

CHOREOGRAPHIC PLAY: INVESTIGATING  
DYNAMIC CHOREOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENT  
WITH ALL BODIES

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## ABSTRACT

Choreographic Play: Investigating Dynamic Choreographic Engagement with all Bodies is informed by the burgeoning trend to include multi-ability bodies in the practice of contemporary dance. An important aspect of this research addresses inclusivity whereby improvisational methods and choreographic processes can be infused within communities comprised of all abilities – of all populations of people. The goal of my research has been to originate improvisational and choreographic processes and choreography that can be experienced and understood by all who take part in it. This research considered ways to share both processes and performative aspects of choreography by utilizing a practice-based methodology in the creation of three choreographic case studies. These are, first the *I Am* solo project entitled ...*at the end of a stem*, second, a self-produced project *(RE)Trace* and finally, *Snowlight*. These case studies represent the containers where activated investigations are magnified and/or realized.



## **DEDICATION**

For Sandra, Adele, Sarah, John

and

The School of the Toronto Dance Theatre General School  
Young Dancers' Program

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## INTRODUCTION

My MFA research and this thesis essay, titled *Choreographic Play: Investigating Dynamic Choreographic Engagement with All Bodies*, have been inspired by the burgeoning trend to include multi-ability bodies in the practice of contemporary dance. As a contemporary dance artist I am part of this trend. This essay is guided by the narrative of my past as a practicing artist and is led by what I have newly sourced during my MFA candidacy in the Department of Dance at York University. My practice is defined and influenced by my identity as a contemporary dance artist, educator and activist. As choreographer and dancer, I continually calibrate a close relationship among my arts practice, my work in arts education and my work in community outreach. As a Toronto-based contemporary dance choreographer, my practice over the course of twenty-seven years is stimulated through studio exploration with members of the dance community and through collaboration with artists in other disciplines.

My training is grounded in contemporary dance. I have committed a large part of my practice to bringing contemporary dance to youth of varied abilities and populations in the context of creative movement. Working with children influences my artistic choices. It encourages me to sustain an environment of spontaneity whenever possible. By working extensively in school and community settings throughout Ontario, I experience a huge confluence of cultures. The nature of this experience both allows and requires me to actively engage with multi-ability movers.

In my work, I shape choreographic and improvisational dance processes with many individuals and communities including artists in other disciplines, contemporary dance peers, virtuosic dance interpreters, children and youth, school-based educators, and populations of multi-ability movers eager to experience the potential of their unique form. What is in common to how I approach working with all of these communities is an

aspiration to mine the potential of playful exchange with each person as a creative partner. My research has investigated choreographic approaches, improvisational methods, and tools such as selected dance notation that support this aspiration. An important aspect of this research addressed inclusivity whereby improvisational methods and choreographic processes can be infused within communities comprised of all abilities – of all populations of people. DanceAbility Methodology, the study of movement improvisation for all bodies<sup>1</sup>, informs this aspect of my research.

Previous to my MFA research, I received my *DanceAbility Teacher Certification* from DanceAbility International founder Alito Alessi in Vienna in July, 2012. I also pursued advanced training with Alessi in Montevideo, Uruguay and in Mexico in 2014 and 2015. This rigorous training prepared me, and ten other teachers from around the world, to teach DanceAbility Methodology at a master level. Alessi guided me through this manifestation. My entire relationship to contemporary dance changed during this training, causing me to redefine my movement orientation especially as it relates to gravity. Defining contemporary dance anew meant deepening my primal connection to movement, all of which is informed by breath, weight, by sensing and noticing where I am, what I am doing, who I am doing it with and what else is happening around me.

These informative and consequential elements loomed expansively in my form. During this research, I sought to temper this transformational reality and gently focus it through the lens of investigating choreographic engagement for all bodies through play. As a Master DanceAbility teacher, this is how I choose to activate new connections and a new understanding of contemporary dance.

Sensing, experiencing, investigating, experimenting and rejoicing through choreographic play within the world manifests in many forms in my life. Understanding more about myself or any body is deeply informed by movement, whether activated by the simple act of walking or uncovered through an elaborate choreographed design. To

me there is no greater joy in this world than sharing the wonder of movement. My research investigates my own choreographic patterns and how they evolve when sharing potential relevance with all bodies. Sharing dance and/or researching dance demands of me to revisit the joy and necessity of lightness, of gravity, of falling and of playing. I am interested in mining the potential of overlapping processes and tools found through the lens of playfulness, in both the making of dance and the experience of teaching it.

The foundation of my practice-based choreographic research is my desire to bring the making of dance and the teaching of dance together. I do this with a process of inclusive exchange among all participants: artists, dance education practitioners, school-based educators, children and youth.

The goal of my research has been to originate improvisational and choreographic processes and choreography that can be experienced and understood by all who take part in it. Within this research, I investigated ways to share both processes and performative aspects of choreography by utilizing a practice-based methodology in the creation of my three choreographic case studies. These are, first the *I Am* solo project entitled *...at the end of a stem*, second, a self-produced project *(RE)Trace* and finally, *Snowlight*. I liken these case studies to containers where activated investigations are magnified and/or realized. This practice-based methodology has also been further defined and supported by practice-based research running parallel to each of these case studies. This parallel research includes twenty-seven years as a dance artist and educator along with my immersion in DanceAbility Methodology that was occurring while I was pursuing my MFA. My immersion in DanceAbility techniques served as a conduit for my research in multi-ability applications of dance study and dance making in each of my three practice-based case studies. My research also includes research on the work of internationally renowned contemporary dance artists Trisha Brown and Meg Stuart,

who use improvisational methods in their dance practice. Parallel research also sourced the writing of esteemed Finnish dance pedagogue Eeva Anttila.

While choreographing each case study, I have considered the relevance and habits of my own choreographic leanings, especially when actualizing multi-ability dance research with multi-ability movers in Toronto and during advanced Master DanceAbility Teacher training in Mexico and Uruguay from October 2014 to November 2015. Research accrued abroad settled into the physical bones of each case study shaped at York.

I have referenced the work of Meg Stuart and Trisha Brown in tandem with all material processed throughout this research, hoping the transparency of their innovative improvisational methods would infuse welcomed levity into my existing way of working. Other underlying aspects supporting this practice-based methodology referenced the writing of practitioners and scholars assimilated during a directed reading course in August, 2015. This course, *Choreographic Play: Accessing Improvisational Methods and Creative Movement Models for All Bodies*, supervised by Professor Mary-Elizabeth Manley included the work of influential dance pedagogue/scholar Eeva Anttila and virtuosic artist, collaborator and scholar Helen Storey. Storey is noted for groundbreaking incentives like “*Catalytic Teaching and Learning*” defined as an art, fashion and science collaboration catalyzing creative learning across schools.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to Anttila’s writings, and those of other dance practitioners including Ann Cooper Albright, whose work deepens and corroborates principles in my ongoing practice. These readings profoundly guide this thesis and the bigger picture of research I will activate in the future. These parallel influences have been far-reaching in scope, and their residual influences contributed essential information to my research. More importantly, all parallel research within this essay made it possible for me to look at play from various viewpoints.

## DEFINING TERMS

This essay investigates playful choreographic engagement among practicing dance artists and the populations with whom they interface. Before delving further into the details of methodology, I will define the following terms that I use throughout this essay: “Choreographic Play”, “Shared Motivation”, “Ensemble Interplay” and “Contemporary Dance”.

### Defining “Choreographic Play”

“Choreographic Play”, in the context of this essay, is inspired by how children play, how they make up games with the tools available to them. Dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright offers the following regarding play relative to choreography:

But first what is play? What is playful movement? What are the interactions of play? And what are the underlying structures that guide play? Webster's *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the noun *play* as “an activity of children, free or unimpeded motion, brisk, fitful or light movement and frolic,” The verb is described by the same source as “to move or operate in a lively, irregular or intermittent manner; to discharge, fire or set off with continuous effect; to move or function freely within prescribed limits” It is the verb's definition that most intrigues me: it suggests a dynamic organization within the activity of play. (Cooper Albright 282)

Like Cooper Albright, I reacted to the verb definition of play as it relates to an innate inner dynamic organization and drew an immediate association between play and choreography. I searched for the word “choreography” as defined by British choreographer/writer Jonathan Burrows. He is making work now, and seems to be playing with what can or cannot occur when in the act of choreographing.

“My current definition of choreography is this: Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice. Or perhaps choreography is this: Arranging objects in the right order that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts”. (Burrows 40)



I am defining “Choreographic Play” as an occurrence where assembled players are animatedly engaged in an open environment of inclusive movement discovery while fluidly utilizing dance tools or methods made available to everyone throughout all aspects of choreographic processes. This engagement and a fluid use of choreographic tools made available to all players, colours choices and how or why they may occur, underlining the profound impact that play can have on choreographic processes.

### **Defining “Shared Motivation”**

Forging partnerships at all levels of choreographic development informs my use of the term “Shared Motivation”. This term is inspired by my work in the community. It originates from my desire to acknowledge the value of energetic investment in time and wonderment that any partner might bring to the creative process. “Shared Motivation” in this context goes beyond making good use of time when working together, it considers the enjoyment of doing something together while anticipating an element of the unknown. Motivated collaborators, seeking a shared investment in the creative process, often manifest or create a tangible energetic epicentre that drives the work forward from its inception through to its completion. I am calling this epicentre “Shared Motivation”.

### **Defining “Ensemble Interplay”**

The idea of “Ensemble Interplay” used in the context of this essay is informed by my curiosity about social structures that form or exist among a group of dancers when work is being made with them. “Ensemble Interplay” considers cause and effect, how an ensemble might take hold of information offered to them. As a choreographer, seeking to cultivate dynamic choreographic play with collaborators, I am interested in how an ensemble might collectively manifest material proposed to them. As a choreographer I am preoccupied with

noticing this. How might cause and effect be realized in movement vocabulary among the interpreters throughout the process? As a maker of a dance, I also play at observing this development. Jonathan Burrows' ideas on continuity in the choreographic process guided my framing of this term.

One of the common logics of movement is to connect sequences by a process of cause and effect. Each movement triggers the next reactive movement in a sensible chain of action. Cause and effect can be a useful tool. It produces streams of movement which point forwards in the imagination of the watcher, and at the same time creates a patterning in the body which helps us remember a sequence or keep an improvisation going. (Burrows 111)

### **Defining “Contemporary dance” relative to my own experience.**

“Contemporary dance” is often defined as a mix of many dance styles anchored in modern, post modern and classical dance. Contemporary dance incorporates elements from many styles of dance. In terms of the focus of its technique, contemporary dance includes strong and controlled legwork built upon ballet; modern/post modern dance places stress on a full range of fluid torso motion; and it also employs a plethora of movement techniques such as contact dance, Skinner Releasing Work, floor work, fall and recovery, improvisational characteristics of the modern/post modern movement, Authentic Movement and more recently trends in somatic movement. I personally experience contemporary dance as an evolving art form that requires both the doer and the observer to define and situate its relevance within society. My training and knowledge of contemporary dance is based on thirty-four years of study and twenty-seven years of practice as a professional artist. I have come to know about the history of dance through dance history university courses, conferences, dance intensives, and through the bodies and stories and research of my teachers who have gifted me with a progression of dance studies running the spectrum from Graham technique to Skinner Releasing Technique and DanceAbility

Methodology. I continue to take an accumulative history, my love of dance, my hardy childhood and meticulously distill these influences and rearrange them in varied proportions under the umbrella of contemporary dance for the purposes of sharing with others, often in the context of creative movement. This distilling to me is especially important and necessary when asking the questions: What do I know? What do I wish to practice as an artist? What do I wish to share? I believe this approach to be relevant, because contemporary dance holds within it a constant drive to create and re-create movement.

## CHOREOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

My choreographic methodology has followed the arc of my MFA candidacy at York University, initiated in September, 2014 by first investigating myself as a dance artist, and someone who continually calibrates a close relationship between the doing of dance and the sharing of it with others. I began with questions. How do I do this, and with whom? How can I expand the boundaries of my engagement to include multi-ability movers – or all bodies? Through this practice-based research process I have sought to find out how, starting with my *I Am* solo dance ....*at the end of a stem* performed in the McLean Performance Studio, York University (see Appendix A for *Available Light* program and notes).

While shaping ...*at the end of a stem*, I was curious about how this solo might relate to working with any or all bodies. How could I as an able-bodied dancer, utilize this solo process as complete within itself yet use it to hone insights into choreographing with all bodies in the future? Another question emerged. Should I start my solo seated or standing? I suspended these questions in hopes of gathering more questions or research material before stepping into the studio. Material and questions were found in the directed reading course that I was completing when conceptualizing ...*at the end of a stem*. The readings became a printed surface through which to glean beginnings.

### **Part I: ...*at the end of a stem***

Investigating Play as a Solitary Act:

When conceptualizing ...*at the end of a stem*, I sourced directed reading material, particularly work of choreographers Meg Stuart and Trisha Brown. When I see Stuart's work, I feel all of my ages. I wonder what she asks of herself. As well, the work of Trisha Brown attracts me for how it is framed in an environment – sophisticated, unfettered.

Sometimes in its sophistication it looks undone – and she in her solo prowess holds just enough weight in the experience for me to hold onto her by a thread – a fine tracing of connection. Brown's proclivity to trace her process with a type of mark making both in her performance and in her process journaling reminds me of how children may fill a page – how a child may seek to compose. Investigating how these women conceptualize their ideas, their dances, and actualize them when creating work for themselves was of interest to me. I concluded that I was intrigued with how they inhabit space – how they seem free to be – free to play. How do I get to this state? And if I am unwilling to try this out not just in the studio alone but in the presence of others – how can I invite anyone else to play along? Is this how the school-based educators in public schools with whom I work, and who are new to dance, feel? Do they feel too shy to play when moving or dancing?

When reading Meg Stuart and Trisha Brown, I wondered how they described their preoccupations and discovered that their work seems to be built upon curiosity. Stuart's and Brown's description of process stood poised like sentinels gracing the boundaries of my adventure. How might I weave their influence into this process, if at all? Nature provided an immediate answer.

While reading Stuart and Brown, I was caring for my neighbour's garden. The summer was dry. My plans to water the garden every other day changed. The dryness of the summer was dramatic – I had to water it every day. In fact I had to soak it. An hour of my daily solo research for my entire thesis was cut into, leaving me to read Stuart and Brown with one hand while holding a garden hose in the other. Why didn't I video this process? Brown would have, no doubt.

I saw Trisha Brown dance when she was sixty. I didn't need for her to be any other age than what she was. But still I thought, "She is timeless". She is dance – she is open – she is playing in the space and she is inviting me to shift and imagine with her. I take this

image forward and splice it into my own mode of dance making.

When newly conceptualizing a choreographic work, I am often in motion, either walking or performing some small task. My work starts with sensing, walking. Perhaps questions arise, images emerge, and while I connect breath to thought – rising and falling – I imagine moments of play. A new game emerges, or is it the same game with a different casing? I note what is happening to me as this new process begins. This happens as a solitary act until imagining this new process with others. I circle back to the word “play”. It helps me move forward with the kind of joyful momentum that I desire when working with others. I am creating a solo for myself yet I need to describe what I am doing with anyone else who is a part of this process. How do I describe this process – can I describe it better when someone asks me? How do I express to others the experience of being in my work? Is this even necessary? These are questions that arose while forming a methodology for the *I Am* solo.

When forming my methodology for the *I Am* solo, I was aware of the fact that the DanceAbility research and training that I had undertaken caused a shift in my personal movement tendencies and intentions. How would I address this when making ...*at the end of a stem*? The first thing that came to mind was to build the intention of my *I Am* solo, ...*at the end of a stem*, on DanceAbility fundamental elements; sensation, relationship, time and design. Alessi refers to these elements during his presentation at a *TEdxUOregon* event; *All bodies speak*, at the University of Oregon (Alessi 0:03 – 17:59). I took hold of these fundamental DanceAbility elements knowing that I could find an interior pulse in the work through these elements. In other words, I could initiate all movement impulses through sensation/sensing during the entire solo. I could do this while moving in relationship to the space. I could do this by intentionally making different and subtle rhythmic choices in my movement vocabulary. By doing this I could consciously shape the piece through

sensation, relationship and time, starting with sensation. Alessi describes sensation, in its most basic application during his presentation, *All bodies speak*, (Alessi 7:48 – 7:56). I thought this approach could easily align with my past methodologies which trace the origins of what attracts me creatively and how the natural world and constructed world frame my relationship to those with whom I am creatively engaging. I put this tendency aside while working on my MFA. I want any body to receive this dance or even imagine dancing it – in some way. This was nestled in my motivation throughout making ...*at the end of a stem* – but how it manifested is a different story.

I wanted someone with a disability to be part of this dance in some way. How could I connect this process to someone who has a different physical or intellectual orientation than me? I reoriented myself to the task at hand – to create a solo for myself as an able-bodied dancer who investigates play. Would this be enough going forward? I believed so. Still another question surfaced – is there anything that I can do to cast any kind of connection to varied bodies in an honest way? An idea surfaced to do the entire solo in a chair – but choosing to do this would remove my own joy of mobilizing, dancing on foot and connecting playfully to the ground. So I decided to use a chair, but not for the entire dance. I could indeed grow this connection of being seated as a form of connecting to individuals who are chair bound. Done – the piece process started in a chair. Should I set this dance on someone in a wheelchair in the future – then ...*at the end of a stem* could be sharable with bodies that have different physical realities other than my own. I was almost ready to go into the studio to make ...*at the end of a stem* but something else was stirring. Could I utilize some kind of prop in the solo as a symbolic token inspired by dancers with intellectual challenges? Perhaps – but was this another tenuous thread? Maybe. Answers to these questions surfaced during the process of making ...*at the end of a stem* when a token in the form of a gift was given to me.

The garden I mentioned caring for belongs to a woman and her son. Her son has Down's syndrome – he dances. We had talked about getting in the studio together beyond our first experience of taking a workshop together in Toronto with the Swiss company, Theatre HORA. In the meantime, the garden was growing wildly. I was snipping it back in fits and bits to mitigate the unwieldy turns it was taking. Upon the owner's return, she cut me a large bouquet of garden flowers. The bouquet looked like a chorus of loquacious children or perhaps a colony of celebratory cherubs – outgrowing their territory. I was struck with the bouquet's composition – how each stem seemed to order itself into a bundle to be held by hand. This gift marked our three paths crossing – mother's, son's, mine – during the late summer months. The bouquet is a live journal page that triggered my decision to stop gathering research and begin working in the studio. I wanted to see what is possible when I held this bouquet while seated on a chair. The composition of the bouquet inspired how I notated and practiced this dance. The bouquet became a physical talisman to represent some of the communities that I wish to fold into my thesis in the spirit of dance play. I imagined this talisman's yellow and orange hues upon the stage providing a subdued and resilient shimmer when lit. My thought moved into action as I acted upon my imagination. The bouquet was used while I was seated. This gesture spawned hope and trust among me, an able-bodied dancer and a mother and her Down syndrome son John.

This trust in the form of appreciation and play brought forward inspiration in the making and performing of ...*at the end of a stem*. This bouquet propagated a residual effect that gave me the courage to invite John into the next dance of my thesis. My practice-based methodology materialized and its weight was upheld by the act of walking, breathing and playing in the garden. This experience was expressed as a solo but it came to light in the presence of others both in process and in performance even though it was imagined while garden gazing in high summer.



My own background as a visual artist came into play when forming ...*at the end of a stem*. Branches found while walking through the neighbourhood were part of the set, along with live flowers. I held them and swung them and used them as adornments. At times the branches were meant to be an abstract symbol for the audience to interpret. This came into play, when I cradled a branch evoking wings. Later I used a branch as a makeshift headdress, inspired by Helen Storey and her tendency to view garments as a catalyst and/or metaphor. While making ...*at the end of a stem*, I kept sourcing the many projects that Storey instigated as listed on *The Helen Storey Foundation* website. Perhaps I was doing this for a few reasons. One, her garments are transformative and two, there is nothing predictable about them. She made an installation comprised of a glass bead dress that dissolves by fire. Another dress disappears while being submersed in water. I kept going back to Storey, when thinking about costume choices for my *I Am* solo, but I also knew her overall visual art esthetic is something that I wanted to continually research going forward when considering costume and/or production possibilities in working with multi-ability bodies.

While making ...*at the end of a stem*, I had no idea how things would turn out, or if the dance would be a narrative or an abstract piece. I only knew one thing for certain, the room that I would be performing in and the audience proximity to me. I wanted to know how Brown might have addressed audience closeness. When describing *Inside*, a dance she made in 1966, she said:

I moved along the edge of the room, facing out, on the kneecaps of the audience, who were placed in a rectangular seating formation duplicating the interior of my studio. I was marking the edge of the space, leaving the center of the room empty, the movement concretely specific to me, abstract to the audience. And I looked at them. I add the problem of looking at the audience, not “with meaning”, but with eyes open and seeing. *Trisha Brown* (Brunel, Mangolte, Delahaye 32)

This seemed like an important find at this point in my research. Certainly, I need to address this problem of “looking” into the audience not only for my own purposes as a performer but also for every interpreter of my work. I played with this notion of “looking” a great deal in my solo. I wish I had waited longer to share a looking out gaze in ...*at the end of a stem*. Through trial and error in my work as an educator, I often allow time for anyone newly seeing me to peruse my form and take in all of me before the moment of gaze begins. A useful game, I had completely forgotten about. Why didn’t I use this more carefully? Still, in deliberately using this in my solo, it seemed the act of seeing with eyes “open” was made whole when I the performer offered this to the audience, who in turn generously responded by engaging in what I imagined to be a game of seeing.

I also looked to the work of Meg Stuart for inspiration when forming ...*at the end of a stem*. In an interview with Rosslyn Hyams on the French premiere of *Hunter*, Stuart talks about how she prepared for her first full evening solo work. (see Appendix C for interview with Rosslyn Hyams and Meg Stuart on *Hunter*). Stuart talks about accessing her own family history and her own movement archive to look for clues. She wonders how all of her archival information may connect and lead her to where she is now. I found great solace in this, getting to where one is now by accessing what has come before. This is what I tried to do, access what I have done, to do something new, not just for myself but to carry it forward when working with others. What was this solo from my point of view? What did I want the audience to see? Neither of these questions seemed important to define. What was important to me was the question of how I could be true to myself and still mine choreographic tools to be activated for all bodies. Who did I need to be other than myself to find this out? I went to the final image of the dance, me seated with a bouquet of flowers on my lap. This final image encapsulated my desire to be seated in this dance for some or all of it. It also defined a self-portrait of sorts.

Did I get this idea from Stuart?

