1 Intent and Content

I was reading the work of Dr. Stephen Joseph on Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) towards the beginning of September 2013. A relatively new school of thought in positive psychology, PTG suggests that trauma survivors may, once their symptoms of PTSD have stabilized, experience psychological growth following adversity (Joseph, 14). I found his research to be uplifting, exposing the shinier flipside of an otherwise very dark coin, without falling into the self-help genre's clichés. From my perspective, publications of the self-help genre are a money-grab, filled with motivational lingo without a research base, and catering to impressionable people desperate for a pick me up. For example, in his best seller, *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle declares: "If you cannot be present even in normal circumstances, such as when you are sitting alone in a room, walking in the woods, or listening to someone, then you certainly won't be able to stay conscious when something "goes wrong"(47). In practical terms, what does he mean by "being present"? To the person suffering from dissociative symptoms, to be "present" is infinitely more complex than Tolle makes it out to be, and his generalization comes across as inconsiderate and misinformed.

I entered the process for my autobiographic solo with the concept of PTG and personal reflections on the unfortunate marketability of self-help publications in mind.

As its title foreshadows*, Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely*, the resulting ten-minute work, was ironic in tone and integrated culturally dissonant ideas. Conceptually, the work unfolds as a character, closely moulded on myself, embarks on a journey towards healing her PTSD, guided by a self-help audiobook narrator. As the character struggles to find peace through the book's step-by-step program and falls apart, it becomes obvious that the suggestion that individuals can heal the after-effects of trauma through generic and impersonal formulas is an emotionally dangerous and socially irresponsible idea. In terms of genre, the work was based in dark humour within a Western contemporary dance framework.

2.1.2 A Shift in Creative Process Trajectory

2.1.2.1 Context.

Up until that point, the creation of my dances had started in the studio with a purely chance-based improvisation, from which insistent or revelatory elements would emerge. I would enter the creative process from a somatic rather than intellectual point, never really knowing what my work was going to be about. My theme would reveal itself over the course of that somatic improvisation, when the movement I was producing sparked an idea; the structure would develop from there. In other words, traditionally for me, somatic elements came first, content and structure, second.

2.1.2.2 Trajectory for this solo

With this piece, uncharacteristically, my idea for the structure and content emerged *before* I entered the studio. As previously mentioned, it was sparked while I was reading *What Doesn't Kill Us*, Dr. Stephen Joseph's work on PTG.

I started with scripting my fictional self-help audiobook (see Appendix A: *Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely:* Script), then hired a voice-over actor to record the lines overtop a new-age musical score by composer James Bunton. Once in the studio, within that pre-set musical score and dramaturgical plot, the movement flowed out of me almost automatically and the piece was choreographed in a very short amount of time.

Upon reflection, I realize that the movement came lucidly and naturally because I was moving from a lived theme. It was simply the physical expression of what had been kinaesthetically stored and intimately known for years. In retrospect, I realize that contrary to what I had initially believed when noticing my uncharacteristic creative chronology for this work, it was not unfolding in reverse but rather following its usual "somatic elements first–structure second" pattern. The difference was that this time, a new phase preceded the two others: from the somatic in the incubation of a lived state, to the idea and structure for the work, to the somatic again in the creative investigation.

2.1.3 Using Text as a Choreographic Element

Text in choreography is, in my opinion, a risky pass-or-fail element: either really successful or completely detrimental to a work. Since it was essential to the execution of my audiobook idea, I decided to use the spoken word, although I found it risky.

I do not have much experience working with the medium as a choreographer, but since the use of text has been a trend in Western contemporary dance over the last decade or so, I have witnessed a great number of instances when it was used as a choreographic feature. From this exposure to other creators' work, and my own trials and errors, I have come to recognize that, to meet my compositional preferences, text in

choreography needs to follow two basic rules. Firstly, it must be composed in prose since contemporary dance's high level of abstraction is stronger when contrasted with concrete ideas than when washed out with yet more abstract information. For example, at one point in *Lab Rats*, a performer, while manipulating another in various ways asked: "Does this hurt?" It was a very straightforward question and its clarity enhanced the movement: it contextualized the action for the audience and reinforced the movement's purpose, however abstract it was independently.

Secondly, since text generally sounds forced or flat when performed by an exclusively movement-trained dancer, its delivery must come from someone with theatrical training.

I followed those two basic rules when designing the structure for my audio book. I kept the narrator's statements short, in the imperative mode, and action based, creating context for the audience to follow the character's journey along, and I hired Andrew Nolan, a trained film and theatre actor, to record the lines. It was important for me that the narration be performed by a male voice, to clearly establish that it was not coming from the female character herself.

When I finally entered the studio armed with my recorded script, I found that the text's signification helped with guiding my physical exploration. I also identified, later in the rehearsal process once the piece was set, that, to me, spoken word is most powerful in choreography when involved in a cause-and-effect kinaesthetic relationship with the dance, i.e. when the dancer's movement comes as a kinaesthetic reaction to the text. Contrary to instances where the physical movement attempts to match the text's rhythm or to recreate the text's meaning in a lyrical manner, this type of relationship gives an interactive and organic purpose to both elements.

2.1.4 Juxtaposing Dissonant Ideas: Exploiting the emotional paradox

2.1.4.1 Combining Humour and Trauma

My first inclination was to take a humorous angle for the work; certainly an ironic one, but humorous nonetheless. I drew from my 2012 experience in clown work with Dean Gilmour, when we identified that "falling apart" was my clown's main characteristic, to shape the *Little Guidebook* character's reactions to the text and to build the work's arch[1]. I did not analyse my instinct to go in that direction until PhD candidate Cheryl LaFrance, in whose research on the dance artist's writing process I have been participating, asked me whether using humour was a reflection of my own day-to-day coping mechanisms in response to PTSD. Upon introspection, I realized that it is. Despite not having the ability to be completely objective in the matter, I recognize that in most social situations, I tend to play the clown to keep my depressive tendencies in check or diffuse tension. When analysing *2.5 Minute Ride,* American performance artist Lisa Kron's work on generationally transmitted Holocaust-related trauma, Ann Cvetkovich (25) reminds us that "humor is much easier than tears, and while it often seems to displace other emotions, it would be more accurate to see it as a way of expressing what cannot be expressed otherwise." Realizing this only confirmed for me that I was taking the right direction with *Little Guidebook*, answering, on yet another level, the autobiographical component of the assignment.

I believe that in any performing art, there is much power in the juxtaposition of comedic and tragic moments. It creates moral and emotional dissonance for an audience: they have allowed themselves to laugh at or with a character before his/her underlying sorrowful reality is revealed. They now have to pause and re-consider their

[1] York University, Department of Dance, Clown Workshop by Dean Gilmour, October 2012.

values in the face of that dissonant reaction. This reflection holds them responsible for their experience, engaging them more deeply in a given work. According to Cvetkovich, when employed to address a traumatic topic, “humor can seem especially taboo or transgressive”; culturally, when reacting to others’ trauma, there is an expectation for appropriate emotional reactions (Cvetkovich, 26), hence the dissonance of humour-trauma and its inherent artistic power.

2.1.4.2 Superimposing Beauty and Sorrow

I believe that dissonance is created with much the same force when beauty and trauma are juxtaposed, a pairing equally subject to an expectation for appropriate affects. How conflicting is it for audience members to allow themselves the positive feelings that come with experiencing beauty when the core of what they are witnessing is traumatic in essence and involves another human being’s distress?

Such juxtaposition takes contrast to an extreme as a compositional element, at the very least in the emotional range, perhaps explaining the synergy that beauty and sadness create when combined. Choreographically, contrast has always been a compositional strategy of choice for me, and I certainly capitalized on it when creating *Little Guidebook*. Wearing a simple yet airy and light coloured costume while performing states of fear, helplessness and violence, and standing under a confetti shower while uncomfortably forcing a smile to the point of tears were two instances where I exploited a clear beauty-sorrow contrast in the work.

2.1.4.3 Playing with the Flux of Awareness

Adding to the overall sense of contrast and tonal instability in the piece, my character was constantly shifting on the scale of awareness. She went back and forth between retreating to her inner world, a dissociative manifestation, and focusing

externally on a part of her body or environment. This type of flux could have created confusion for the viewer, but I thought it was very successful, its unpredictability as compelling as a ticking bomb. The key to this success was, I believe, the embodied fashion with which I executed this awareness flux. I know from experience what it feels like to dissociate, to mentally fluctuate from presence to absence in uncontrollable ways. I was simply kinaesthetically amplifying a known feeling until it was perceptible through movement.

2.1.5 Choreography and performance of dissociative states

In a context like this one where the choreographer is also the performer, and where the work is heavily state-based and autobiographical in nature, the distinction between the task of choreography and performance is perhaps impossible to make. I certainly felt as though I had to be in performance mode in the studio while generating movement. For curiosity, fear, confusion, frustration and dissociation to come across, I needed to genuinely put myself through those states before they could literally move me. In a sense, being in a state of performance while in process was necessary to generate PTSD related material.

Of all the processes I have undertaken as a choreographer over the course of my career, this one was by far the quickest to produce a satisfactory work. In comparison with my experience in the studio for previous works, the movement here flowed straight out of me and I knew almost instantaneously whether it was right or wrong for the work; a significantly larger-than-normal proportion of my initial material output was actually used in the final product. I attribute this phenomenon to the fact that my body had been internalizing those states for a decade by the time I reached the studio, developing an

intimate kinaesthetic understanding of their nature and subtleties over time. My movement-generating process was simply an externalization and amplification of that long repressed kinaesthetic knowledge. Because the journey was largely internal and intimate, I decided to work on my own, without an outside eye.

I divided the work into sections, the choreographic content in reaction to the punctuation of the audiobook narrator's guiding commentary. I found that each section recruited a different emotional state, and I was able to identify in my body where those various aspects of trauma were being hosted. For example, a section about confronting triggers activated superficially: the surface of my skin tingled, and I followed my instinct to let that part of my body initiate the movement. The creative writing I did immediately following my performances of the work as per Cheryl LaFrance's suggestion reflect those sensations (Appendix C: Creative writing following a *Little Guidebook* performance).

In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud wrote: "We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli." (Cvetkovich, 49) An extremely tactile being from birth, most of the events that traumatized me had to do with being touched in invasive ways. To speculate that being exposed to triggers, even representationally in performance, activates nerve endings along my skin because it was a site of aggression is rather logical. I utilized those bodily trauma-host sites in creation just as much as in performance; for me, they were essential to the integrity of the work just as much as its compositional structure.

By the time I presented *Little Guidebook* to an audience, subjecting myself to the required emotional range felt controllable and safe, largely because I had approached

the creative process as a performer and by then had confirmed that I was able to get through it repeatedly without breaking down. Moreover, performing material that I had recognized to be an authentic physical trace of my PTSD appeared to increase my confidence on stage. Being the sole bearer of my own somatic history, I was convinced of my work's validity beyond doubt. My usual insecurities surrounding my performance skills were almost entirely gone. In terms of practice, this was self-affirming.

2.2 Off-campus self-production: *Levity as IN (absentia)*

2.2.1 Intent and Content

Part of my interest in investigating the expression of trauma in choreography has to do with learning how to identify the PTSD-related elements of a work and devise strategies to frame them in a more poignant way.

To foster develop those abilities, I decided to dedicate the self-presented component of my research to reworking a pre-existing piece in my repertoire, with the intent to extract and distil its underlying essence of PTSD.

The duet I selected has had several incarnations since its inception in February 2013. Originally titled *Portraiture/ Wreckage* and developed on two dancers from the York Dance Ensemble, the seven-minute piece had Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* for a departure point. As mentioned before, the creative process for *Portraiture/ Wreckage* played a significant role in helping me realize how trauma-related imagery was insisting in my choreographic practice.

The piece was remounted professionally with a new cast three months after its initial presentation, for Anandam Dancetheatre's May 2013 *Dance Party Series* at Toronto's Collective Space. I kept one of the original dancers, Justine Comfort, who by that point had become an emerging professional, and replaced the other by a Forcier Stage Works dancer, Heather MacPhail. The original work was re-choreographed to accommodate the presentation venue's architectural specificities. Indeed, Collective Space's stage walls meet the dance floor at a generous curve, rather than at a traditional 90º angle. This unique feature allowed me to explore verticality in the remount, the dancers climbing up the curve aiming for unattainable heights until gravity

inevitably forced them to slide back down. In light of those changes, I retitled the now ten-minute adapted piece *Levity as IN*.

In August 2013, the piece was altered yet again to be included as part of the *SummerWorks Festival,* at Hub 14. This time, having kept the same cast, the remount process occurred over the course of a single afternoon and the choreography remained essentially the same, aside from interacting with the venue's traditionally 90º-angled walls.

This latest version is the one that I utilized as the base work for my research; from which I extracted and reworked the trauma-related choreographic components towards the creation of a "new" work: *Levity as IN (absentia)*.

2.2.2 Presentation context

When deciding to take this investigative approach for my self-presented work, I was aware that, by reworking the minute details of a ten-minute piece, my finished product was likely to be short in duration. Knowing how time-consuming commuting can be and how busy people tend to get in the city, I was not too keen on asking audiences to invest their travel time for a ten-minute artistic payoff.

At the same time, as the co-director of Hub 14, an artist-run live arts incubator and presenter, I had a fully subsidized rehearsal and performance space at my disposal for up to 200 hours, well in excess of what my needs were going to be for re-creating and presenting *Levity as IN.*

With those two factors in mind, I decided to present my research as part of a full length mixed program entitled *IN absentia*. In Latin, *IN absentia* signifies "while not present at the event being referred to". Somewhat summarizing the idea of dissociative

states in performance, it seemed like a fitting title to represent my research. My presentation format decision was also made in accordance with my professional and social values. Indeed, progressively for years but more insistently since 2012, I have been reflecting upon my beliefs and objectives as a dance professional and member of the artistic community. Among other pursuits, my desire to facilitate the presentation of deserving artists' work and my desire to help integrate the emerging generation of dancers into the professional world stand out with clarity.

Therefore, when curating my mixed program, I approached creators of diverse levels of choreographic experience whose work communally reflected a large stylistic range within the contemporary genre. This resulted in a dynamic line up: alongside my own work was presented those of emerging choreographer Miles Gosse (*Half Second Echo)*, emerging choreographer/established dancer Heather MacPhail, established dance artist Lucy Rupert (*Blue Ceiling Dance*) and established multidisciplinary artist Brandy Leary (*Anandam Dancetheatre*).

The presentation was scheduled for November 20-22, 2013, at *Hub 14,* the space I co-direct in downtown Toronto. *Hub 14's* studio is an intimate venue with a seating capacity of 30. With interesting architectural detailing, such as an old-fashioned bright red radiator, two doors on a single wall and a stained glass shutter window, it can be used either as a site-specific or a traditional performance environment. In exchange for presenting their work, the artists received free rehearsal space and an even split of the box office revenue; the proceeds were entirely redistributed to the curated artists. To disseminate the event, I printed posters, ran a social media campaign and gave a radio interview to Evi-Dance (CIUT, November 9th 2013). (see Appendix I)

2.2.3 Creative process: another chronologically irregular process

As it did in the process for *Little Guidebook*, but for different reasons, my creative trajectory for making *Levity as IN (absentia)* happened in a different order to my usual somatic-exploration-first, structure-building-second ways. Because my departure point here was a fully formed work as opposed to an idea or kinaesthetic itch, to draw a visual arts analogy, I like to think of this second creative process as the re-carving of a rotund sculpture as opposed to the painting of a blank canvas.

Indeed, in the first phase of this process, I worked mostly by removal. The dancers would run the piece through several times and, between each completion, I would remove one or two elements towards which I felt neutral. With each run-through, I got a new sense of the remaining elements' interaction, re-arranging what I saw in consequence, experimenting with variations in focus, intention, dynamics, etc. Then I would run the piece again, and remove, and re-arrange some more. I did so until all of the original choreography's cluttering and irrelevant material had been stripped off, leaving exclusively the post-traumatic state-evoking elements. There was very little left of the original work by the end of this phase; mostly images, like a photographic trace. In retrospect, I find it interesting that the snapshot-like remains of my original piece appeared much like the flash back memories I experienced in the months following my trauma.

From those remaining images, the next task was to rebuild the work. The idea for a unifying thread did not come naturally, I suspect because of a multitude of complicating factors, two of which I will further elaborate in the sub-section 3.5 below, *Challenges inherent to this particular process*.

Facing this creative block, my instinct was to return to my earlier way of working, trying to find my answer from somatic improvisation. Although I successfully generated a new bank of relevant movement by doing so, my unifying spine for the work was still lacking. I spent much time experimenting with the idea of a music box for a through line, with unsatisfactory results. As the time passed, this became a problem because I was at the mercy of the dancers' restricted availability for rehearsal time.

This forced me to do a significant amount of the work on my own, making notes and developing ideas from rehearsal video-recordings. It was at home, between two working sessions, that I realized how the piece's movement vocabulary was suggestive of burials. From there, a vision involving using actual soil started developing; I could project how incorporating earth as a prop would allow the work's key undertones of violence and dissociation to truly resonate. Aware that prominent choreographers, such as Pina Bausch in her *Le Sacre du printemps*, had used dirt as a component of their work, I wanted to use the material to convey something unexpected: the violent suppression of another being.

When I added soil to the choreography at the next rehearsal, the work's elements started falling into place. From that moment on, much like in the process for *Little Guidebook*, the piece came together rather quickly.

2.2.4. Triggering kinaesthetic empathy and reinforcing emotional dissonance

2.2.4.1 Casting

My casting choices for this work stemmed from part-convenient, part-experimental, and part-calculated reasons. Convenient, because choosing to keep Justine, one of the *Portraiture/Wreckage* original dancers, meant that I would have direct

access to the original material from her embodied archive. Experimental, because having developed an interest in her as an emerging dancer over the course of the previous year, I would get to test out whether she could work with my company's performers. Lastly, calculated, because by putting her together with Heather MacPhail, I would have a pair of eerily similar-looking dancers to work with. Indeed, the two of them share comparable physical features: same blue eye colour, same dirty blond shade of hair and same physical height; they even share a similar movement signature. I figured that working with dancers who look related would make the viewer anticipate seeing a mutual display of care coming from them. I consciously strategized with this evolutionary expectation when re-creating the piece: the dancers' physical similarities amplified the dissonant effects of violence and dissociation in the choreography, creating a greater emotional incongruity for the audience.

2.2.4.2 Violence

I also paid specific attention to the way I used violence in the work, alternating between aggressive and passive expressions of force in order to generate a post-traumatic-like atmosphere of instability. Psychological trauma often stems from being the victim or witness of a violent situation, whether premeditated or accidental, and haunting images of violence populate the PTSD sufferer's cognitive landscape as an aftereffect (Joseph, Williams & Yule). Choreographically, I could not imagine creating a work in the context of my research on PTSD without violent references, either actualized or implied.

This climaxed in *Levity as IN (absentia)* when I pushed the perceptible limits of physical comfort. I directed the dominant dancer to cover her inactive and supine counterpart's face with dirt, and to press down on the accumulating soil in an attempt at

suffocation. Of course, this was performed safely and with the dancers' agreement, but the effect was visually disturbing.

2.2.4.3 Organic Prop with Sacred Connotation

Working with the dirt brought an organic dimension to the work, which helped ground the choreography in a tangible, familiar environment for the audience. My intention was to reinforce the idea that post-traumatic states, although portrayed here through art, are part of our actual reality. Furthermore, the dirt as a focal point created a solemn context for *Levity as IN (absentia)*. Corporeal, it brought the idea of a burial to the forefront and invested the piece's pre-existing violent imagery with ritualistic connotations surrounding suffocation and death.

2.2.5 Challenges Inherent to this Particular Process

Out of the three choreographic projects I developed as part of this research, I found this particular one to be the most challenging. Retrospectively, I suspect that this was due to four major obstacles.

Firstly, I found that generating a new work out of a pre-existing one gave me problems of perspective. Because I had been conditioned over time to see *Levity as IN* a certain way, it was difficult to distinguish whether I was holding on to certain elements because they supported my intention or because I had learned to see them positively from familiarity. I also was faced with blockages when imagining alternative arrangements for the material during the reconstruction process, conditioned to see it as part of the original, now deconstructed, progression. Visualizing "what comes next" did not occur with the ease I have gotten used to during my years as a creator.

Secondly, I have a long creative history with Hub 14, a complicating factor that I had not taken into consideration when first choosing the production venue. That put me in a strange situation: I had to create my new work in an environment with heavy connotations. Indeed, aside from administrating the Hub 14 on a continuous basis, I had choreographed *Lab Rats,* an integrally site-related work, on the premises a mere few months prior to this new process. Although having a creative home is normally creatively beneficial for me, in a context like this one where my home was serving as a base for choreographic development for the second time in a year, it created blockages: my perception of the space and how I could use it to frame work had lost some of its neutrality.

Thirdly, working with two performers of divergent experience levels added complexity to my directorial task. While Heather, the more mature of the two, had developed the necessary confidence to bring her own individuality to the research, leading to her genuine embodiment of the required dissociative state, Justine had not, and was still exhibiting a tendency to apply my directives literally, a vestige of her recent training as a dance student. As a consequence, I had to direct them from two different entry points, making it harder for the three of us to develop a shared understanding of the piece's essence and their task within it.

Lastly and most significantly, I struggled with remaining creatively focused while simultaneously playing a producer's role. Producing an event is time consuming and stressful, and those two factors impaired me creatively. However, having been in this position several times in my professional past, this did not come as a surprise. Familiar with the overwhelming feeling that comes with producing a show, I was able to cope and finish my work, albeit not at an optimal depth of creative involvement.

2.3 Proscenium group work: *The Snow Globe*

2.3.1 Intent and Content

2.3.1.1 Casting

For my final choreographic process, I worked with undergraduate dance students from the York Dance Ensemble (YDE). When, in July, 2013, the YDE's Artistic Director Professor Holly Small approached me to propose that I create my proscenium piece on the young members of the company, I agreed immediately. Although I understood that working with students would require different considerations and choreographic sensitivities on my part, I thought that the proposed exchange was fitting for my situation and conducive to my development. Not only would I get to rehearse on campus, which was convenient for me both geographically and financially, I would also get to refine my knowledge-facilitating skills, directing higher education courses being a long-term goal of mine. The following September, by audition and through consultation with Professor Small, I selected six dancers based on their technical abilities and apparent stage presence.

2.3.1.2 Original creative intention

My initial intention for this work was to look at trauma from the collective angle. It is estimated that 75% of all people will experience some form of trauma over the course of their lives (Joseph, 21). In light of that statistic, and because I had a relatively large group of performers at my disposal, I was interested in exposing the universality of trauma through choreography.

About half way through the process, I admitted to myself that the material I was generating felt fake and misinformed. I realized almost instantaneously that this was due

to my lack of first-hand knowledge about my intended topic. Having never personally experienced or witnessed *collective* trauma, I did not have enough insight to contribute to a cohesive choreographic statement. Upon further reflection, I discerned that, although experiencing trauma *is* something of a universal phenomenon, it is never a collective affair. Whereas a single event can traumatize many, the traces that it leaves behind and the ways those manifest differ from one surviving individual to the next. Throughout their book *Understanding Post-traumatic Stress: a psychological perspective on PTSD and Treatment,* Stephen Joseph, Ruth Williams and William Yule expose the multitude of different degrees to which the survivors of the 1987 *Herald of Free Enterprise* ferry capsizing experienced PTSD, although they had all survived the exact same accident.