Arrested in the moment by Stuart's relationship to self, and her ability to capture essence in stillness and in motion, I had to acknowledge what I found through her. André Lepecki, in an essay in *Remembering the Body*, described aspects of Stuart's work plainly provoking wonderment over the risks she takes when composing her work. "Meg Stuart choreographed a still-dance for a man lying down on the ground, reaching for his past memories."<sup>3</sup>

Before going forward into the next project, I sourced the work of Helen Storey again. Her work often starts in one location, with one idea and gathers momentum finding its way into several cities and places. I went to the Helen Storey Foundation website simply looking for any information on Storey's creative process. I wanted to do this before placing my second case-study in a new and different environment. Interestingly enough I had found the following conversation Storey had with a collaborator, London-based scholar Jim Coan at the onset of her project *eye and I*. I was affected by how Storey communicated with her collaborators and how she aimed to remember processes shared with her creative partners. I wanted to do this when approaching individuals involved in my next practice-based case study. The project she spoke about is loaded with emotion, and seemingly not connected to what I wanted to achieve in *(RE)Trace*. Yet what Storey sets out to do "with" her collaborators was revelatory to me at this point in my research. Could I find this same kind of carefully constructed partnership as Storey did when collaborating. I was also attracted to how she not only orchestrates the positioning of her work in other environments but also how in this case, she cultivates an opportunity for the audience to emotionally engage with her work. This was of interest to me heading into *(RE)Trace*.

We seemed to be mutually facinated by the notion of "authentic emotion". In my words, an urge to explore those emotions that best inform you exist. After further conversations and a key trip to New York, the idea for *eye & I* suggested itself. Jim says I began to draw

it on a napkin in a Starbucks down town, I think I drew it for the first time on the plane on the way back home. It was and is a new kind of explorative space for emotional interaction between humans. A room within a room whose purple walls and ceiling are covered with rectangular slots, behind which 16 actors emote polarized emotions in unison; anger/joy, fear/happiness – for 5 minutes at a time (Storey).<sup>4</sup>

## **Part II: *(RE)Trace***

### **Performative Research Manifesting Shared Motivation**

The second study of my research, *(RE)Trace*, took place at The Gardiner Museum in Toronto on September 27, 2015 during Culture Days Weekend. At this point in my research, I wanted to access Feuillet notation, a French dance notation system from the court of Louis XIV.<sup>5</sup> I had first discovered the notations in August, 2104 when rummaging through the dance section stacks in Scott Library. I was not so much interested in the notations for their connection to Louis XIV, simply in awe of their detail. What did these notations mean, and how is it that someone was clever enough to generate them?

When forming choreographic ideas for *(RE)Trace*, I initially accessed Feuillet notation to jump-start the process. I did this by leafing through images found in *An Essay for the Improvement of Dancing*, by historian E. Pemberton. Initially I did this by myself and then with *(RE)Trace* collaborators. I tried walking, running and stopping and starting along the pathways indicated in the images as if the notation images were a floor map. But what if I could not mobilize? I then attempted to communicate the delicacy of these patterns by relying on my fingertips to represent an entire body response to them. By doing this, I was trying to explore miniature movement possibilities to indicate the images before expressing the images with larger, splashy, full body motion. This was interesting to me and I wondered if this could be a starting point with *(RE)Trace* interpreters. In fact this is where I started when working with collaborators.

When formulating *(RE)Trace*, I also revisited choreographic material that I developed when making *Flying Hearts*, a sensorial movement event for multi-ability youth audiences in Toronto at Theatre Direct in April, 2015. Raw material for this project was developed in residence at Beverly Public School in April, 2014. Beverley Public School is a school for students with intellectual and physical disabilities. It has been in existence since the 1950s. Theatre Direct Artistic Director Lynda Hill introduced this community to me. *Flying Hearts* is currently taking on various manifestations ranging from an installation event to a theatrical experience – built upon a call-and-response improvisational modality where friendship, nature and discovery are shared. Dancers Andrew Hartley and Britanny LaRusic perform *Flying Hearts*. It consists of four sections. Sections were enhanced by ceiling projections and video footage collected by Mani Mazinani and by a minimalist text written by Paula Wing (see Appendix D for *Flying Hearts* performance photograph).

My considerations when undertaking *(RE)Trace*, were led by my desire to shape a choreographic and improvisational dance study with individuals and communities with whom I continually collaborate. During this process, I wanted to activate choreographic play with each collaborator.

I approached Gardiner Museum development and program manager Lauren Gould about presenting my second thesis study at the Museum. I worked with Lauren Gould when she was the general manager at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre. Prior to her post at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre, Gould managed the education department at National Museums Liverpool. She was keenly aware of emerging trends in inclusive education in the U.K. when we met in 2010.

When speaking to Lauren Gould, I proposed an event that would include two Down syndrome dancers as well as an intergenerational cast of emergent and seasoned performers, children, and live music and projected Feuillet images. Gould was

enthusiastic to facilitate the event but the only opening for such an event was the day after my *I Am* performance. This caused me to rethink my approach. I proposed bringing *(RE)Trace* to the Museum in the form of a performative research event. Gould liked this idea and wondered if audience participation might be possible. Once we agreed on framing *(RE)Trace* as a performative research event, I began working with Feuillet notation images to develop choreographic material for the event. Gould was excited by the notations and any connections they might have to the Museum's extensive collection of ceramic artifacts. Both she and I agreed that we didn't need to force any connections yet invited the possibility that they may exist.

I wrote information about *(RE)Trace* for the Gardiner Museum website after speaking with Gould about contextualizing my work within the Museum's environment. Conversations with her guided the following approach:

*(RE)Trace: a Performative Research Experience*  
Facilitated and created by Michelle Silagy with performers Sebastian Oreamuno, Jennifer Lynn Dick, Megan Andrews, Andrew Hartley, Brittany LaRusic, John Romney, Dalia and Isadora and Musician Jake Oelrich. *(RE)Trace* is a series of Contemporary Dance improvisational vignettes inspired by 18th century dance notation collection invented by Raoul Auger Feuillet and assembled by E. Pemberton. York University Dance Department MFA candidate Michelle Silagy accesses these intricate notations as an entry portal to create an interactive dance event. Silagy ...mixes dance genres and sensibilities while inviting viewers of all ages to see and experience dance from different viewpoints. *(RE)Trace* is family and child friendly — and — explores both naive and sophisticated treatments of the doing of and the love of dance. (Silagy)

This framing marked an important part of shared motivation taking place between Gould and me. It represented how the Museum community immediately set out to create a finely focused environment for *(RE)Trace*. (see Appendix E for *(RE)Trace* program generated by the Gardiner Museum). This framing also represented how I, as a guest artist, could enrich the Museum's commitment to provide events for families and a wide range of learners. All of the details described above occurred before setting foot in the studio with the interpreters of *(RE)Trace*. This to me is testament to the value of creative

exchange with producers so that the work can bloom expansively within a given environment.

On the first day of studio exploration, Feuillet notation images served as companion tool when making *(RE)Trace*. Captivated by their intricate appearance rather than the steps they represented, I intentionally used Feuillet notation images as a starting point to reverse-engineer improvisational interpretations among all performers. Collaborators were asked to trace perceived pathways noticed within the notations by performing movement initiated by their torso, hands and fingers. I liked this beginning for the simplicity it represented, a seemingly focused entry point to share with all movers.

The first dancer I worked with on *(RE)Trace* was York MA Dance candidate, Sebastian Oreamuno. I introduced Feuillet images to him and asked him to select a favourite. He selected the one he did because it reminded him of a gate – an opening to a magical land. I took this at face value but could not help but to notice that we were both intrigued by the whimsical filigreed appearance of Feuillet notations. I then animated an improvisational study with the Feuillet image in one hand while following the perceived pathways within the image with my free hand. I did this by inverting my opposing hand and wrist to echo the twists and turns present in the image now referred to as the gate. Sebastian and I alternated improvising along this line. I directed him to let go of the physical image and trace the selected image by air-drawing it with fingertips. He did this seated to best access the image before him. I loved that he was seated.

In this very moment, I imagined bringing Feuillet notation forward as a companion tool to use when making dance with movers who are in wheelchairs. I communicated this to Sebastian and we both tried a similar study seated on a piano bench. Our imaginations were reeling. Sebastian and I were in the act of choreographic play. We photographed the process. (see Appendix F for *(RE)Trace* rehearsal process).

At this point, I wanted to know how current choreographers or scholars might

refer to or cite Feuillet notations. I found several passages in *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* by Susan Leigh Foster. The following was of great interest to me given what Sebastian and I explored.

Not only did Feuillet notation propose clear underlying principles that governed each movement, but it also taught the body a new locatedness in space. As part of the instructions for learning to read the notation, Feuillet discussed the relationship of the aspiring dancer to the page on which the notation was printed, even detailing how to hold the book while learning the dance. (Leigh Foster 25)

After reading this I wondered if this notation could inform a new-shared “locatedness” with all *(RE)Trace* interpreters. I also wondered if doing this might inform ensemble interplay. I took this research forward and stepped into the studio with emerging Toronto-based contemporary dance artists Andrew Hartley and Brittany LaRusic. They both worked on the Theatre Direct *Flying Hearts* project with me. They work with children with varied abilities as instructors in the Young Dancers’ Program at The School of Toronto Dance Theatre. I direct this program. Much of the material that I developed with Andrew and Brittany during the *Flying Hearts* project was based on “Call and Response” partner work influenced by DanceAbility exercises. Material was also informed by partner exercises that I have culled when working in school settings. I accessed *Flying Hearts* material when designing movement scores for Andrew and Brittany to interpret in *(RE)Trace*.

Next, I introduced Andrew and Brittany to the Feuillet notations. I asked them to interpret selected images three-dimensionally in space while simultaneously superimposing energetic associations upon their interpretations. A manifestation of this originated by me asking them questions like, what would happen if you use your Feuillet images as a floor map while generating sporadic yet deliberate impulses with your feet? What would happen if you did this while extending your arms lavishly in opposition to



your legs? Material generated from the notation was used as a bridging mechanism connecting Brittany and Andrew to the rest of the ensemble. I explored a final choreographic aspect with Brittany and Andrew by repurposing the prop-based movement material used during the *Flying Hearts* project (see Appendix E: *Flying Hearts* performance photograph). We did this by recalling material generated with the use of large plastic bag props and colourful electrical tape. Although these props were used in the *Flying Hearts* project, the large plastic bags were first discovered as a dance prop in solo dance research during the first year of my MFA candidacy. The electrical tape is a prop that I have used in my work with children to delineate floor pathways for them to play within. Material accessed with Andrew and Brittany now included partner work based on Call and Response, improvisational studies accessing the Feuillet notation, and repurposed prop-based material.

When I looked at these three entry points for material developed with Andrew and Brittany, I was compelled to refer to Trisha Brown and her history of repurposing her own work when placing it in different environments. But still I had to move forward with making *(RE)Trace*. After rehearsing with Andrew and Brittany, I regarded their material as a shared motivation element to expand upon with all movers. I was now ready to bring John and Sebastian into rehearsals with Andrew and Brittany. Before doing this I worked with John one-on-one to show him the kind of work that we would be doing. Once momentum was in place he came to rehearsals to work with Andrew, Brittany and Sebastian. A trio among Sebastian, John and Andrew emerged based on Call and Response. Though simple, it was practiced until all interpreters were fluidly working with one another. Next I brought in two children, Dalia and Isadora, from the Young Dancers' Program, both of whom were familiar with varied ability movers and with Andrew and Brittany. Dalia and Isadora were invited simply to witness the duet material that Andrew and Brittany were working with. I asked them to look for windows – open

spaces – created by Andrew and Brittany, and to dance under and around as if these openings were bridges and pathways. Fluid improvisers, they tried this and from there I shaped material with them. At this point I brought in the remaining collaborators to this process, video artist Mani Mazinani, musician Jake Olerich and virtuosic movement interpreters Jennifer Lynn Dick and Megan Andrews.