My own experience of trauma certainly unfolded in a place of deep isolation, at the antipodes of “the collective”. So drawing from this known experience to create an honest and congruent work for the proscenium stage made better sense. In order to achieve that and reveal the isolated reality brought upon by PTSD, I re-contextualized my previously developed material. I made one of the dancers the piece’s protagonist, directing her to relate to her environment from a different state of awareness than her counterparts. I wanted to expose the survivor’s perceived inability to relate to her surrounding world, in this case the other dancers, post-trauma.

2.3.1.3 Revealed creative intention

Even with this change, the piece was not working for me. I will elaborate upon how I got to and out of this place in the following Creative Process section (4.2). Very near the end of my process, when I was still struggling to find my work’s spine, the element that would bind and contextualize everything else, like the dirt did for *Levity as*

IN (absentia), I fell upon a section of Joseph's *What doesn't kill us* that I had highlighted during the summer and had since forgotten about. On page 22, Joseph talks about how, following trauma, the mind is overwhelmed, the body in shock, and draws the following analogy for the phenomenon: "Imagine a Christmas snow globe. Shake it and the snow flurries. Over time, it settles. How long the snow remains unsettled depends on how vigorously the globe was shaken in the first place. So it is, with the trauma that shakes up our mental world." Having been planning on using softly falling theatrical snow as a feature of the work for months without quite knowing why besides following my instinctual vision, I now had my answer: I had been choreographing the insides of that snow globe. There was my work's spine, its revealed intention.

2.3.2 Movement generating process: a return to my initial creative chronology

In terms of developing the movement for the piece, when I first started rehearsing with my cast, I used my habitual somatic-exploration-first creative strategy. I did so mostly so that I could get better acquainted with the dancers' abilities and individual learning processes. I discovered early on that those young dancers' strengths were based in their technique. To be time efficient and capitalize on their abilities, I first developed movement-based vocabulary, creating sequences of movement in duets, trios and quartets. This choice was in line with the ones I had previously made when creating student works with successful results; I thought it was calculated and smart in this setting.

Unfortunately, the work I created through that approach left me neutral when I watched it from the audience during a mid-process on-stage showing. Although

compositionally valid, what I had created thus far did not relate to my research in any informative way, and that was upsetting to me.

On the positive side, seeing the work from the audience's vantage point allowed me to discover that I could afford choreographing with smaller movement, in subtler ways. For example, contrary to what I had previously assumed, shaking was perceptible from afar. This discovery, paired with the growing frustration I was feeling towards the insipidity of my piece, made me shift my movement-generating approach and abandon the great majority of the previously developed vocabulary.

Back in the studio with my research questions as creative priority, I focussed on developing state-based movement, with a large proscenium space in mind. In order to elicit genuine physical responses, I let the dancers experiment with state-based directions, such as "feel as though the world around you no longer makes sense, and let that shape the way you execute the material", or "feel cold", or "reminisce an experience of loss". This came with a number of challenges, upon which I elaborate in section 2.3.4, but at least I felt as though I was taking creative risk and actually moving towards answering my questions on choreography through a PTSD lens.

2.3.3 The environment as choreographic context

In the fall of 2012, before I had even identified the focus of my investigation, I developed an interest in populating the vertical space for this MFA research's proscenium choreographic component. To me, the proscenium stage offers a physical separation from the audience that is not so obvious in black box settings, allowing for the development of clearly separate environments. Its arch gives the unique illusion of

infinite space above the performers, and that was an advantage on which I wanted to capitalize for my final choreographic presentation.

As a progression of my dissonant imagery explorations in *Little Guidebook* and *Levity as IN (absentia)*, I was interested in staging physical states of fear and confusion in a beautiful, seemingly peaceful environment. I believe that there is much dissonance in experiencing trauma in blissful surroundings. When one has freshly survived a traumatic event, it may be confusing to understand how one's outer world can remain beautiful while one's inner landscape is being blown to pieces, realities clashing. "I have returned from a world beyond knowledge and must now unlearn for otherwise I clearly see I can no longer live" said Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo (230). The sense of cognitive incongruity that she expresses encapsulates what I was aiming to recreate on stage.

Falling snow has a special significance for me, related to my experience of trauma, and I believe that it is universally considered as beautiful. As such, even before I remembered Joseph's snow globe analogy, I had decided to use falling theatrical snow to create the blissful environment against which I would set my choreography. Compositionally, I anticipated that staging a post-traumatic scene under gently floating snowflakes would create contrast and reinforce dissonance, making the beauty more striking and the desperation more poignant for the audience.

2.3.4 Developing state-based work with student performers

As I mentioned earlier, working with young dancers to generate state-based work came with a series of complicating challenges. Used to taking a movement-based approach when setting choreography on pre-professional students rather than a state-

based one up until that point, I had no previous experience to draw from to gauge the appropriateness of my requests to them, or to use the right directorial strategies to elicit the subtle physical responses I needed.

I believe that there were three main interplaying obstacles to compose with in this process with the YDE: our hierarchic dancer-to-choreographer relationship; my own fear of bringing them to unsafe emotional places; and their still-developing interpretative skills.

2.3.4.1 Dancer-to-choreographer relationship

Over the last few years, when developing state-based work with professional dancers, I had grown accustomed to working collaboratively with dancers, in settings where it is commonly understood that, regardless of our respective roles, our individual contributions bear equal weight. In such scenarios, if one pushes him/herself too far emotionally, it does not result from having obeyed a person in power, but from having willingly taken part in a personal exploration within a mutually beneficial artistic exchange. Working among peers in this type of environment breeds mutual trust and allows the artists involved to support one another towards greater risk-taking for what is understood as being the common good.

With the YDE dancers, the process towards developing state-based material unfolded in a significantly different social climate, and this had a significant impact on the outcome. From the onset, there was a clear sense of hierarchy among us in the studio. Although I was technically their fellow student, a student-teacher type of relationship arose between us, in which they apparently felt compelled to apply every single one of my directions literally and with diligence. I sensed that their foremost intent was to please me. This was a roadblock to my movement research because, from what I

now understand, one cannot engage in genuine state-based work if one's motivation is external and if one is feeling a pressure to "do it properly".

2.3.4.2 Emotional Safety Concerns

To elicit what I needed from them, I had to be extremely descriptive at times and encourage them to take initiatives at others. Taking on that guiding role reinforced my pre-existing feeling that I was responsible for them. Because trauma is a private and difficult reality to explore somatically, I was hyperaware of conserving their well-being. I was also struggling with moral reservations towards the idea of causing them emotional harm for my own creative purposes.

I eventually rationalized that the dancers were intelligent adults with the right to refuse my directions. By the time I understood that I was being unnecessarily overprotective, impairing the dancers' depth of emotional exploration and, consequently, the proper development of my own choreography, *The Snow Globe*'s presentation was imminent.

Running out of rehearsal time and feeling pressured, I could no longer afford to workshop new emotionally-embodied material with them, needing to use my time to fine-tune the existing work in preparation for the stage instead.

2.3.4.3 Eliciting post-traumatic states in student performers

What I did find the time to do as part of this fine-tuning, however, is to alter my cueing vocabulary to accommodate a more universal frame of lived experiences. I also stopped bringing up the word "trauma" as a descriptive word, and instead asked the dancers to imagine that they lived in a snow globe, their world having just been shaken beyond their control and now unrecognizable as its elements resettle. These simple directorial changes seemed to enable the dancers to actually draw from their accessible

physical memories, softening their interpretation; doing less “acting” and more “embodying” when performing the existing material.

In retrospect, I realize that when developing state-based work, mature performers do for themselves exactly what I had to do for the young YDE dancers: they adapt the choreographer’s directions for their own frame of reference, until they create an imaginative landscape to which they can physically relate and from which they can draw genuine, embodied reactions.

OUTCOMES

3.1 Fundamental shift in creative methods and interests

When first starting this overall process, I expected my research to yield one of two possible outcomes for my artistic practice, whether focussing for a year on creating dances exclusively centred on trauma would allow the recurring emergence of PTSD-related imagery in my work to run its course, or would confirm that a fundamental change in my creative methods and priorities as a choreographer had taken place. It is obvious for me at this point that the latter has occurred, rather than the former.

Indeed, the transformation that my creative process methods and interests have undergone feels significant and permanent in nature. I have gained far too much insight into the benefits of trust in collaborative platforms and into the power of embodied-memory-informed movement to go back to my earlier creative dispositions. I cannot imagine reverting to my prior hierarchy-based directorial ways, nor can I foresee that I will perceive working towards polished technique and exact repeatability as relevant ever again in the context of developing genuine and honest work.

Being transparent about my post-traumatic psychological landscape and its influence on my choreographic work has enabled me to embrace that reality for its potential. This led me to make bolder compositional and interpretative choices, which, according to the feedback I collected, resulted in clearer choreographic intent and greater resonance for the audience.

It is self-affirming as a creator to draw upon years of repressed psychological states to create and share a body of work. Being told by audience members that they

enjoyed the works in various ways certainly gives the exercise purpose, but being told by self-identified trauma survivors that they felt deep personal connections to the work hints at the fact that the exercise had significantly greater implications. In the greater context, it suggests that, for people affected with PTSD, choreography can instil or reinforce the reassuring sense that they are not alone; that they are acknowledged and understood.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Movement generating

Much movement was created over the course of my three choreographic processes. Through generating such a large bank of movement from one single core theme, certain constants surfaced, three of which are most noteworthy.

Firstly, the tasks of choreography and performance may be inseparable when developing state-based movement related to trauma and/or embodied memories. While this was exposed most clearly when I was creating *Little Guidebook,* because I was simultaneously performer and choreographer, it was also revealed as true when I was subsequently in process with performers. From what I gleaned, the movement instigator, whether he/she is the choreographer or the creatively contributing performer, needs to be in a performance mode in order to generate genuine state-based vocabulary in process. If the movement instigator does not approach the task with full emotional investment, the movement might lack specificity or “feel” wrong and need to be discarded sooner or later. The creator/performer also benefits from approaching the

creative process this way because it allows for a gradual acclimatization to the work's emotional demands, promoting a greater sense of control and preventing unfortunate breakdowns once in actual performance.

Secondly, state-based work is most efficiently developed over an intensive period of time rather than over a multi-month process made of short and periodic rehearsals. Because states are fleeting, difficult to document and increasingly challenging to recall over time, much of the states' specificity and their derivative movement may get lost between rehearsals if those are too spaced out. The amount of time spent recalling previously developed material in a sparse process can be put towards deepening the work in a more intensive one.

Thirdly, creating an atmosphere in the studio and preparing the dancers' mind-body connection for the work's demands before the official start of a rehearsal is helpful. Indeed, I found that the instances when I took the time to warm myself and/or the dancers up through yoga-based, breathing and somatic awareness exercises before rehearsal yielded significantly more satisfying work than the ones when I had not taken that step. Attuning the somatic body and focussing the mind seemed to help individual performers to take greater emotional risk and the group to develop a common state of awareness. Dimming the lights appeared to promote a deeper level of physical/ emotional involvement as well, perhaps because of the enhanced sense of privacy darkness provides.

3.2.2 Composition

The constants of creation though the post-traumatic lens also emerged compositionally over the course of this practice-based research. Psychological trauma being heavy, dark and emotional in essence, trauma-related art could easily be monotone, inaccessible and/or overly disturbing. I found the following two compositional strategies to be repeatedly successful in avoiding these potential pitfalls while conserving the works' poignancy.

I discovered that as a general rule, emotionally distressing elements bear more resonance when balanced with neutral or positively perceived ones. For example, beauty or humour when tactfully applied can warm an audience up emotionally, increasing their receptiveness to a work's otherwise difficult content. Additionally, the emotional dissonance created by emotional contrast emulates the inner landscape of the traumatized for the audience, contributing further to the work's relevance.

I also recognized that day-to-day objects incorporated as props or set pieces help to contextualize the work in reality. Because contemporary dance is abstract, state-based work is somatic, and psychological trauma, private and internal, trauma-based choreographic work could easily look as though it portrays an alternate reality. Integrating props (confetti, dirt, snow) situates the work in the concrete contemporary world. Juxtaposing trauma to familiar props reinforces the notion that trauma is undeniably part of reality. It holds the audience responsible for acknowledging its existence.

3.2.3 Challenges and solutions

Undeniably, there were challenges to this research process, some inherent to my own relationship to the work, others to the development of my collaborators' understanding of the task.

I realized that finding perspective in the creative process when making a choreographic work sourced from a deeply personal experience is a conundrum. If in any creative situation an artist's objectivity towards his/her own work is unattainable, the degree of separation is divided tenfold when an artist creates a work based on a core personal issue. What seemed to be helpful in my case was to consider the works as though they were descriptive exercises foremost. Of course, any work of art will reflect a point of view, whether it is its creators' intention or not. But staying clear of interweaving a personal agenda into choreography seems to neutralize the creative task, granting greater emotional objectivity.

Adding performers to the trauma-based choreographic equation increased the process' level of complexity. Although I have an intimate and extensive understanding of what it is to live with PTSD, the performers did not automatically share this understanding. Ethically, in the context of this research, I could not select my cast members based on their previous experience with psychological trauma. This made establishing a common level of comprehension challenging. Simplifying the directive language by referring to regular psychological states such as "shaken up" instead of referring to infrequent, albeit more accurate, ones such as "dissociated" proved helpful in promoting our homogenous understanding.

3.3 Further development

3.3.1 Choreographically

I intend on applying the knowledge I have developed over the course of this practice-based research to my professional choreographic explorations moving forward. The overall outcome of my investigation was not to complement my choreographic identity, but rather to re-arrange it completely, down to its most basic components. I sense as though this metamorphosis has laid for me a fertile bed in which to root and grow as a creator. My next step will be to apply my newly acquired insight on trauma as a creative lens and on sites of embodied memories as impetus for movement to a new creative process involving mature performers. I am interested in discovering how performers with more life and creative experience will change the process and provide different avenues for the work.

In the further future, once I have established partnerships with mental health professionals and developed a better understanding of the ethical concerns surrounding work with people afflicted with psychological disorders, I intend on developing choreography with entire casts of professional dancers who *have* received PTSD diagnoses. I anticipate that process to be very challenging yet extremely revealing, artistically and socially.

3.3.2 Academically

Several questions remain for me at this conclusive point of my Master of Fine Arts research, and I hope to answer at least some of them through my projected doctoral investigation.

Foremost, I have an interest in contextualizing my experience as an artist working with the post-traumatic cognitive landscape as an indelible lens. Are there universal

ways in which the artist's work is influenced or changed by trauma? What are the commonalities among the ways in which trauma affects the dancing body? Answering those questions would serve to gather information in devising a new creative method based on stimulating creativity from places of embodied memory, or, more field-specifically, on developing movement from a locus of embodied trauma.

There is much room to grow from the base understanding I have developed over the course of this thesis research. There is much artistic, embodied and real-life knowledge left to be explored and shared. Dr. Stephen Joesph said: "As human beings we are storytellers. Trauma triggers within us the need to tell stories to make sense of what has happened. These stories may take the form of conversations with family, friends and colleagues." From the evidence I have gleaned thus far, I feel confident to say that, for dance artists, these stories may take the form of choreographic works.

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Appendix A: *Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely*: Script

SCRIPT—Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely
Written By: Marie France Forcier
Performed and recorded by: Andrew Nolan
September 2013

Dear reader,
Congratulations on your purchase of this audiobook. Unbeknownst to you, with this simple yet courageous act, you have already completed the first and most crucial step of our program: Little Guidebook for Using Your Suffering Wisely.

We suggest that you begin your journey with a re-immersion into an earlier version of yourself.
This person you once were, yet unaffected, has not entirely vanished.

We do not recommend shying away from triggers.
As desperately as you may avoid being reminded, those visuals, scents and noises have not disappeared. They will always exist.
Accept that.

You may feel an unquenchable thirst for numbness: for restlessly throwing yourself at tasks of questionable relevance. Don't get stuck.

Celebrate. You are a survivor. The destruction of the world as you once knew is nothing but an opportunity for growth.

Discomfort is necessary. Pain is a construct

Engage with the concrete world. Feel the ground under your feet. Stay with us.

Don't get stuck

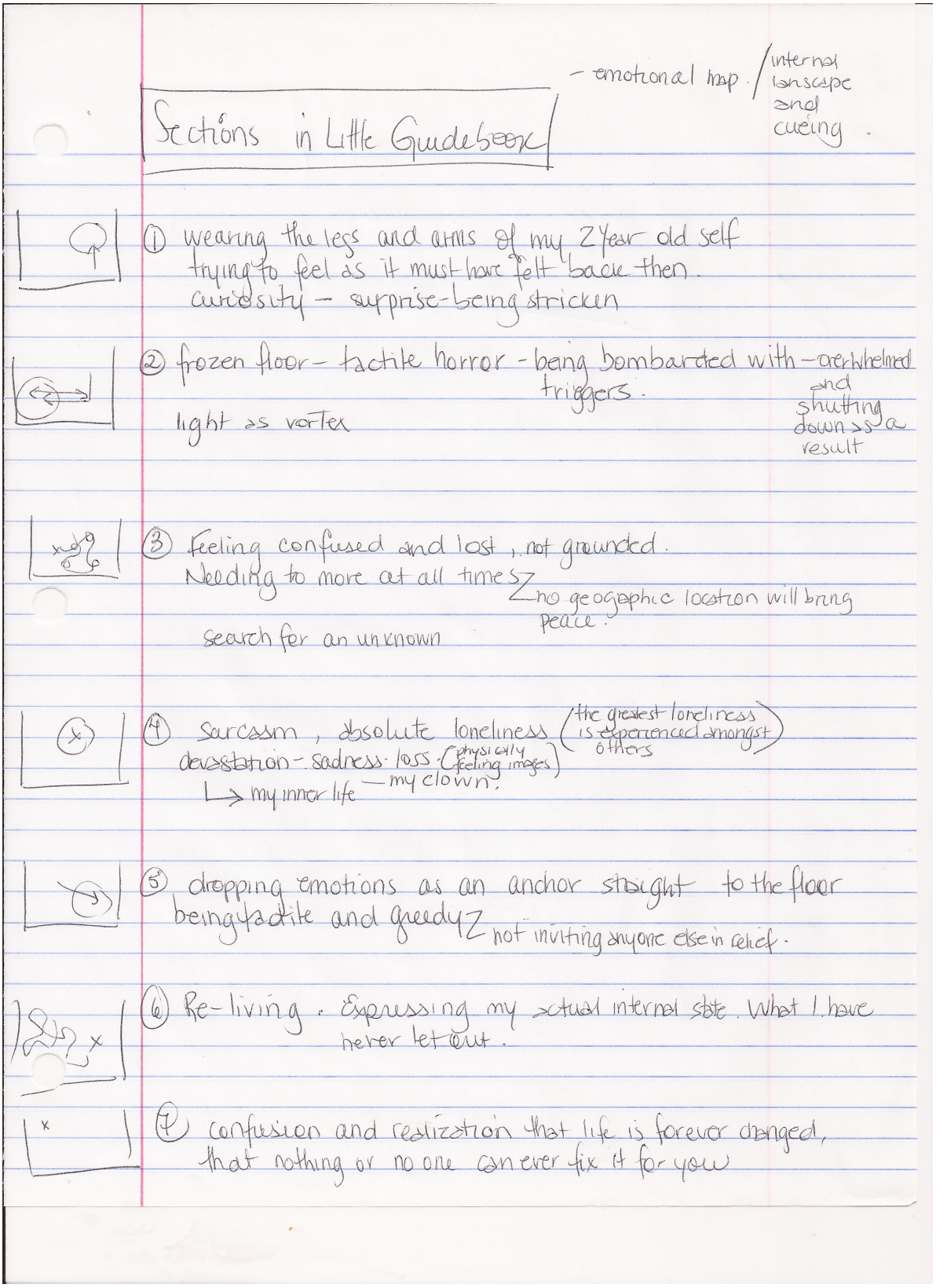
Take care of yourself. It is likely that no one else is there to do it for you.
Learn to be your own primary caretaker.

Discomfort is necessary

Congratulations, you have now gone though our simple steps for suffering wisely. We hope that by this point in your journey, you are feeling rejuvenated.

Good luck.

Appendix B: Various creative process notes: *Little Guidebook*



(w̄ headshake) 1st

— hair off face on own.

fix clothes.

taking care of yourself is as alien as taking care of a newborn for the first time

☐ Buy confetti;

☐

Finish on floor?

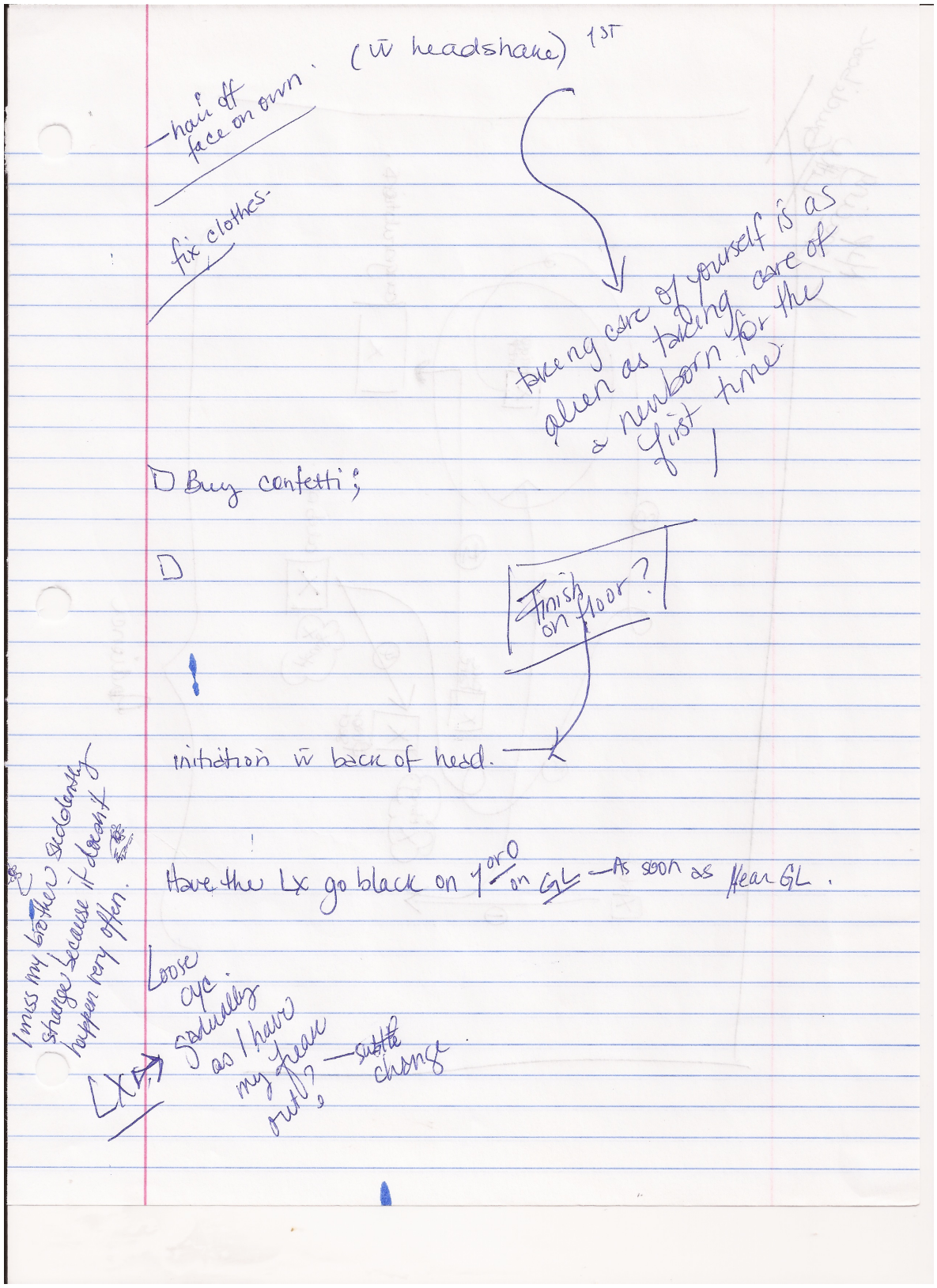
initiation w̄ back of head.