I asked Mani Mazinani to photograph and sequence selected Feuillet images that would be projected during the *(RE)Trace* performance. Mani and I went to the Gardiner Museum and worked with Lauren Gould to see what kind of lighting was present in the performance space. Mani hammered out details to create an image slide show that would loop throughout the *(RE)Trace* and in between each of the three performances that would take place on September 27, 2015. Mani and Lauren and I spent a considerable amount of time in the space looking at how the light in the space would impact the projections.

Jake began working with the dancers in the studio and onsite at the Gardiner Museum. He was taken with the baby grand piano at the Gardiner Museum and was excited to play it along with his own percussion kit.

Next I began working with accomplished dance artist Megan Andrews. I envisioned her as a conduit that could fully realize a playful enactment of Feuillet's notation images. I asked her to choose a few images that attracted her immediate attention. She chose one of the concentric circle images. She liked the fact that it represented circles within circles. She also liked the marks at the edges of the circle. We talked about these marks and wondered if they might be starting points. I listened to Megan's thoughts, and on the spot, I suggested an improvisational movement score consisting of movement qualities and initiations for various areas in the room. I was confident to follow this impulse as one precariously dependent on chance, mostly because Megan and I have a history of playing in the studio. This kind of playing has

yielded many choreographic possibilities in the past. It was not until that moment of choosing an impromptu approach with Megan, that I realized any courage that I have mustered to be free in the presence of collaborators, has originated in part as a result of working with burnished collaborators like Megan. I was revisiting my own joy in making work in the moment “with” interpreters. This is how I sought to play with interpreters during *(RE)Trace*. Megan and I continued until there was just enough form in the score for her to interpret and hold onto so that she could carry the score forward consistently for the Gardiner Museum performances.

This movement score I generated instantly was a result of our influences on each other. I regarded this as not only an enactment of choreographic play but also as a manifestation of shared motivation. This happened in an environment that Megan and I fully relished, Studio B at York University with its windows framing rectangular prisms of light spilling onto the studio floor. We know this light. It is the light of all of the studios we have worked in before, the same light that Megan would undoubtedly celebrate in *(RE)Trace* at the Gardiner Museum. This light graced our motivation, adding brightness to this playful experience. I took pause at this moment to concretely acknowledge the impact of play materializing in my practice-based research with Megan. She manifested this playfulness by rising and falling, by spinning and springing in any given moment of her improvisational executions.

Our interpretation of Feuillet’s notations was not an accurate physical depiction of the notation, yet I wanted to believe that we captured the essence of what the notations might represent. Big bold fanciful imaginings on my part, yet seeing Andrews play with the Feuillet images and the vertical and horizontal axes that they represented, provided me with hope that these images could represent a grid to play with and place in many locations and with many different bodies.

Finely tuned professional dancers are capable of rendering movement developed

in detail from rehearsal to rehearsal, making it possible for me to see the potential of how what we are doing could find its way to the performance space. This seems to happen almost instantaneously with artists like Megan. She manifested an altered state of awareness in her creative expression. The other collaborators on this project have not had as much time to develop this skill. I did not want to isolate her or burden her with being the “enlightened vortex” of this work, if such a vortex could at all be present in *(RE)Trace*. I felt *(RE)Trace* would best serve her, and her it, if she had a seasoned performer to share performance possibilities with in *(RE)Trace*. Enter richly communicative Jennifer Lynn Dick, and her gloriously generous ability to dance “with” everyone she is working with. Jennifer was pursuing her MA at York. Her time was precious. How might I involve her? I knew that I wanted her to grace the performance event at the Gardiner Museum. With little effort and volumes of experience, I knew that she would bring an element to the performance that would engage the viewer.

Jennifer and I co-made a work together titled *HOME/WORK*. I asked her if she would be willing to repurpose short excerpts of *HOME/WORK* into *(RE)Trace*. She was. We worked over three rehearsals to coordinate material and a duet with Sebastian Oreamuno. It was Jennifer who suggested that Sebastian bring his pointe shoes into their duet somehow. I listened. I played fluidly because I could do so with partners like Jennifer and Sebastian. I shaped choices rapidly with them. I didn’t bring the Feuillet images forward for Jennifer to improvise with, yet showed them to her. Without saying a word, we both understood that she could absorb their influence and play with them during the performance without losing stride. This was enough for us and for the dance.

When all elements of this performative research were in place, I worked with outside eye Wendy Chiles to build transitions between each miniature episode present in *(RE)Trace*. We rehearsed with Jake onsite at the Museum. A final touch was required to complete *(RE)Trace*. Lauren Gould requested audience participation. I activated this

through Andrew, Brittany, Dalia and Isadora. The audience was invited to dance in the performance space to live music. I invited Sandra, a Down syndrome dancer, to come to each performance to be part of this experience. It was a way to bring her into the work for her own pleasure but also it gave her the choice to participate or not.

The connecting thread that united this ensemble was a willingness to play within the simple patterns offered to them. The collaborators on this process represented all of the communities that I engaged with. This was meaningful to me because whether or not this performance was perceived as successful, to me it was the physical expression of what I was seeking to discover in my research – dynamic choreographic engagement with all bodies.

Something unexpected occurred after the second *(RE)Trace* performance. A man introduced himself to me as Isadora's father. Isadora was one of the young performers in *(RE)Trace*. I have taught Isadora for five years but have never met her father before. He has a condition that makes it difficult for him to be in gatherings where sound levels are higher than he can comfortably tolerate. I did not know this. *(RE)Trace* had made it possible for him to see his daughter dance in public for the first time. He was able to see her dance without being destabilized due to the acoustics of the Gardiner Museum. This is what he said. He was beside himself with joy. Play, ensemble, family, an experience for different abilities, another environment to experience choreographic engagement in, this was some of what was present in *(RE)Trace*. (see Appendix G for *(RE)Trace* performative research photographs).

Any doubts that I have ever had about mining the potential of overlapping processes and tools found through the lens of playfulness, in both the making of dance and the experience of teaching it, were eradicated in the making of *(Re)Trace*. I was loathe to analyze *(RE)Trace* once it was over. Still, I wanted to consider parallel research that occurred during this process, especially *A Dream Journey to the Unknown*

by Eeva Anttila. I welcomed her words in my want of forming temporary closure with *(RE)Trace*. She offered the following in reference to a community project:

“Voices of other people who took part in this journey displace me as being the sole centre of this work. Instead of one centre there are many centres. Thus, the focus of this work is a shared world: on moments of life that my students, my colleagues and I shared”.  
(Anttila 290)

I assert this shared world that Anttila mentions above is not a new discovery for her. It is not a new “aha” discovery to me. Rather, what she describes above is what happens when choreographic collaborative engagement is sought. Any artist educator who loves working in the field has found what she mentions through trial and error. Creating a “shared world,” as Anttila puts it, is necessary to do better than average work in school and community work. It is what is required to make an indelible impression for all involved. Yet how Anttila says what she says is compelling. “...A shared world...” is possible in dance. I believe it is what humans long for, a chance to belong to each other while doing something together. I believe this occurred in *(RE)Trace*. Anttila brings me to this. I find joy in her words for what they represent. This empowered me to continually seek partnerships, as a practice-based dance artist who shares dance with many communities.

What of the audience for this work? I don’t know exactly how they experienced or viewed *(RE)Trace*, but I wanted them to be able to contextualize it within a world of art being made now. I wanted them to see it as a contemporary expression and to see that this contemporary expression involves all bodies. Did Lauren Gould assist this in any way? Prior to each *(RE)Trace* performance, Gardiner Museum development and program manager, Lauren Gould introduced me. This introduction represented a focused entry point for the performance to situate itself within the Museum. Following this, I explained to the audience that what they were about to see was performative

research and that we would be following a very structured improvisational score. They knew that the interpreters represented various communities that I had worked with.

The audience seemed ready to invest in seeing things differently. And so they did kindly and with the care that any performance deserves. During the performance of *(RE)Trace* I was also reminded once again of Alessi's words in his *TEDxUOregon* presentation at the University of Oregon. He starts his presentation by saying "It's good to see things differently than you usually do, to let the way that you usually perceive things be different (Alessi 0:03 – 0:14)". I hoped that my second case study would give audience members an opportunity to see things differently.

When making *(RE)Trace*, it occurred to me I had seen the word 'trace' multiple times during my parallel research in reference to how choreographers define all stages of their choreographic process and how they want to remember their process before moving onto something new. All artists seem to do this. Storey did this as well. This was curious to me. In fact, I had made a piece called *Trace* in 2004 in response to textile artist Kai Chan's solo exhibit entitled *A Walk in the Wilderness* at The Textile Museum of Canada. I chose this name because I was responding to Chan's work in the form of dance response. I wanted to trace his process and the physical blueprints of his work while making *Trace*. Then, in 2004, I attempted to physicalize tracings in space as a geometric three-dimensional exercise that could contain human effort, communication and emotion. Is this what I had done in part at the Gardiner Museum with collaborators and the fanciful use of the Feuillet notations? I thought so but wanted to look at this process again in light of weight, the weight of the body in space relative to multi-ability bodies. Did *(RE)Trace* represent an opportunity to renew information beyond my own choreographic leanings? I wanted to believe *(RE)Trace* was a renewed proposal of how all bodies could and do dance with each other.

After completing *(RE)Trace*, I walked through the Museum to give thanks for

what had just happened. Being thankful in the moment had made it possible to acknowledge that the miracle of putting this show together under such a tight timeline was possible due to the familiarity I shared with each collaborator. Trust was formed early on in the process. Megan and Jennifer accelerated it and it was present throughout process and performance. I believed this was due not only to the generosity of each collaborator but also largely due to the simplicity of the movement approach. *(RE)Trace* was built upon Call and Response. There was plenty of space in the choreography for the interpreters to notice what they were doing, who they were doing it with and where they were doing it. These are all fundamental elements of the DanceAbility Methodology. All of which are built upon sensation – an awareness of how one’s body is moving and how one responds in relationship to others. *(RE)Trace* was then a manifestation of all the research I had undertaken, a folding in of influences held together by a simple improvisational score for interpreters to sense and express wholly. Before moving on to *Snowlight*, I took time to reflect further upon *(RE)Trace* in light of research that was influencing me up until this point.

Seeing and sensing each collaborator for what they could readily offer became paramount in *(RE)Trace*. Facilitating a process for all collaborators to individually and collectively sense and experience invested engagement became necessary. This brought me back to a fundamental aspect of DanceAbility Methodology, sensing. I thought that a “sensing” casing or mechanism through which to share gaze and focus needed to be cultivated among interpreters. This is something that needed to occur for the interpreter and the viewer. This is something that needs to happen regardless of the physical or intellectual ability of any interpreter. Where were we together and what were we doing? What sensing, seeing and looking could be experienced between the choreographer and interpreters? What did and could we see in each other? How could I as a choreographer create an environment that fosters an invitation for both the mover



and the watcher not only to see but also to sense each other anew? This also brought me to understand that the audiences for my case studies were not passive participants. They were as much of a contributing partner to choreographic engagement as any influence in this research. The audience merited careful consideration at each point of my research process. *(RE)Trace* audience engagement solidified this belief. I kept asking myself how to activate this consideration during the making of *(RE)Trace*. The answer to this question seemed unsolvable since the *(RE)Trace* process occurred over a very brief time frame. How could choreographic engagement coalesce among the ensemble and extend itself outward to the viewer over a short period of time? Without fully realizing it at the time, in an attempt to answer this question, I had chosen Megan Andrews and Jennifer Lynn Dick to be part of *(RE)Trace*. Their experience as performers perpetuated momentum for choreographic engagement to occur within the ensemble. Emergent dance artist Brittany LaRusic mentioned how much she had learned as an artist by performing with Megan and Jennifer. She noticed their impact by “sensing” it and feeling it. Brittany’s comments caused me to believe that sensing was happening on multiple levels during the performance of *(RE)Trace*. I wanted also to remember that Megan and Jennifer also activated a group consciousness among the ensemble and among the ensemble and audience making it plausible for *(RE)Trace* to authentically acknowledge the audience as an active participant in *(RE)Trace*.