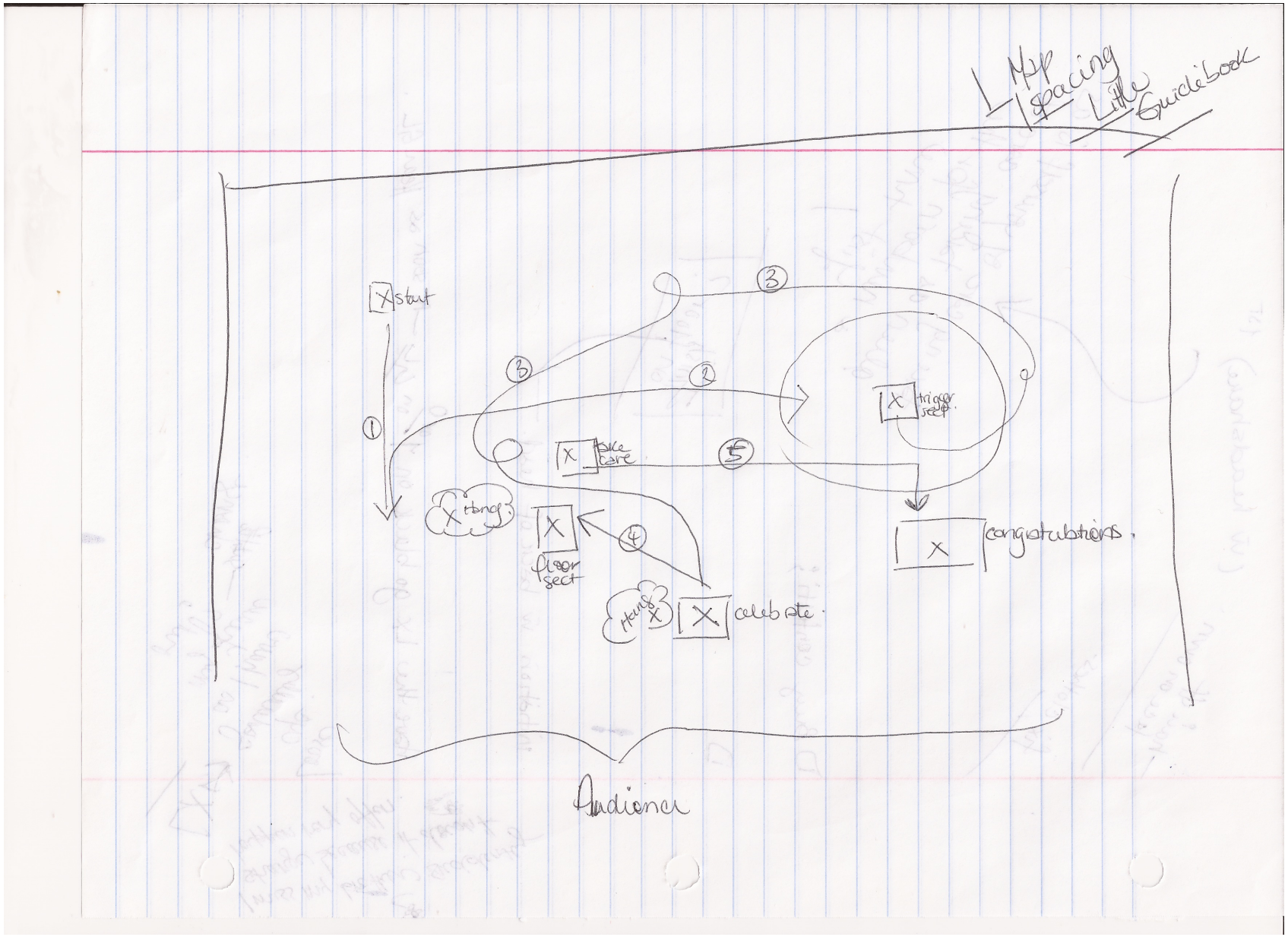
Have the Lx go black on 1 or 0 on GL — As soon as Hear GL.

Loose cyc. gradually as I have my freak out? — subtle change.

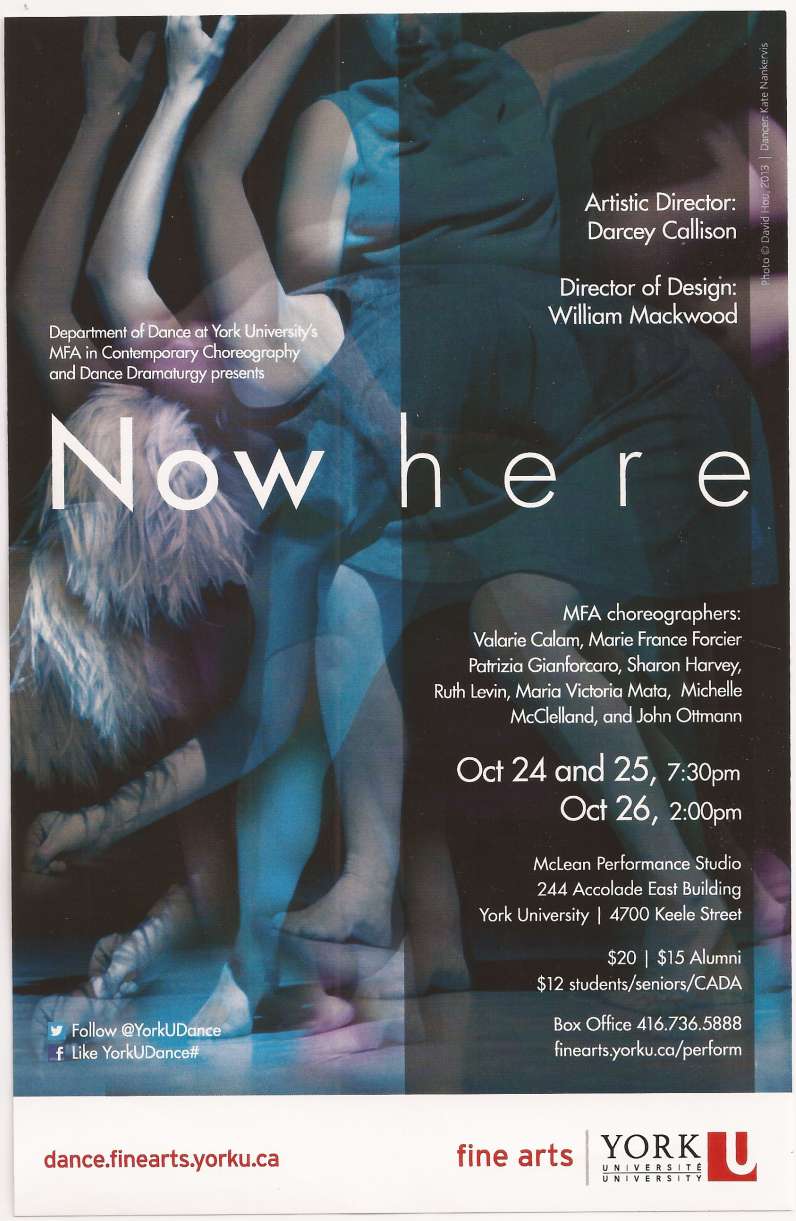
Lx ⇒

I miss my brother suddenly strange because it doesn't happen very often.




Map spacing
Little Guidebook
X start
1
2
3
3
X take care
5
X trigger sect.
X congratulations.
X hang
X floor sect
4
Hands X
X celebrate.
Audience

Appendix C: Flyer for Now h e r e



Appendix D: Program notes for *Little Guidebook*

Little Guidebook for Using your Suffering Wisely

Choreographer and Interpreter and Text: Marie France Forcier
Voice: Andrew Nolan
Lighting Design: April Gorday
Composer, Sound Engineer: James Bunton
Costume and Set Design: Marie France Forcier
MFA Supervisors: Professor Carol Anderson, Professor Holly Small

My body was
obviously moving;
the ground
supporting its
strength and
extension:
I was aware of it.
I could tell.
Meanwhile, within,
I was immobile,
breathless and miles
away… trapped
in a snapshot I've
been trying to
forget. Sometimes,
I just find
the whole thing
funny.



Marie France Forcier is the artistic director of Forcier Stage Works (forcierstageworks.com) and co-artistic director of Hub 14 (hub14.org). Internationally presented, Marie France's choreography has been seen in film, at festivals, on main stages. She has toured extensively performing various physical disciplines.

Appendix E: Photographic images from *Little Guidebook*









Images used courtesy of the Department of Dance, Faculty Fine Arts, York University.
Photographer David Hou, 2013

Appendix F: Creative writing following a *Little Guidebook* performance

It is impossible not to find it (that state)

From the moment I back away

This is my world

I see what you don't see

My hands, tactile, react to absentia

As though a fire caught them open

As though a fire licked them closed.

- Marie France Forcier, October 23rd 2013

Isolation is tricky;

While they remain shadows

I, on display, dialogue internally

- Marie France Forcier, October 24th 2013

Appendix G: Photographic images for Levity as IN

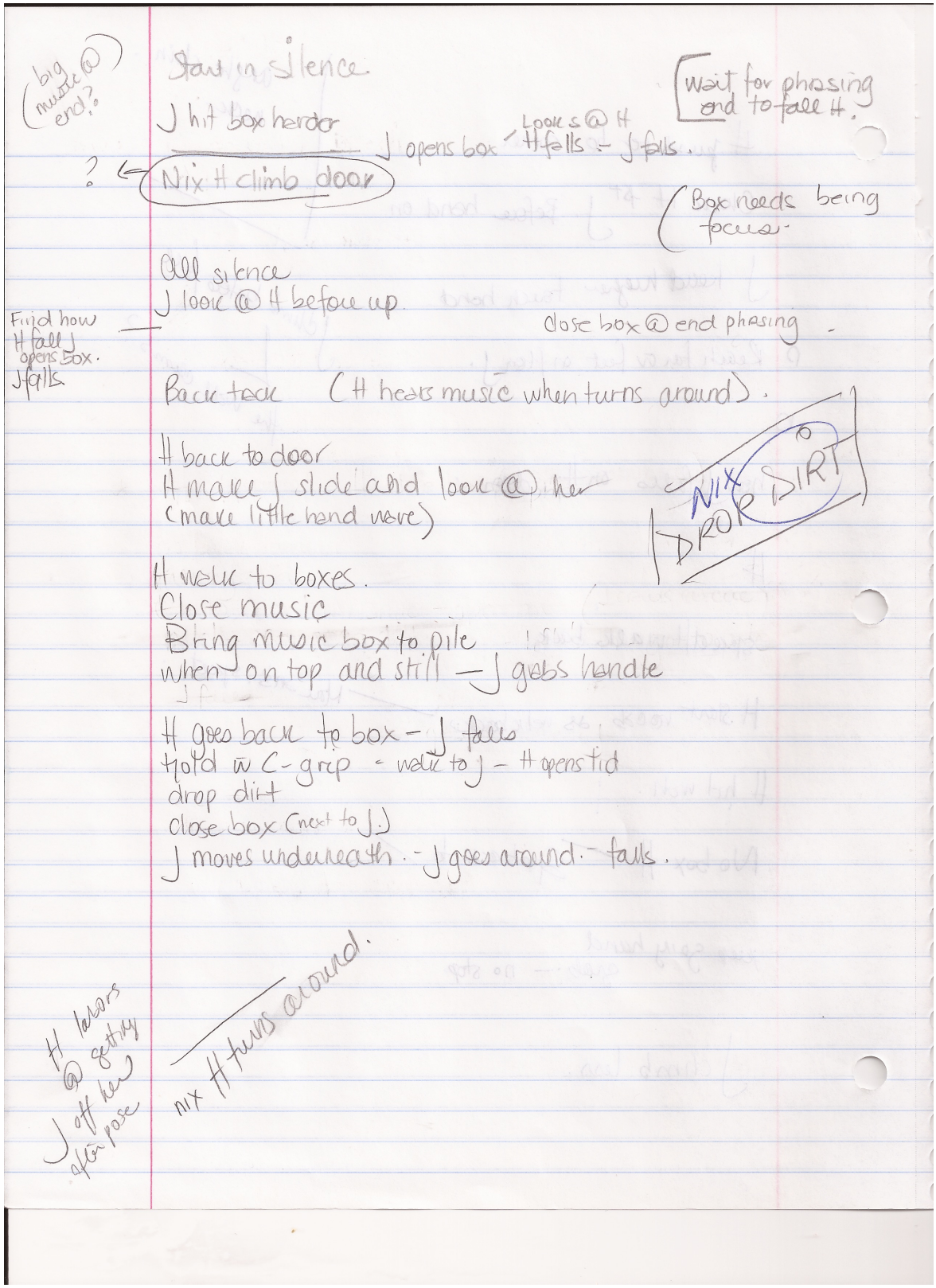


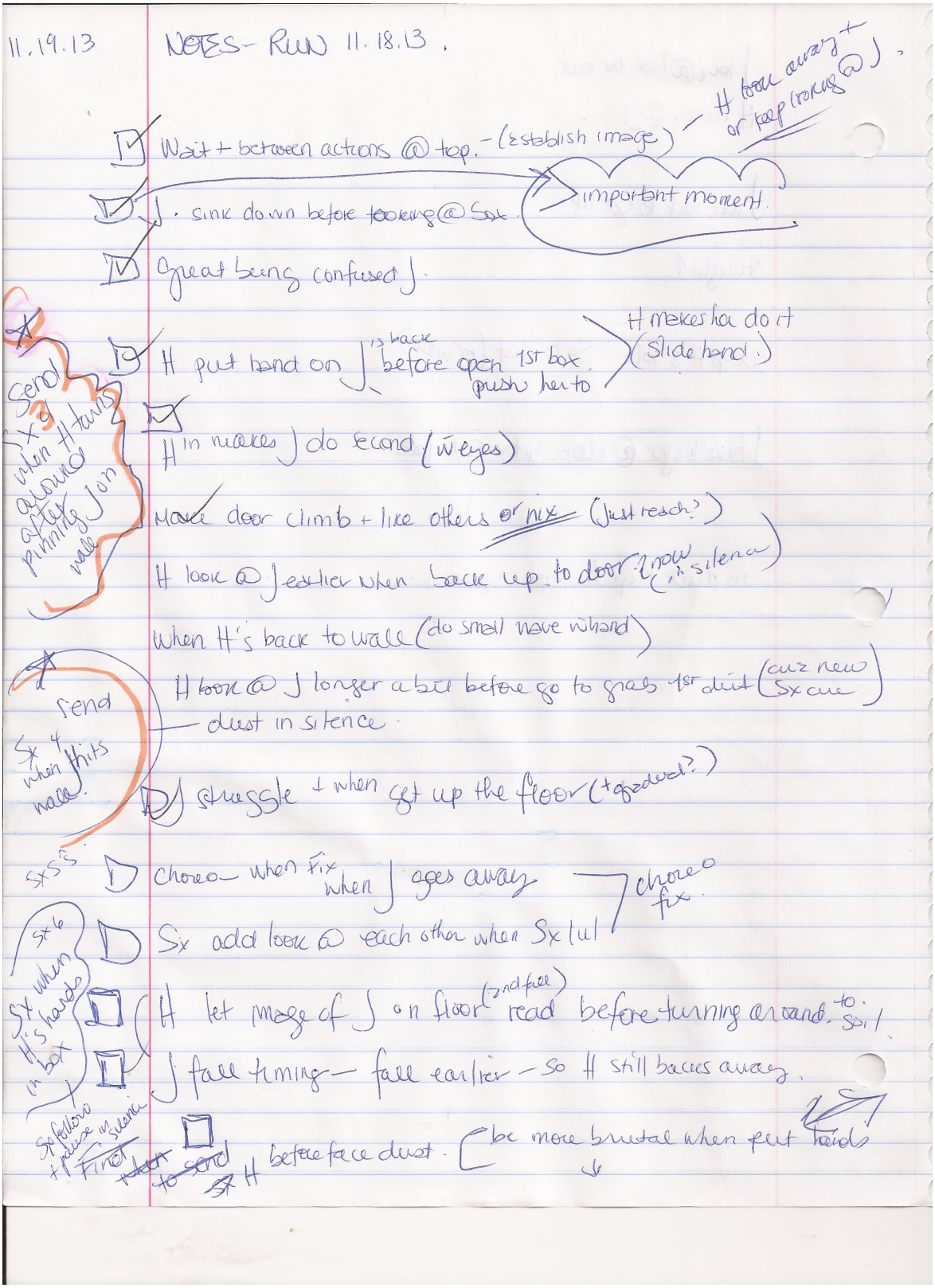




Photos: Walter Lai, 2013. Dancers: Justine Comfort, Heather MacPhail.
Venue: Dance Party, Collective Space, May 25, 2013.

Appendix H: Various creative process notes for *Levity as IN (absentia)*




11.19.13
NOTES- RUN 11.18.13.
Wait + between actions @ top. - (establish image)
H look away + or keep looking @ J.
J. sink down before looking @ Sx
important moment.
great being confused J.
send Sx 3 when H turns around after pinning J on wall
H put hand on J's back before open 1st box, push her to
H makes her do it (slide hand.)
H in makes J do second (w eyes)
Make door climb + like others or nix (just reach?)
H look @ J earlier when back up to door (now, silence)
When H's back to wall (do small wave w hand)
send Sx 4 when H hits wall.
H look @ J longer a bit before go to grab 1st dust (cuz new Sx cue)
dust in silence.
struggle + when get up the floor (+ graded?)
Sx 5's
choreo- when fix when J ages away
choreo fix.
Sx add look @ each other when Sx lul
Sx 6 Sx when H's hands in box
H let image of J on floor (2nd face) read before turning around to Sx 1.
J fall timing- fall earlier - so H still backs away.
Sx follows + pause in silence
First floor to send Sx H before face dust.
be more brutal when put hands

H don't stand there but go straight in corner. after the kill.

☐ H grabs soil + go to J faster (like in fall so catch 2nd verse when poor)

→ make face dust longer (grab soil from sides

play through track 7)

☐ H kill earlier (less climb) — music helps the ↓ in tone.

☐ in door — H look @ J, — then as verse finishes very slowly look away.

H look @ J @ top — look @ H's focusses.

H look @ J when drop her on floor —

arrange end H just hit pose / J replicate + climb

H fold.

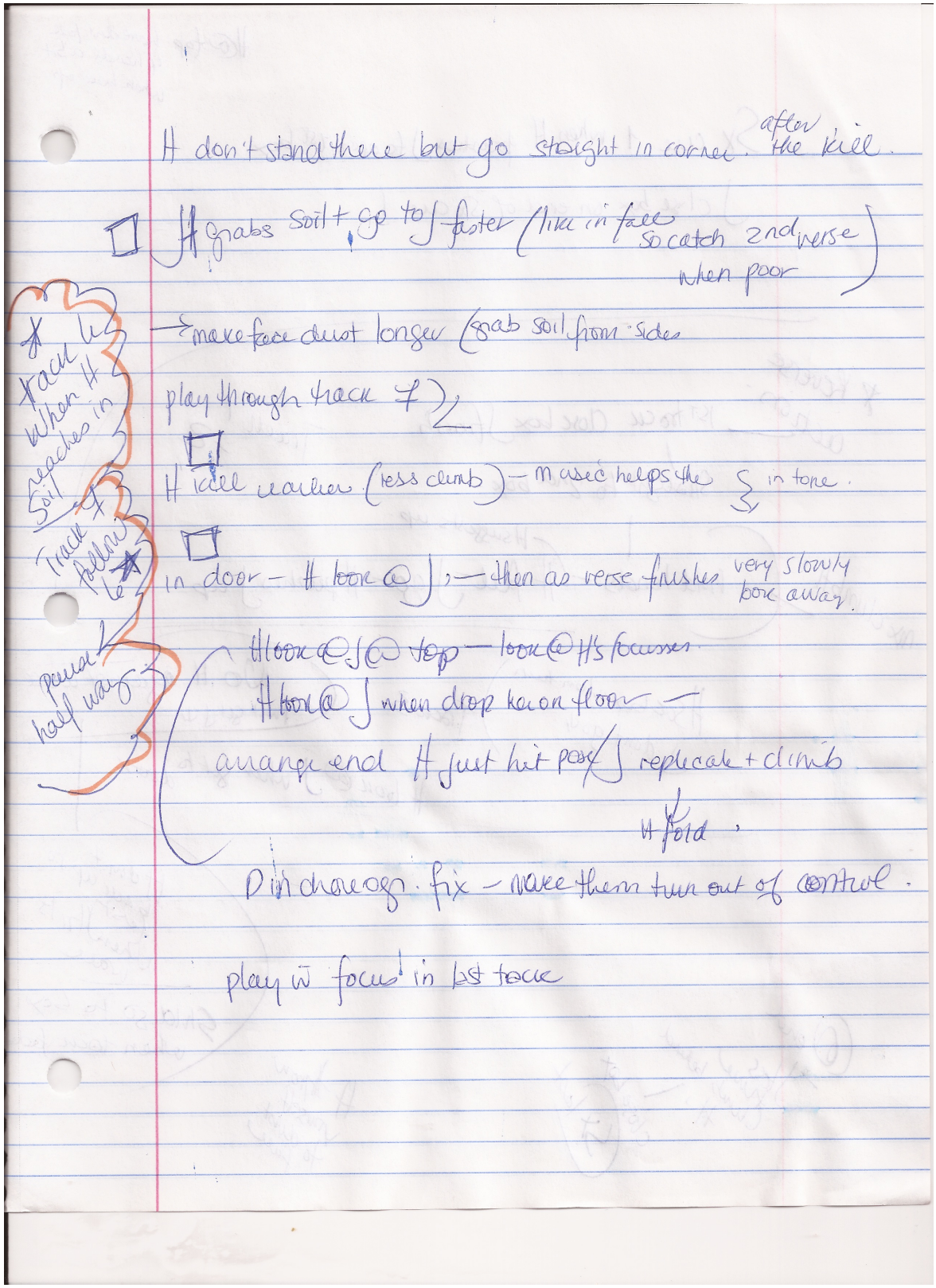
D in choreogr. fix — make them turn out of control.