### **Part III: *Snowlight***

#### **Activating and Synthesizing Research Discovery**

Before working with members of the York Dance Ensemble I felt compelled to get my house in order. In doing this I came to acknowledge that my research was a lens through which to newly synthesize each aspect of my research. I attempted to access this lens in the process of *Snowlight*. I had come to the process of *Snowlight* fully aware

that I possessed more knowledge and experience than the interpreters. Yet I was on equal footing with them in that I had no idea what the end result of our union would be. This was our shared beginning, the foundation for our shared choreographic engagement. This could happen with any collaborator with whom I might work in the future.

The process for *Snowlight* in many ways started when I performed an introductory solo presentation for MFA faculty and my MFA colleagues in September, 2014. During this presentation, I had referenced Trish Beatty's influence on my esthetic. It was after performing that solo that I realized the extraordinary influence that Beatty has had on me. Beatty's use of textiles is meticulous, as if she considers fabric a dancing partner. I let this influence go, until I walked through the *Snowlight* process. *Snowlight* premiered in *New Light/Ancient Light* on February 10, 2016 at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre, York University (see Appendix H: *New Light/Ancient Light* Program). The York Dance Ensemble dancers who interpreted *Snowlight* were Shaelynn Lobbezoo, Amanda Marrone, Joshua Murphy, Paige Sayles, Kiera Shaw and Julianna Velocci. Professor William Mackwood was the Lighting Designer. He also crafted the set and projections based on our conversations and inspirations regarding how the visual environment for this dance might take shape. I wrote the following description for *Snowlight* in the program:

*Snowlight* is fuelled by a fascination with images of 18<sup>th</sup> century Feuillet Notation. They remind me of tracings or pathways etched in fallen snow. I am interested in the potentiality of these images – what they represent and evoke – as a revelatory companion to the making of dance for multi-ability interpreters and viewers. These notations coupled with gesture-based vocabulary became a point of departure in the making of *Snowlight* – guiding a dance made in the presence of each other while anticipating the impending weight of snow. (Silagy)

The first solo that I made for the Initiating, Forming and Performing Choreography in September, 2014 also greatly informed *Snowlight*. We were given a piece of music, *A Sudden Manhattan of the Mind*, composed by the illustrious German-born British musician and composer Max Richter. Richter is known for being an influential voice in “post minimal” composition. His work possesses a mix of genres labeled as contemporary classical, ambient, minimalist and post-minimalist. Shamelessly, I used his music almost exclusively in every practice-based research dance that I made between September, 2014 and February, 2016. Why did I do this? I was infatuated by his compositions, which to me sounded as if they were being made in the moment, heard yet composed out of devotion to all the music Richter may have ever heard. This was a big projection on my part but the crux of it is that I felt in good company with Richter’s work. I believed his masterful artistry would provide needed grace while I floundered through making dance studies quickly.

When Professor Carol Anderson handed us *A Sudden Manhattan of the Mind*, I began imagining a solo that would directly connect to my research involving multi-ability bodies. As an able-bodied dancer how do I do this? Where is the entry-point to make this dance relevant to what I am seeking to find. I listened to the music, and thought of the streets of Manhattan, their energy. Were the streets of Manhattan wheelchair friendly? After listening further, my experience of performing in Vienna at the Museum Quarters in 2012 with four wheelchair dancers came back to me. We were poised at the foot of the Museum steps, bringing attention to accessibility or the lack of it to individuals in wheelchairs. We were out in the public in and among viewers in the context of a DanceAbility “*Informance*” as Alessi calls them. An “*Informance*” is where the public happens upon a DanceAbility performance in a public site-specific event (Alessi 6:21).

At this moment I embraced my experience of working with multi-ability bodies and stopped worrying about how the dance would connect to my research. I relied on

the music and my research intent to guide process for this dance. I decided that this first dance made in September, 2014 would have wheels in it for me to maneuver.

Something else emerged, the inspiration that I received from the Down syndrome dancers that I teach in the Young Dancers' Program. My mind went to one dancer, Sandra. I wondered what if anything obstructs her mobility and then remembered her mother mentioned how much Sandra hates snow. She doesn't like walking in it. It makes her feel unsteady.

With all of this information, I went into the studio in Fall, 2014. I had wanted to pile snow on stage to communicate the effort of having to get through unplowed pathways. This idea was too elaborate. Still I wanted to use snow. In that moment – I considered using snow in the third and final dance that I was required to make for my MFA thesis. I wanted it because of how it falls and how it potentially thwarts plans to mobilize movers on foot, in wheelchairs and in vehicles. With this in mind, I wondered about the visual theatrics of snow and thought to work on some kind of mini-version of working with snow in the studio. First I created makeshift snow-globes using clear plastic bags and shredded paper. Not subtle enough. Then I tried various weights of paper cut to bits. Then, I started cutting up single sheets of tracing paper. I loved the tissue paper for how it expressed the lightness of falling snow. At this point I was imagining the potential mess that this might make, but felt certain that what I was concocting was sensitive enough to any staging concerns that may later occur. Next I began working with the wheeled tables in the York studios. Some of the wheels moved well and others did not. I used two tables in the dance; one fully functioned as a transport gizmo and the other as a broken prop. All of the above became groundwork for *Snowlight*.

Fast-forward to Fall 2015 when I began to work on the third and final practice-based research dance. This was my last chance to sort through the direction that I would take with this dance. I met with Professor William Mackwood to talk about the dance. At

this point I was still considering using snow. We talked about production and clean up realities surrounding snow, how it might fall and from where. I still liked the idea of tissue paper but what about having snow dusted on trees and branches? What about suspending clouds from the ceiling with snow falling from the clouds? Mackwood and I also discussed the Feuillet notations at length. I mentioned that they would be part of the dance somehow. I wondered if they could be projected. Mackwood saw *(RE)Trace*. He wondered if we could reverse the images, meaning, could the Feuillet line drawings appear as white on a black background. He thought that if I decided to use snow this would be a nice touch. I wondered about surfaces for the Feuillet images to be projected upon. I liked a layering idea or the possibility that the images could manifest in different scales. Our conversations seemed to forward possibilities. The more we spoke, the more I liked the idea of snow being in the dance. How would this relate to my research? I suspended this question trusting that it would.

I was getting ready to work with six dancers from the York Dance Ensemble. It was my intention to also bring Melissa Addison-Webster, a Toronto-based wheelchair dancer, into the dance. We had planned for this but availability made it impossible to involve her. Neither of us knew that this would come to pass when I began rehearsals, so I designed the first third of the dance with her involvement in mind. *Snowlight* was made to start with dancers moving in and out of a formal diagonal line. It was my intention to harmonize pathways made by Melissa in her chair with these diagonal lines. Once I knew that Melissa was not in the dance, I opted to keep the diagonal lines in the dance because I still wanted to imagine individuals in chairs in relationship to them.

Once I knew for certain that Melissa was not going to be in the dance, I shaped the dance with the six York Dance Ensemble dancers while dialoguing with Mackwood about projection possibilities. First I developed ensemble unison phrases. I did this to establish a united front among the dancers. It seemed to work. Next I began to shape

duets. It was my intention to make three duets, each of them different but made to run parallel to each other. How and why should I do this? I knew that it would be a stretch to make three dances that would occur simultaneously. What I had hoped to achieve was an expression of three sets of partners working together within their duets and within the group. Could this idea of partnering exist in the context of ensemble Interplay? This question was informed by my work with multi-ability children. Sometimes in order for group harmony to exist, individuals need to be paired off doing their own thing. How would this work in a performance? I didn't know but wanted to find out. I proceeded to create duet material first with Kiera and Amanda, second with Joshua and Paige and lastly with Julianna and Shaelynn.

The duet made with Julianna and Shaelynn was designed to be easily adapted for seated dancers whether able-bodied or not. I wanted an available simplicity to exist in their work where anyone could recreate parts of it or respond to any one part of their dance in the moment that they were dancing it. Originally, I had intended to put them as far downstage as possible. I imagined snow falling and being caught by them over the course of their duet, but I needed to change their location later in the process. At first I wondered if they both felt too exposed in my initial placement of them, but in the end I wondered if they could not fully sense what the others were doing when they were dancing. And if this were true, perhaps they felt too disconnected from the group making ensemble interplay unreachable in the moment.

The dance was playing its course. I had no difficulty generating material for this group, yet felt the dancers needed to find themselves and each other in the dance. Still the willingness in the room was more than any choreographer could ever ask for. Once I had enough material in play, I brought in the Feuillet notations. This is where improvisational tools and approaches dropped into the dance. The dancers in their duets were asked to select an image. Each dancer was also asked to select an individual

image. Once they had their images, I gave them each directives to shape a solo based on their individually selected images. The studies that they generated became the blueprint for the snow dances. They worked on these solos with me on one day. The following rehearsal they worked on them with Sebastian Oreamuno because I was away in Mexico City doing further research with Alito Alessi and a community of multi-ability dancers. While I was in Mexico City, I was deeply affected by all of the dancers that I was dancing with in Mexico. I was reminded of the relationship that many wheelchair dancers have to the ground. When someone cannot mobilize one part of their body, especially their legs, the weight of their body is very difficult for anyone else to move or manipulate. I was reminded just how grounded some of the dancers were. I was reminded of how very different my way of movement is in contrast to these dancers who are grounded out of necessity. I imagined how and where our movement gifts may meet and intersect, not just functionally, but how they may do so poetically in the name of dance. This is what I came back to York wondering before my next rehearsal with the York Dance Ensemble dancers. I continued making work with them. We started working with the snow. This snow and how it moved, this lightness was the polar opposite to the unmovable weight that I had felt in Mexico City.

Earlier in this essay, I stated that the goal of my research has been to originate improvisational and choreographic processes and choreography that can be experienced and understood by all who take part in it. I believe that I newly revealed another parallel layer of improvisational potential that could exist in process and performance among all bodies even though *Snowlight* was created on six able-bodied dancers. My discovery was/is not new, but I found it anew. It was in the working with the snow and seeing it on stage that I came to see the potential for how props may “dance” within a space. Initially I did not regard the snow as having the potential to be part of manifesting choreographic play because it was made of inanimate matter. How I came

to view the treatment and impact of the snow radically changed as a result of utilizing it in this work.

While the snow constructed for *Snowlight* was made of tissue paper, an inanimate material, it was light enough to ride on the air particles and currents permeating the stage space. The snow became animate because it was light enough to ride upon the wafts of current generated by the dancers. This was not an esoteric reality but a physical reality. This dance of snow was illuminated by how the light fell upon the snow and how the dancers responded to this. During the second evening of the performance, I was able to see this as ensemble interplay among performers and among all of the production levels in this work. I was able to see this because of how the piece was lit. I was so moved by this that it was impossible for me to analyze my observation at the time. It was only possible to experience it.

During the third evening of the performance, I felt the dancers summon a vibrant ambiance because of each other. I saw the snow animating the physical energy in the theatre. I imagined in this moment that the snow was a lens for the sharing of breath, vitality and expression that was transpiring among all players in this game to include the audience. I saw how William Mackwood the lighting designer considered this long ago when initially lighting *Snowlight*. In the moment of seeing this dance and all of its production elements harmonize, I felt something shift – weight – the weight of air, the weight of immobile limbs. I saw my research intent materialize in my desire to share time, relationship, sensation, and design with all bodies. This happened through the dancers and all collaborators (see Appendix J for *Snowlight* ensemble photographs).

*Snowlight* was inspired and informed by Sandra, a Down syndrome dancer, by how she moves and by her relationship to snow. I don't know that I ever shared this with the dancers but it was always on my mind. When waking up the following day after the last performance, it is the first thing that came to mind. I shared this with Sandra's



mother, a visual artist, who like me is inspired by the unfettered, sheer brilliance of her daughter's artistic genius. Yes I said it. I am not patronizing Sandra. In fact when contemporary dance doyenne Patricia Fraser first saw Sandra dance, she said she was a true post-modernist. She wasn't being trite. Fraser never is when it comes to contemporary dance. Thank you Sandra. In this moment I knew that Sandra is not only a student of mine, she is a fellow artist and she is also one of my multi-ability mentors. *Snowlight* research and collaborators brought me not just to wish for this but to know this, to experience this and to be grateful for the ways that Sandra has transformed my perception of inclusivity.

Seeing *Snowlight* on a proscenium stage gave me an opportunity to imagine how I might craft stage work for all bodies. During this process I re-found the value of building a piece upon relationships emerging among the players to the game. Partnership came to the foreground. I wanted to find the ensemble by initially working with unison movement material to establish as a united front. I counterbalanced this by establishing internal intimacy by developing duet partner work.

This is where a much-trusted teaching tool that I have acquired from school-based educators dropped into the *Snowlight* process. I had employed a functional yet overused teaching tool propagated in schools throughout Ontario. It is called "Think, Pair, Share." It is what educators do when they want to ensure that everyone in the group has a voice. They pair up individuals to achieve something together and then the pair shares what they think and/or made together with the group. They do this just in case someone feels isolated or too shy to speak for him or herself. This "Think, Pair and Share" also inspired me to try duets out in *Snowlight*. I wanted to see how the dancers would activate Call and Response. Shaping movement choices through duets afforded me with a view to see each dancer in relationship to someone other than himself or herself. Overlapping of choreographic tools and school-based teaching tools was in play.

Once I identified this reality, I felt free to navigate the inspirational and researched information leading up to this piece. How would I synthesize each aspect of my research? I did not know yet I had imagined putting research elements into an invisible basket to make available to all *Snowlight* collaborators. These elements – Sandra’s story, sharing breath, falling, gravity and grace, the delicacy of Feuillet’s notations, the lightness of snow, the weight of immobile limbs, playing, circles, and tracings – were the raw material ready to be formed into a dance. I kept an inventory of these elements while committing to share them while doing one thing at a time. But something else was needed, a willingness to work with “seriousness, joy and clarity” (Beatty 80.)

Seriousness, joy and clarity were realized through choreographic engagement among the interpreters. It was our partnership that guided choices. When I came to trust this, I realized that choreography is an embodiment of choices, it is the exchange of information. Animating choreography requires the exchange of breath among collaborators. This inhalation and exhalation is the medium to build work upon. This breath cannot be held, it has to circulate among the ensemble to best reach the audience. I wanted to believe this could happen even when it was not during rehearsals in the absence of viewers.

The kind of choreographic engagement that this research pursued required the audience as receptor and as active participant to complete it. *Snowlight* was blessed by feedback and insights offered by those who saw it. I responded to all and any feedback with full confidence. Choreographic engagement to me meant responding to what the viewer saw and imagined. This brought me to the most precious find of this study. Dance expressed and witnessed can resituate itself through the act of dynamic choreographic exchange. Choreography is never static – it, like its inhabitants, is always in a state of change.

## OUTCOMES

What I had discovered and considered in the sum total of my research at first appeared impossible to track. But then an obvious reality set in; whatever had occurred during my process had settled into my bones. This investigation had become a part of me. I had paid attention to what was happening at each moment of this research, making it possible to contain and articulate this process while constantly being reminded that each aspect of my research was influencing all the others. I was left not only to trust the effectiveness of practice-based research but also to hold it in deep regard. It was time to notice and share what I had found. I went back to my beginning intention, to investigate ways to share both processes and performative aspects of choreography by utilizing a practice-based methodology in the creation of my three choreographic case studies (see Appendix J for DVD of Choreography). I also acknowledged that the practice-based methodology was defined and supported by research running parallel to each of these case studies. I had done what I set out to do. What I did not expect was a radical repositioning in how I made, shared and taught dance.

This radical shift was in play from the start of my MFA candidacy, but changed dramatically when I began working on *...at the end of a stem* and *(RE)Trace* simultaneously. *(RE)Trace* was made in twenty-one days. During this period of time, there was little room to get lost. There was only time to trust, to be curious, to move forward, to play fully. With this in mind I rode on multiple waves of inspiration and gifts given in the form of collaborators and researched information formed by scholars and practitioners. I had acted upon what was offered and found. This became the play that I had imagined.

This was an important reality because my previous approach was to work intuitively over long periods of time. I did not have time to second guess myself and undo any intuited choices. Most of the changes that I made to the process came from

suggestions made by others. This was new to me – allowing others to influence my process required another layer of trust. I also needed to step back from the work quickly and then re-submerge myself in it. This created a dynamic mechanism for seeing the work while it was being made. During each case study, I was able to do this with greater awareness, especially at the eleventh hour when manifesting *Snowlight*. The three case studies of my research served as a meta-lens through which I could view the bigger picture of this research.

Through these studies I aspired to synthesize all of the influences that emerged in my research. Attempting this synthesis felt like forming a crazy quilt or a collage that would never come together if not for choosing a point of focus to begin each process. Process transparency is what I was after when accessing the various threads of my research. If asked how I synthesized research influences, I would say I never attempted to separate any of the research influences from each other. Still, I needed to do one thing at a time. An example of this was in the winter of 2015, when I performed the initial showing of my *Fabulous Beast “Moth”* solo a day before leaving for Montevideo, Uruguay to complete my *Master DanceAbility Teacher Certification*. I had performed while being present in the moment, yet was poised to leave the country on a seventeen-hour trip the next day. Raw and exposed; this became the modus operandi of any research synthesis that was in play. As much as I tried to do one thing at a time, I was reminded of the futility of trying to separate the influences of my research from one another. Synchronicity among all research elements availed in high definition at every juncture of my studies. Circumstances continually pointed to this. I was reminded in Montevideo that everything that I was doing was connected.<sup>6</sup>

During the summer of 2015, when creating and performing the *I Am* solo – I struggled to position the act of creation within the context of how it related to my thesis. The aim of my thesis was to examine my own process for the purposes of sharing it.

Through ...*at the end of a stem*, I had aimed to authenticate this process as one relative to or worth sharing with all bodies. I asked myself time and time again, what of my process is shareable with bodies very different than my own? This brought me to how I regarded my identity as a performer in ...*at the end of a stem*.

I did not see myself as a special performer. I had simply wanted to share the underpinnings and the depth of breath in my form, with an audience. This is what I tried to do in ...*at the end of a stem*. Feedback from the audience indicated that what I had wanted to share transmitted to at least some audience members. There were three young performers in particular, who articulated interest in my work. They wanted to talk about my performance quality, my presence. They seemed to be intrigued with my performance even though it was, in my opinion, devoid of athletic virtue. Yet perhaps how I had performed resonated enough with them to cause questions revealing a desire to know more about how I danced and how I had assembled ...*at the end of a stem*. After conversing with them, it occurred to me that what they found in me was something that I wanted to find when working with multi-ability dancers. All of the young performers noticed a sustained tension throughout my work. Many of them described my work as delicate, present, vulnerable, yet containing unrelenting focus. This surprised me. I took this to mean or at least I wanted it to mean that even though ...*at the end of a stem* was devoid of technical virtuosity, it contained minimal movement and tiny gestures that were saturated with palpable tension and intent. This was my interpretation of what they said.

This was a powerful find. I wondered how I might guide multi-ability performers to saturate gaze, minute gestures and/or broad-brush stroke movement with this kind of powerful intent in the future. I wanted to pursue this question further when working with any body during dance making processes and performances in the future. These same viewers were also curious about how I made ...*at the end of a stem*. What brought me to choose the props? How long did it take to incorporate them? How did the props become

so much a part of the dance? One viewer later revealed that she was so taken with my treatment of props that she tried using flowers in a dance she was working on. Through dialoguing with her, I had realized again the residual impact that Trish Beatty's treatment of props has had on me.<sup>7</sup>

During the making of *...at the end of a stem* and *(RE)Trace*, I became preoccupied with "seeing" both with looking at the audience and with how the audience was looking at me. I had also considered this in light of sharing work with all bodies. Reading up on how Trisha Brown addressed looking at the audience instigated this. This contributed to what I believed to be part of the big picture of my research. I tried getting at this by starting with myself and subsequently when choreographing with project collaborators.

The timeline of my research seemed loaded with an urgency that I had not previously experienced. I had tried to remain present in the company of collaborators in the making of *...at the end of a stem* and *(RE)Trace* while pulling at the threads of my past and while accessing current research to inform the present. Before moving onto the making of *Snowlight*, I wondered if it was at all sane to rock back and forth between the doing of dance and seeking insight from dance practitioners and scholars past and present. Brown and Stuart provided me with windows of hope during this process. Both of these creators seemed to go back and forth between what they made and what they were newly making to guide choices. This was unsettling, but I believed synthesizing each aspect of my research was what was needed for the making of *Snowlight*.

The hardest yet most significant discovery of the sum total of this research occurred while conceptualizing *Snowlight*. During this time I had to acknowledge that process plans do not always materialize as projected. I had intended to build this work with a wheelchair dancer. Circumstances prevented this from happening. This corroborated a hunch that I had about the importance of timing and flexibility when

working with multi-ability artists. Timing has to be adjusted when considering the needs of all multi-ability collaborators in any given process. But this reality was only one consideration that I had when contextualizing choreographic engagement for all bodies in the bigger picture of contemporary dance and/or dance.

Working with bodies that have very different needs in the context of choreographic engagement means considering their needs at every turn while co-creating with multi-ability dancers. It does not mean being a caregiver to these needs. Innovative artistic exchange is possible with all bodies. Seeing multi-ability performers as dynamic artists in the process of choreographic engagement is not only possible, it is necessary if multi-ability movers are to be viewed as equal participants to any given process. I found that it is necessary for me to uphold and practice this viewpoint if I am expecting audiences to see multi-ability movers as fully realized contributors to dance processes and performances going forward.

The collaborators and I, as the facilitator, uphold the outcome of this research yet the audience for each case study also informs the outcome. Conversations with those who have viewed my practice-based research led me to conclude that audiences are longing to connect with the dances they see. I believe, it is up to any maker of multi-ability dances to provide audiences with carefully produced work that supports deep connections to occur among the dance and the viewer. I argue esthetic choices by way of props, sets or any production aspects of the work are part of creating carefully composed work. Production elements, like choreographic material, could be re-considered based on any transformations that dance facilitators are experiencing when making multi-ability dances. I referenced the innovative work of Beatty and Storey to support this belief when making the case studies of this research.

Alito Alessi so often states, “it is a good idea to see things differently than you usually do” (Alessi 0:07). Through this research I discovered the importance of taking

more time to see things differently than I usually do when working with the Down syndrome dancers. I had also found how very important it is to establish familiarity among the families of Down syndrome dancers involved in any given project. I found that choreographic engagement includes the families of collaborators. Sometimes families need to add to the information pool regarding how I can fully engage with collaborators on projects involving multi-ability movers.