play w focus in last track

* track 6 when H reaches in soil

Track 7 follow 6 *

pause half way



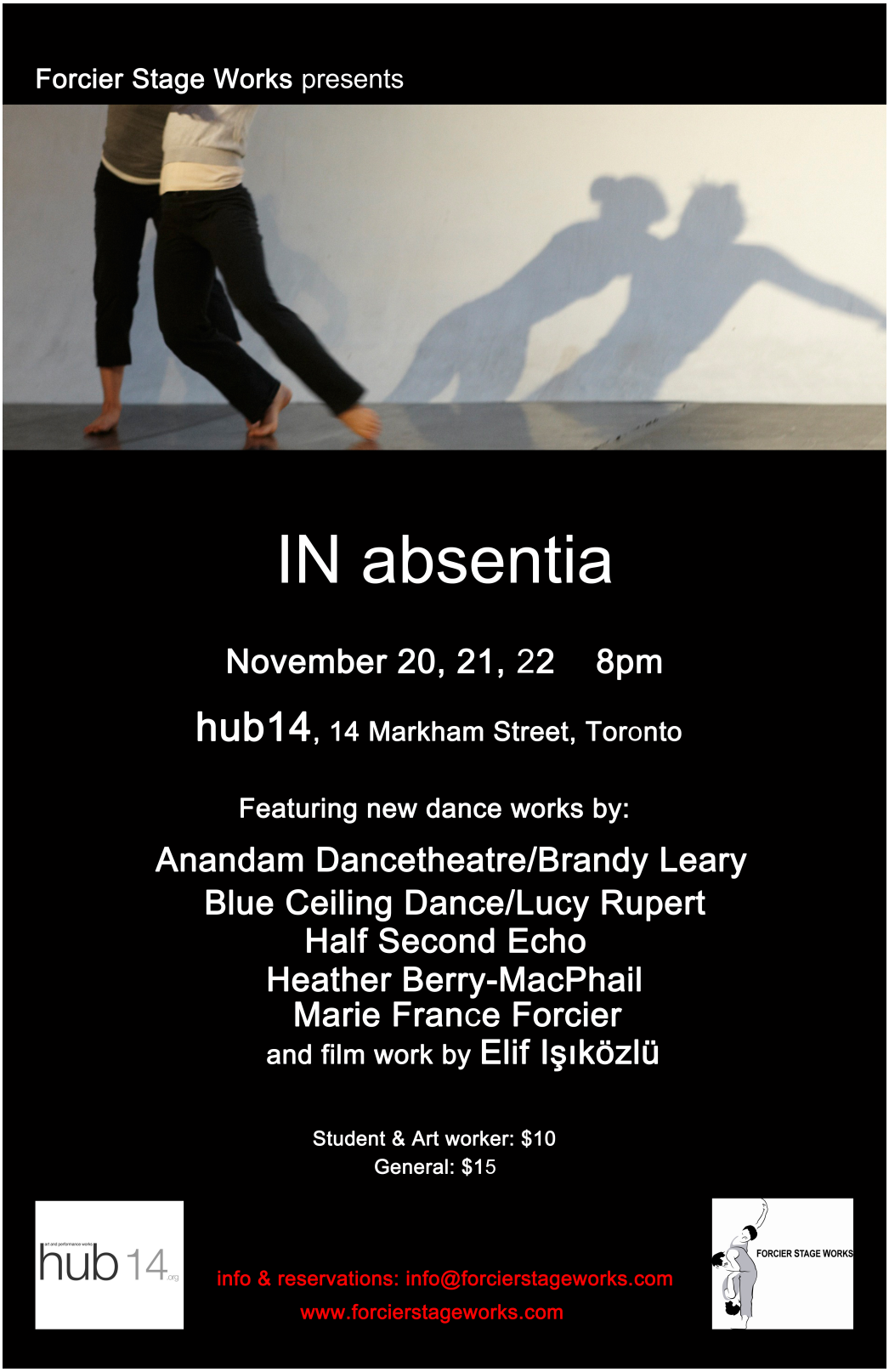
Appendix I: *IN absentia* November 9, 2013, Evi-Dance Interview Podcast

http://www.evidanceradio.com/home/podcasts/2013/saturday-november-9-2013



Marie France Forcier, Artistic Director of Forcier Stage Works and MFA candidate at York University on her presentation of IN absentia, 8pm Wednesday November 20th to Friday November 22 2013 at Hub 14, 14 Markham Street, Toronto. With her is one of the candidates Miles Gosse, Co-President of 2013/14 York University Dance Students Association. Expands the scope of a thesis assignment where the candidate is required to present their research-related work off campus, Forcier curates a shared program, creating a presentation opportunity for fellow artists of her community. www.hub14.org http://www.forcierstageworks.com/

Appendix J: Poster for *IN absentia*



Graphic Design: Marie France Forcier and Michelle McClelland, 2013

Appendix K: Press release for *In absentia*

For immediate release: October 30, 2013
PLEASE ADD TO LISTINGS NOW THROUGH November 22 2013
Media contact: Marie France Forcier (416) 904-5961 info@forcierstageworks.com

IN absentia by **Forcier Stage Works**

Marie France Forcier, artistic director of **Forcier Stage Works** and MFA candidate at York University presents ***IN absentia***, Wednesday November 20th to Friday November 22nd 2013, at **Hub 14**.

Expanding the scope of a thesis assignment where candidates are required to present their research-related work off campus, Forcier curates a shared program, creating a presentation opportunity for fellow artists of her community.

Toronto based established choreographers **Brandy Leary (Anandam Dancetheatre)** and **Lucy Rupert (Blue Ceiling dance)** each contribute new works. Rupert, aptly qualified as "an orchid blossoming in a bed of forget-me-nots" by the Toronto Star, shares ***At this altitude****,* a self-performed solo, while Leary performs ***jhāṛū*** in dialogue with Anwar Khurshid's live citar soundscape.

Established performer and emerging choreographer **Heather Berry-MacPhail** premieres ***A simple circuit***, performed by **Peter Hessel**. **Half Second Echo**, a fresh and vibrant collective of recent York graduates makes its debut with ***Within one's Self****,* an ensemble work by choreographer **Miles Gosse**.

In line with her academic research on the expression of trauma in contemporary choreography, Forcier contributes her work in progress ***Levity as IN (absentia)****,* a duet performed by **Heather Berry-MacPhail** and **Justine Comfort** exploring trauma imagery and dissociative states; in other words: states of absentia. Known for being "the kind of choreographer who generates thoughtful reflection in audiences" (Toronto Life), Marie France Forcier is a choreographer of substantial works. Internationally presented, her choreography has been seen in film, at festivals, on main stages. She has toured extensively performing various disciplines.

Forcier Stage Works (www.forcierstageworks.com)
Presents
IN absentia
November20-22, 2013 at **8pm**
Hub 14,
14 Markham Street, Toronto
Tickets: General/ $15 Student/ Art Worker: $10
Box Office: 416-904-5961/ info@forcierstageworks.com
-30-

Appendix L: Program for *IN absentia*



IN absentia

Welcome to *IN absentia*: a school assignment turned into a community gathering. Let me explain. As an MFA-Dance thesis requirement, I had to self-present an off-campus choreographic event. The contribution I had to make was short in duration, and still in progress: process-wise, I have been concentrating on distilling a pre-existing work with my research question in mind; "*How may PTSD and dissociative states be expressed in contemporary choreography?"*
So… with a short piece to present yet a full access to Hub 14 for three evenings, I figured: why not use the resources at my disposal to provide an opportunity for inspiring artists in my community to present new works as well? And that, in a nutshell, is how *IN absentia* came about… Thank you for being here! -Marie France Forcier

at this altitude

Choreography & Performance: Lucy Rupert
Music: *Drumming III*, Steve Reich (with editing help from Gangsta Sprite) *"Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together But when I look ahead up the white road There is always another one walking beside you" (T.S. Eliot)*
Thanks to: Ed Reifel, Allyson McMackon, Michelle Debrouwer and Swansea School of Dance, John Geiger and his book "The Third Man Factor" and, as always, Dennes and Pablo.

-

within one's self

Choreography: Miles Gosse
Performance: Justine Comfort, Sarah Dowhun, Niko Markakis, Denise Solleza
Music: *Var*, Sigur Ros; *Stand By Me*, Ben E. King
Outside Eye: Marie France Forcier
Everyone's story of heartbreak is different, but it is the inner conversation within oneself that directs our outcome in the end.

-

A Simple Circuit

Choreography: Heather Berry-MacPhail
Performance: Peter Hessel
Music: *Please Stay*, The Crying Shames
Thank you Peter: for your time, contribution, and willingness to be awkward.

Levity as IN (absentia)—*work in progress*

Choreography: Marie France Forcier
Performance: Heather Berry-MacPhail, Justine Comfort
Music: *Auctori Vite Psalmis*, Hildegard: Antiphon (edits by James Bunton)
Primary MFA Thesis Supervisor: Carol Anderson
Secondary MFA Thesis Supervisor: Holly Small
Thank you Heather and Justine for taking part in my academic research. It is a very generous act on your part, and I am deeply grateful for it.

-

jhāṛū

Choreography & Performance: Brandy Leary
Music Composition & Performance: Anwar Khurshid
Dramaturgy: Audrey Dwyer
jhāṛū means to sweep. This work combines the movements of East Indian Chhau dance and Kalari (South Indian Martial Art) seen through a contemporary lens to explore sweeping as an cyclical process of uncovering and burying.
Thank you Eamon Mac Mahon, Collective Space, Siobhan Sleath, Anandam Dancetheatre, Marie France Forcier/Forcier Stage Works

-

Artistic Collaborators

Marie France Forcier: The Artistic Director of Forcier Stage Works, Marie France Forcier is a Canadian dance maker and writer. Her choreographic work, seen across Canada, in the US, Europe and Asia, has been commissioned by numerous dance festivals, film-makers, main stages and professional training schools. She has toured extensively as a performer in disciplines including aerial circus, film, family theatricals and contemporary dance. Forcier serves as the co-artistic director of Hub 14, a Toronto arts incubator serving independent movement-based practitioners and is contributor to the Magazine *The Dance Current.* She will complete her MFA at York University in 2014.

Heather Berry-MacPhail is a performer, creator and teacher in Toronto. She has worked extensively with Forcier Stage Works, as well as with Toronto Dance Theatre, William Yong, Sasha Ivanochko, Darryl Tracy, the Crazyfish Collective and others. She is on faculty at George Brown College, teaches at STDT and is a Pilates instructor.

Justine Comfort graduated from York University where she completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts with Specialized Honours in Dance and a Disciplinary Certificate in Dance Science. As an emerging dance artist in Toronto, Justine has worked with artists such as Marie France Forcier, Ben Landsberg, Shannon Litzenberger, Julia Aplin, Susie Burpee and John Ottmann.

Sarah Dowhun is a graduate of the York University Dance Program. Having trained with the accomplished faculty at York, Sarah is excited to showcase her skills with her fellow alumni in Half Second Echo. Since graduation Sarah has worked with many talented artists throughout the Toronto Dance Community both on screen and on stage.

Miles Gosse is an emerging dance artist from Toronto, Ontario. A diverse performer, choreographer, and educator, Miles explores the relationship between contemporary dance techniques and choreography as self-expression and storytelling. Miles is currently completing his fifth year at York University in the BFA Dance and Concurrent BEd programs.

Peter Hessel was born and raised in London, Ontario. After completing his second year studying medicine, Peter left Paramedicine to pursue dance. Mr. Hessel is a graduate from The School of Toronto Dance Theatre. Since then Peter has had the privilege of working with many inspirational and talented choreographers.

Anwar Khurshid: Before making the sitar his primary focus, Anwar Khurshid studies vocals, flute and tabla. These instruments still permeate his playing, giving it a fluid, lilting quality that has become his signature. His major influences in the Hindustani tradition are Ustad Nasiruddin, Ustad Vilayat Khan and Ustad Amir Khan. Anwar collaborates across musical genres and with dance artists in both classical and contemporary contexts.

Brandy Leary creates contemporary performances through dance based entry points that work form multi disciplanry and poly culutral perspectives. Her choreography, performances and research have been produced in Canada, Europe, India and the USA in theatres, urban environments, festivals, museums and isolated landscapes. She is the founder and Artistic Director of Anandam Dancetheatre www.anandam.ca

Nikolaos Markakis has just completed his final year of undergraduate studies. During his time at York he has been an active student representative for the Department of Dance and Winters College. Building on his original training in Cretan Folkloric dance, Niko is dedicated to developing a career as a professional performer and choreographer.

Lucy Rupert is a freelance dancer and theatre performer and the artistic director for Blue Ceiling dance, choreographing, commissioning, producing and presenting contemporary and collaborative dance projects. She has worked with Anandam Dance, Angela Blumberg, Fujiwara Dance Theatre, Theatre Passe Muraille, Volcano Theatre, Puppetmongers Theatre, Circus Orange and for over a dozen years with Theatre Rusticle. She is happy mommy to Pablo.