Going forward in placing multi-ability performance into the mosaic of contemporary dance, I argue that this is essential. Still this information is not nearly as valuable as sensing what is possible with all movers regardless of their ability in the moment of creation. This brings me back to sensation. Taking time to sense process with collaborators was an important find in this research. Sensing and experiencing ourselves, as well as who we are dancing with, while being cognizant of what is happening around us, is possible with any body. It is what this research sought to do. Sensation, sensing oneself and sensing co-collaborators, sensing the viewer – sensing is the door through which choreographic play can be considered or activated, given willingness and interest.

The world of contemporary dance is very pre-occupied with knowing more about multi-ability dance. I argue that approaching this preoccupation through sensation as Alessi suggests, is not only a profoundly necessary entry point, but also one that invites extraordinary joyful engagement. This kind of engagement spawns clarity. And where there is clarity, there is the promise of utilizing choreographic tools to maximum effect. DanceAbility presents itself as a comprehensive method for activating movement involvement among all populations of movers. In the future I hope to share discoveries made during my MFA research and bring them forward into the bigger picture of working with all bodies in the context of contemporary dance through my own practice, and through ongoing communication with other DanceAbility practitioners. I hope that the



growing population of movers who have unique physical and intellectual abilities will be part of ongoing choreographic research in contemporary dance. I am also excited about collaborating with artists in other disciplines to make work that is inclusive. My guiding aim overall is to investigate, explore and work to find new possibilities for inclusivity within the broader dance community, and within the dynamic culture of local, national, and international artistic exchange.

## CONCLUSION

I am attempting to share my choreographic process with the many communities with which I interface. This seems joyfully possible having witnessed how deeply collaborators engaged with and listened to each other during each of my three case studies (see Appendix J for DVD and notes of case study choreography). Dance to me is a partnership – I am motivated to share dance beyond myself while accessing as much of myself as is possible. Ready myself to do this is an onerous task. Yet the meta-lens afforded during this research confirms that choreographing is rarely a solitary act. Choreographic engagement is more often than not made more joyful when shared. I wait and wonder with whom I may have the privilege to dance in the future. I wonder how or if it may be possible to retrace these findings anew when seeing any dance form with which I may be less familiar. How will I see dance? How will I look at it? How will I become a more fully realized audience member who sees the potential of any body expressing movement? What new dance will land into me? How can I ride upon any ripple effect of this practice-based research and authentically place its findings within a renewed revolution that is before us now in contemporary dance – the promise of choreographic engagement with any and all bodies?

## NOTES

1. DanceAbility founder Alito Alessi speaks in depth about DanceAbility Methodology in an interview with Jenni Malarkey. See Malarkey, Jenni. "An Interview with Alito Alessi." Interview. *DanceAbility*. DanceAbility International, 2012. Web. 23 Feb. 2016. "<<http://www.danceability.com/malarkeyInterview.php>>

2. See The Helen Storey Foundation website link for community collaborations projects like "*Catalytic Clothing*" instigated by professor and artist Helen Storey. I referenced Storey's website often during my three practice-based case studies for costume inspiration for each study. She has a visual art esthetic and plays with perception. I first became familiar with her work in 1996 when I found an item that she designed on Queen Street in Toronto. Her garments were not affordable to me yet I found her influence prevalent in the work of Annie Thompson, Canadian designer whose garments are used in two of my case studies, *(RE)Trace* and *Snowlight*. I like the way both Storey and Thompson play with fabric. I wanted their influence to grace the production value of my research. Storey, Helen, and Tony Ryan. "Catalytic Clothing." *Catalytic Clothing*. Helen Storey Foundation. 2013. Web 23 Feb 2016. <<http://www.catalytic-clothing.org/home.html>>.

3. André Lepecki in an essay, "Still: On the Vibratile Microscopy of Dance", describes and dissects the placement of stillness in dance. It was this simple description of Stuart's work that facilitated my understanding of these posits, pointing again to the impact Stuart has had on my work and on the evolution of contemporary dance. Brandstetter, Gabriele., Volckers, Hortensia., Mau, Bruce., Lepecki, André., eds. *ReMembering The Body*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000, 358.

4. I was interested in seeing how Storey started a project, "with" other collaborators like wellbeing scholar Jim Coan. See The Helen Storey Foundation for Story's recollection of her *eye and I* project. <<http://helenstoreyfoundation.org/pro5.htm>>

5. For a vivid connection between a call for dance notation by Louis XIV and how Feuillet Notation originated see Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, New York: 2011, 17- 19.

6. The many threads of my research were helping me to understand that my practice-based research was driving any and all circumstances. When leaving the country to gain needed perspective on the DanceAbility Methodology, I sought momentarily to separate my homeland research from my work abroad but could not. I was making a solo inspired by moths and performing it one day and hopping on a plane the next day to go to Montevideo. Could I leave this experience behind? Should I? At every turn it seemed that separating influences was not entirely possible. This reality was signposted in the form of wooly moths populating the outdoor laundry balcony of the apartment that I stayed in, in Uruguay. Moths left behind at York? Not really, the sheer number and variation of moths on the wall, their delicate beauty reminded me that nothing is separate. My work with all bodies was not “othered”. It was up to me to connect my research not only across dance genres but also across geographic borders. All of the incoming information received would need constant sorting. Once again, I had to trust any and all processes over the course of this journey. Supporting research running parallel to each case study provided constant companionship if not security when shaping each work.

7. Beatty’s influence on how I use props figures into how I want to use props or fabric when making dance with both able-bodied and multi-ability bodies. Beatty, in her seminal book *Form Without Formula: A Concise Guide to the Choreographic Process* says the following about props: “They should be extensions of the people who use them, physically and emotionally” (Beatty 39.) This viewer brought me to the realization that this kind of prop treatment could happen with any body in dance.

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APPENDIX A: *Available Light* Program and Notes

The Department of Dance presents


# AVAILABLE LIGHT

September 24-26, 2015  
September 24 & 25: 7:30pm | September 26: 2pm  
McLean Performance Studio

*I AM* solo Series

original choreography by  
MFA candidates  
Nikolaos Markakis, Allison McCaughey,  
Suma Nair and Michelle Silagy

Artistic Director: Carol Anderson



[dance.ampd.yorku.ca](http://dance.ampd.yorku.ca)

school of the arts, media  
performance & design | **YORK U**  
UNIVERSITY

Photo: David Hsu | Dancer: Laura Armstrong, York Dance Ensemble | Choreographer: John Ottomari

## ***...at the end of a stem***

Choreography, Performance and Set: Michelle Silagy

Music Selections from: Daniel Hope / Max Richter / André de Ridder. *Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi - The Four Seasons* and *Max Richter: 24 Postcards in Full Colour - When the Northern Lights* / Jasper and Louise

Consulting Eye: Jennifer Lynn Dick Rehearsal Director: Wendy Chiles Costume: repurposed garments by Annie Thompson and Ivan Grundahl

### Choreographer's Note

*...at the end of a stem* uncovers aspects of my dance and familial heritage, and how I create and de-create; the garden is a wellspring that continually informs my creative arc as a dance maker and educator. Over the past year, I have tethered my storied past as a dance artist living in Toronto to a plethora of new influences discovered in my MFA research. This research is based on questions that I have about sharing the act of choreographic play with all bodies. In pursuit of this play, I am reflecting upon what I have to give – and what it is that I don't know. How then do I sort through influences known and unknown? My way into these and other research questions is through practice-based research. *at the end of a stem* – is a paean to practice-based searching that starts within my form and plays out in concert with new findings.

The garden is where I familiarize self and establish footing – it is where I have researched the movement content of this dance – and it is often where I ready myself to be present with others. This readiness often unfolds, feet to dirt in the garden, or while walking at a fast clip through the greening side streets of Toronto. All of which occur in high summer when time momentarily expands, as it did this past July midway through my MFA research. Here *...at the end of a stem*, becomes a portal through which to pursue a fine attunement of my relationship to air, exhalation, respiration, impulse, nuance, gravity and the natural world. Chasing this aspiration is often salvaged when offsetting the imaging of dance with the doing of something – something practiced-based, something reciprocally connected to the earth and all its elements, and to the people I gravitate toward. Here in the garden I am all of my ages and influences; I understand the weight of gravity and how I hope to share it with you. In this garden, this metaphorical place, I aim to take reverential pause and play with choreographic seeds until they become something that travels through me and into the vertices they are spilled within. These are the salvageable remnants of my aspirations to fully realize the potentiality of self and practice-based research, something I am attempting to do – with you – through this offering at the end of a stem.

Selected Research Influences: Simone Weil, Anne Carsen, Beth Powning, Stephen Andrews, Trish Beatty, Jonathan Burrows, Helen Storey and Sherry Firing. Companion motivations: chlorophyll, gravity and available light. Thank you: York University Dance Department, Carol Anderson, Holly Small, Susan Cash, Darcey Callison, William Mackwood, Mary-Elizabeth Manley, Patricia Fraser, The Young Dancers' Program of The School of Toronto Dance Theatre, Sarah Chase, Andrea Nann, Megan Andrews, MFA colleagues, Jennifer Lynn Dick, a lasting artistic friend, Chad and Lucy, and my family for gifting me with the name of Silagy, the origins of which signify “forager” and “gardener.”



**APPENDIX B: ...at the end of a stem Performance Photographs**



Photograph by David Hou. Dancer: Michelle Silagy



Photograph by David Hou. Dancer: Michelle Silagy

## APPENDIX C: Interview with Rosslyn Hyams and Meg Stuart on *Hunter*

### Radio France International, Hunter – Rosslyn Hyams, 09.02.2015

Radio France International, Hunter - Rosslyn Hyams, 09.02.2015

Hunter – interview with Meg Stuart

A transcription of an interview with Meg Stuart by Rosslyn Hyams, on the occasion of the French premiere of Hunter at Les Spectacles Vivants du Centre Pompidou.

#### **Rosslyn Hyams: Why did you choose to name the performance ‘Hunter’?**

Meg Stuart: “I like one word titles. Hunting has a certain urgency about it. It’s not just searching but actively looking. For a large part of the piece, I am looking into my own personal archive, my movement archive and family history, searching for connections and clues. How do they all link? How did I get to where I am now?”

#### **How much more would you say this is a research into yourself, your own personal history and previous works?**

“Making a solo means that I don’t need to explain and translate my ideas to performers. Usually, I shape movement material based on their proposals or the way they move. Here I’m relying on myself. Of course, every person is influenced, is a myriad of others and all the other things that have crossed their path, wanted or unwanted. In Hunter, I’m diving into the wreck, positively seeing what has changed and what has remained since I started dancing. How and what does my body want to express? I always say the body is a container for memory. In Hunter, I am really putting it to the test.”

#### **“You mentioned the word myriad - myriad on stage - with not only your movements and the style of movements but also with the decor, the scenography and sound. Is this very multi-layered, multi-faceted appearance, Meg Stuart?”**

“It’s a solo made with others. I invited a handful of collaborators to share the process with me. I gave Chis Kondek, the video artist, some old super 8 movies my father had made in the seventies and we created some original material as well. We even did some reenactments of Yoko Ono’s cut piece and a tribute to Cindy Sherman. The result is a mix between real memory, fictional meetings and reenactments. Vincent Malstaf did the sound design. I asked him to work with sound effects, which creates some almost ‘cartoonish’ moments but is also quite strong because I’m moving to the sound of keys and doors slamming. I wanted to dance to voices of others as well. When you’re alone in a private space or on stage, you often put on the radio or have unfinished dialogs with other people. So it made sense to not just dance to music but to have other people’s presence through their words in it as well.”