Denise Solleza is a recent graduate of the BFA Dance program at York University. As an emerging artist in the community, she has worked with artists such as Irvin Chow, Valerie Calam, and Julia Aplin. Denise is grateful and excited to share Half Second Echo's first public performance with the many talented artists involved with In Absentia.

-

Special thanks to: Carol Anderson, Hub 14: Aria Evans, Andrew Gaboury & Kate Nankervis, Brandy Leary & Collective Space, Ruth Levin, Walter Lai, Tracey Norman & Craig Chambers, Siobhan Sleath, Cassandra Wiesner.

And most of all: thank you to the wonderful artists on the program for agreeing to lend your precious time and talent to this little project of mine.

Appendix M: Photographic Images from *IN absentia*



Lucy Rupert in Rupert's *at this altitude*



Half Second Echo in Miles Gosse's *Within one self*



Peter Hesel in Heather MacPhail's *a simple circuit*



Brandy Leary and Anwar Khurshid in Leary's *jhāṛū*

Photo credits: Walter Lai, 2013

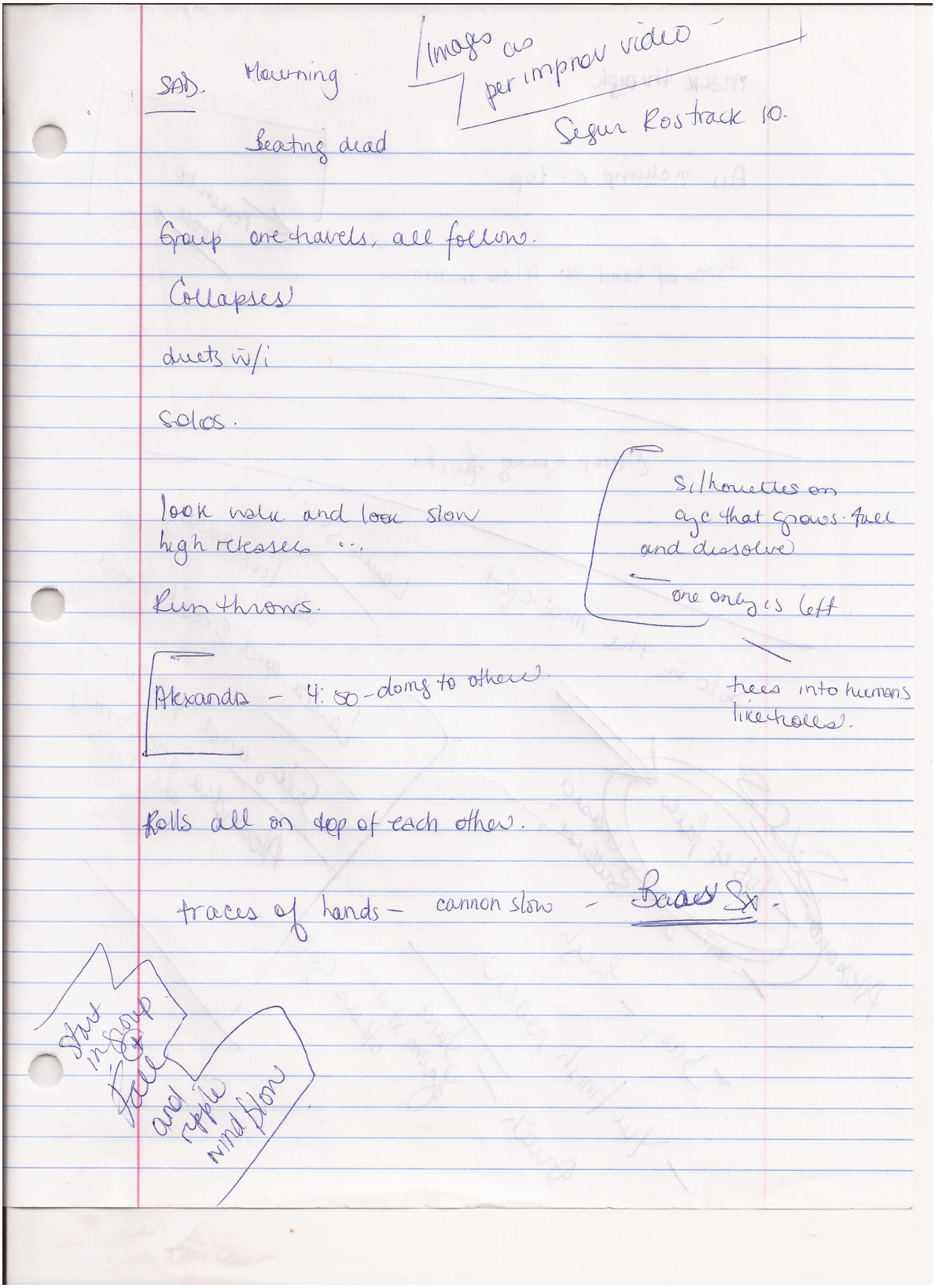
Appendix N: Photographic images from *Levity as IN (absentia)*



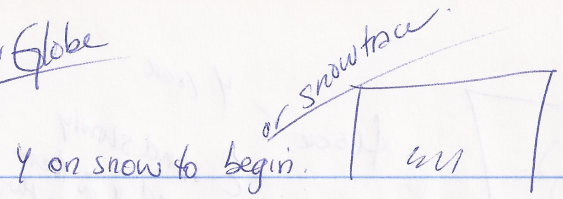


Photo credits: Walter Lai, 2013. Dancers: Justine Comfort, Heather MacPhail.

Appendix O: Various creative process notes for *The Snow Globe*



The Snow Globe



Y on snow to begin.

@ end - Snow falls after words. / (after the six drop)

Projections @ end swell so that by 8:45 it is all black.

end part → next page.

5:00-6:00 - Make ending. + run in time

6:00-6:30 - Changes in earlier part.

6:30-7 → 2 runs.

Cantii

Snow on ground @ top.

confused more than stricken.

Snow during swell - Orion to smell but until fall

Snow during Emily [E falls slowly after. + smell sit until fades.

@ end - no snow til the drop. (cue on time code)

big music @ end?

Start in silence.

J hit box harder

Wait for phrasing and to fall H.

J opens box - Looks @ H - H falls - J falls.

? ← Nix H climb door

Box needs being focus.

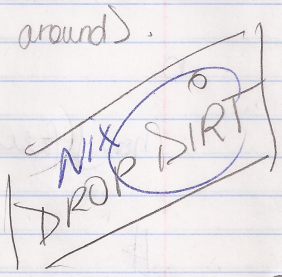
All silence
J look @ H before up.

Find how H fall J opens box. J falls

close box @ end phrasing

Back track (H hears music when turns around).

H back to door
H make J slide and look @ her
(make little hand wave)



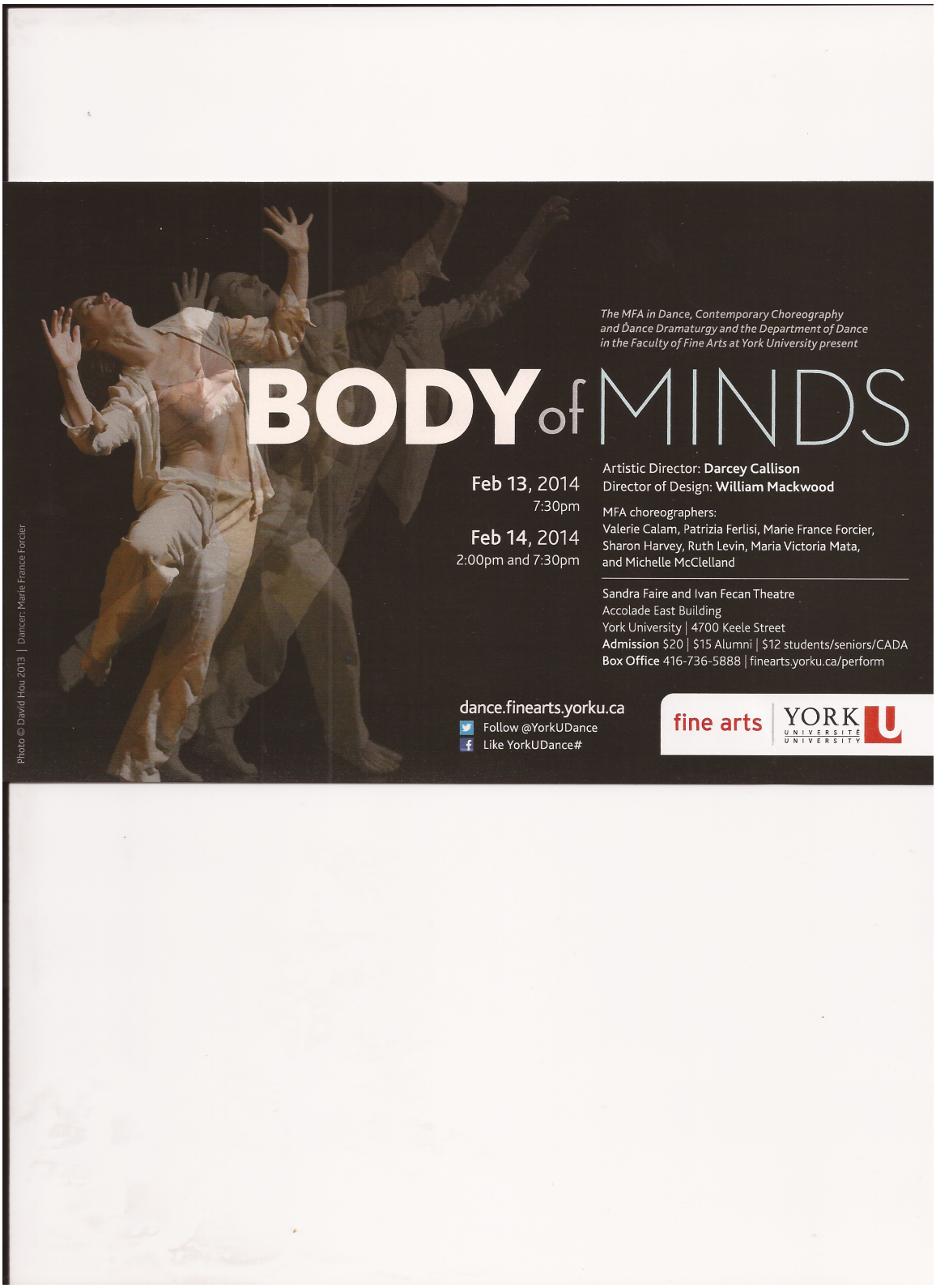
H walk to boxes.
Close music
Bring music box to pile
when on top and still — J grabs handle

H goes back to box - J falls
Hold w C-grip - walk to J - H opens lid
drop dirt
close box (next to J.)
J moves underneath. - J goes around. - falls.

H leans @ getting J off her after pose

nix H turns around.

Appendix P: Flyer for *Body of Minds*



Appendix Q: Program notes for *Body of Minds*

The Snow Globe

Our movement surfaced from somatic memory— my own to establish a base, the dancers' to develop and refine the content. It originated from our individual and collective kinaesthetic reactions to recalling nightmares, confusion, loss; trauma. It was developed as an exercise in dissociation: body operating in one direction, mind in the other.

Choreographer:	Marie France Forcier
Interpreters:	Laura Brown, Sally Choi, Alexandria Di Fazio, Emily Downs, Yui Ugai, Oriah Wiersma
Lighting Design:	April Gorday
Composer, Sound Engineer:	James Bunton
Costume Design:	Marie France Forcier
MFA Supervisors:	Carol Anderson Holly Small
Acknowledgments:	Special thank you to Holly Small and the York Dance Ensemble.



Intermission
15 min.

Appendix R: Photographic images for *Body of Minds*









Images used courtesy of the Department of Dance, Faculty Fine Arts, York University.
Photographer David Hou, 2014