“Towards the end of the piece, two speakers are swinging and creating a sort of Doppler effect. As I am screaming, the speakers are reflecting the sound and bringing it back to me. So Hunter begins with an installation – I’m creating a collage, live on stage – and it ends with a sound installation.”

**Dance has evolved as well as where you’ve evolved. Do you feel that contemporary dance is very different today from when you were starting out? Are the challenges the same?**

“In the beginning I was searching for a language that related to a resistant body, looking at it in fragments. It was a lot about ‘no’, as opposed to ‘yes’ - a kind of anti-virtuosity. I wouldn’t say it had a punk-aesthetic but it certainly had a big mode of resistance. Over the years, I’ve opened up on all levels. Experimenting with many different styles and approaches. The speaking, conscious dancer, expressing the state of things is something very present in performance - especially as dance has moved into the contemporary art world. Maybe it’s a reflection of that. It’s not enough just to criticize and to show an air of resistance on stage, it’s also to imagine possible outcomes or solutions, or at least to dream together on how things might be.”

**APPENDIX D: *Flying Hearts* Performance Photograph**



Photograph by Mani Mazinani. Dancers: Andrew Hartley and Brittany LaRusic



## APPENDIX E: *(RE)Trace*. Program Notes



### **(RE) T r a c e: a Performative Research Experience** **Performances at 11:30 am, 1:30 pm, 2:30 pm**

Performances will be approximately 20 minutes



**Facilitated and created by** Michelle Silagy **Performers** Megan Andrews, Sebastian Oreamuno, Jennifer Lynn Dick, Andrew Hartley, Britanny LaRusic, John Romney, Isadora and Dalia  
**Musician** Jake Oelrich  
**Multidisciplinary Artist** Mani Mazinani

*(Re)Trace* is a series of Contemporary Dance improvisational vignettes inspired by 18th century dance notation collection invented by Raoul Auger Feuillet and assembled by E. Pemberton. York University Dance Department MFA candidate Michelle Silagy accesses these intricate notations as an entry portal to create an interactive dance event.

Silagy along with the performers delves, and Musician Jake Oelrich delve into a process that mixes dance genres and sensibilities while inviting viewers of all ages to see and experience dance from different viewpoints.

***(Re)Trace* is family and child friendly, and explores both naive and sophisticated treatments of the doing of and the love of dance**

NOTE: *(RE)Trace* is 35 minutes in length.

## APPENDIX F: *(RE)Trace* Rehearsal Process



Photograph by Sebastian Oreamuno. Dancer: Michelle Silagy with Feuillet Notation example



Photograph by Michelle Silagy. Dancer: Sebastian Oreamuno with Feuillet Notation example

**APPENDIX G: (RE)Trace Performative Research Photographs**



Photograph by Jae Yang. Dancer John Romney



Photograph by Jae Yang. Dancers: Andrew Hartley, Sebastian Oreamuno, and John Romney





Photograph by Jae Yang. Dancers: S.Oreamuno, Isadora, A.Hartley and B.LaRusic



Photograph by Mani Mazinani. Dancers: Jennifer Lynn Dick and Sebastian Oreamuno



Photograph by Mani Mazinani. Dancers Dalia, Isadora and Brittany LaRusic





Photograph by Mani Mazinani. Dancer Megan Andrews

APPENDIX H: *Snowlight Program and Notes*

The Department of Dance & the MFA in Dance present

# NEW LIGHT/ ANCIENT LIGHT

Artistic Director: Holly Small  
Director of Design: William Mackwood  
featuring THE YORK DANCE ENSEMBLE  
Artistic Director: Susan Lee

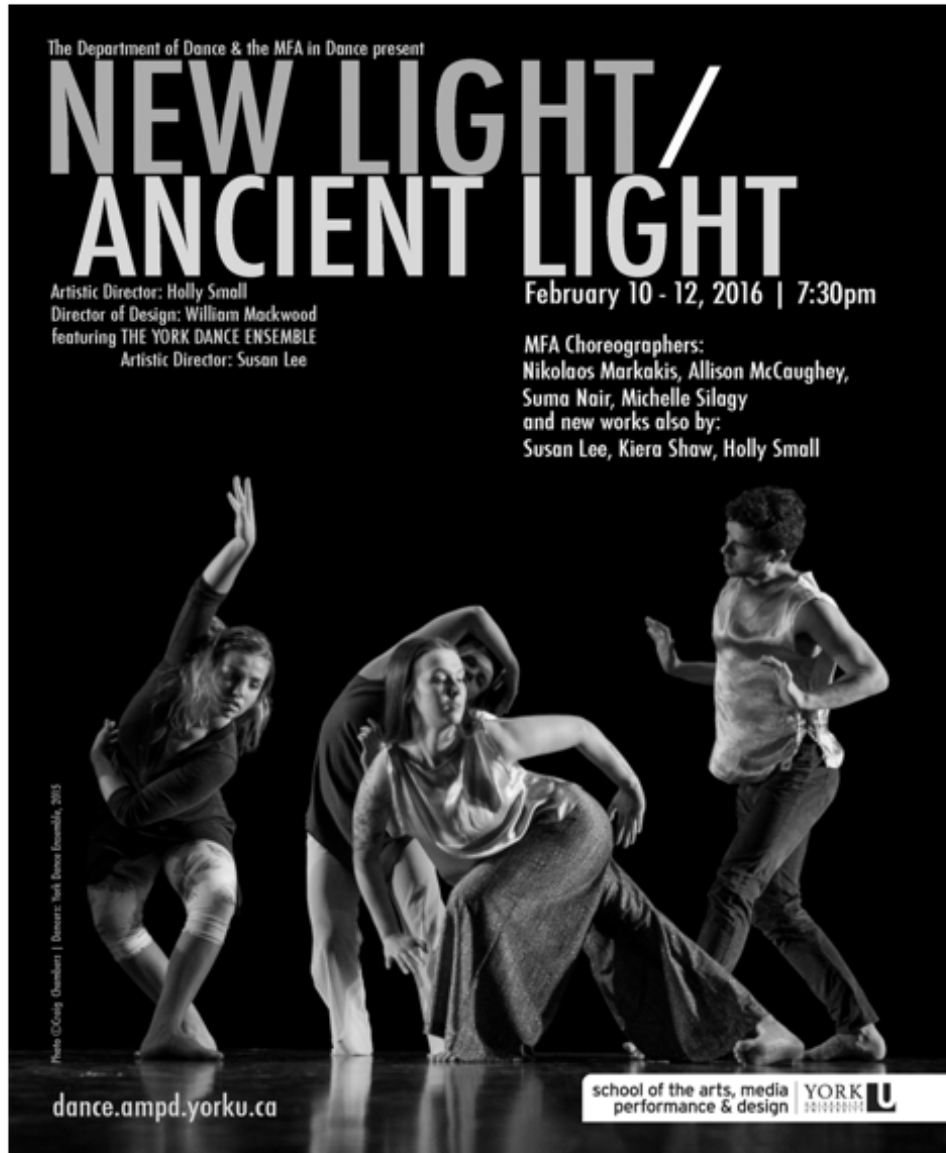
February 10 - 12, 2016 | 7:30pm

MFA Choreographers:  
Nikolaos Markakis, Allison McCaughey,  
Suma Nair, Michelle Silagy  
and new works also by:  
Susan Lee, Kiera Shaw, Holly Small

Photo ©Craig Davidson | Bowers Hall Dance Ensemble, 2015

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performance & design | YORK U

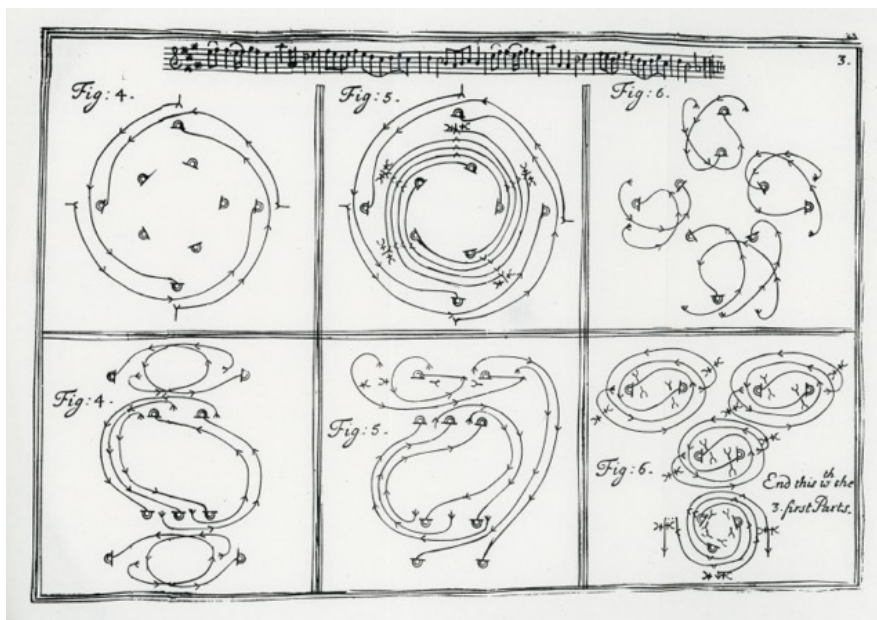


# SNOWLIGHT

Choreographer	Michelle Silagy
Music	Vivaldi: <i>The Four Seasons</i> Recomposed by Max Richter. Violinist: Daniel Hope. Max Richter: <i>24 Postcards in Full Colour</i>
Lighting Designer	William Mackwood
Video Projections	Feuillet Notation Images
Costumes	Dance Department Archives and repurposed garments created by Annie Thompson
Dancers	Shaelynn Lobbezoo, Amanda Marrone, Joshua Murphy, Paige Sayles, Kiera Shaw, Julianna Velocci

*Snowlight* is fueled by a fascination with images of 18th Century Feuillet Notation. They remind me of tracings, of pathways etched in fallen snow. I am interested in the potentiality of these images – what they represent and evoke – as a revelatory companion to the making of dance for multi-ability interpreters and viewers. These notations coupled with gesture-based vocabulary became a point of departure in the making of *Snowlight* – guiding a dance made in the presence of each other while anticipating the impending weight of snow.

Thank you to the dancers for sharing your gifts in the making of *Snowlight*; to Susan Lee and Claire Wootten for your continuous support; to Sebastian Oreamuno, David Outevsky, Michelle Johnson, and Suzanne Liska for rehearsal assistance; to Luisa Malisani, Flannery Muise and the York University Dance Department; to my MFA Colleagues Suma, Allison and Niko; to Susan Cash, Holly Small, Darcey Callison, William Mackwood and Mary- Elizabeth Manley for your care and vision; and to Carol Anderson for your endless support and inspiration and most of all for your sublime artistry. Thank you Melissa, Megan, Chad and Lucy forever more.





## APPENDIX I: *Snowlight* Performance Photographs



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble: Shaelynn Lobbezoo, Amanda Marrone, Joshua Murphy, Paige Sayles, Kiera Shaw and Julianna Velocci



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble Dancers: Shaelynn Lobbezoo, Julianna Velocci, Kiera Shaw and Amanda Marrone



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble Dancers: Paige Sayles and Joshua Murphy





Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble



Photograph David Hou. Dancers: *Snowlight* Ensemble

## **Appendix J: DVD of Case Study Choreography**

Track One: *...at the end of a stem*

Track Two: *(RE)Trace* (excerpt)

Track Three: *Snowlight*