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Process Metamorphosis

My Choreographic Journey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Abstract

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By Brianna Jean Lucas Larson, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

Major Advisor: David S. Leong

Professor, Head of Graduate Performance, Department of Theatre

Process Metamorphosis: My Choreographic Journey describes the journey from my initial interest in choreography to where I find myself as a choreographic artist today. Throughout the paper I look at different productions I have worked on, both professionally and within an educational setting, and different people I have collaborated with. Included will be thoughts from peers and mentors as well as my own observations from rehearsals and meetings. I will also be pulling information from my notes and journals while working on shows over the last twelve years.

Chapter 1: First Taste

Moving Into Theatrical Dance

While this whole journey really started at birth, with parents working in theatre and dance, in all reality it truly started at a place called Trollwood Performing Arts School in Fargo, ND in the summer of 2003. I always loved theatre and dance and had been engaged in various ways from a young age due to my parents. My mother was a dance instructor and my father acted, directed, and taught theatre. I had been involved at Trollwood since 1999, performing in shows, taking June Session classes, and working on the hair and makeup crew for the Mainstage Musicals. Hair and makeup was one of my first loves in theatre and what I thought at one point I would pursue. I also loved dance immensely, but my background in dance was not traditional; my experience up to this point was primarily through studying folk dance with my mother.

The summer after I turned 16, I decided to try some more traditional styles of dance in order to increase my knowledge, experience, and love of the art form. I took an intro class in jazz, tap, modern, and ballet. However, an expanded love of dance was not what I first came to have. I began to realize that many of the students, years younger than myself, had a much firmer grasp on these more traditional styles and were much further along than I thought I could ever become. This was hard to swallow. I began to doubt that dance was in my future since I had

not begun studying traditional styles like ballet at a young age like the other dancers. I thought that I would have to accept the fact that I waited too long and must put dance as a love in the past and move forward with another passion in life.

Then, one afternoon I ended up in a conversation with Jennifer Salk, the head of dance for the summer program at Trollwood. My worries came out in our conversation and she told me not to let it get me down. She talked to me about how if I didn't have a background in the classical techniques, that the next best thing would be to have the folk dance background that I did have. She pointed out how studying so many different cultures and their movements, the way I had, had taught me how to understand movement in many different ways. It allowed me to see different styles of movement and pick them up easily. Her encouragement showed me how to look at the strengths I had from the training I had received, and not to focus on things I lacked due to a past that was over and done with. All that I could do was move forward and continue to study, gaining more experience in what forms I saw fit at this point. I really think that if it were not for that conversation, I most likely would not have pursued the performing arts. After that, I continued to study what I could, and though I will always wish I had done more, I am happy for that summer and where it has lead me.

Falling in Love with Dance

With a fresh outlook, I signed up for a couple of classes in jazz and tap at a studio that fall. Taking classes at Gasper's School of Dance was where I first

discovered my love of Bob Fosse. I was studying dance with Broadway veterans, Eddie and Kathy Gasper, who had both spent some time working with Fosse. I must have either seen a poster of him in the lobby, or heard talk of him and then looked him up. All I can remember is that once I had seen his work I was hooked. Part of what drew me to him was the odd angles of the dancers' bodies and the movements he created with them. It made me feel like you could still dance even if you didn't have perfect feet, perfect turnout, a crazy extension, or weren't flexible. There was hope for me yet. I loved it!

I was also keeping up with theatre and even had a scholarship to a college theatre program in the state. However, my senior year in high school had me questioning my choices again, as college loomed closer and closer. This caused another bout of doubt in myself, and I didn't know what to do. I felt like asking for advice could only get you so far, so I took each piece of it with a grain of salt. However, chance would have it that while filming for a local commercial, I ran into my old swing dance instructor and also met one of my mom's former students named Dave Harmon. Dave was now a big part of the social and swing dance scene in Fargo, and I began teaching and dancing with him. This helped me reconnect with dance in a whole new way. The whole experience led me to realize that there was no way I could be happy without dance in my life, and I dove back in headfirst. I even wrote a poem about the experience. I think it shows my state of mind at the time and my reconnection to dance.

My heart leaps up when

The music starts to play.

The heart inside skips a beat
Knowing what will come next.
I'll get to fly; I'll get to move,
I'll get to be free.
Each measure and phrase pulls me in
Deeper and deeper.
Finally I've made it to where I should be,
On the dance floor.

The music and the dance floor (and often my partner) were all I needed to be happy. I finally knew that I couldn't go through my life without dance being a part of it.

With my newfound freedom of knowing that this is what I really wanted in my life, I began to look at other opportunities I could pull out of my remaining months of high school. It was also going to be my final summer of eligibility at Trollwood. I still planned to take classes and audition for the show, but what else could I do. Over the last four years I had been on the hair and makeup crew for each of the shows. One year I had the opportunity to help with the hair and makeup design. Another year I was the student assistant on the crew, even though I was also in the cast. It was thinking back to that assistantship that gave me the idea to apply for the spot as the student assistant choreographer for the upcoming show. That assistantship would allow me to dance even more over the summer as well as give me a new vantage point as a choreographer. So, along with my audition, I sent in an application for the assistantship on *Beauty and the Beast*. Little did I know how that one application would set the course for where I am today as an artist.

Best Foot Forward

While I still felt that my dance technique and experience wasn't quite where it should be, I knew that *Beauty and the Beast* included a waltz, a tango section, and of course, the dance between Belle and the Beast at the end. Thus, in my application to be the student assistant choreographer, I really stressed my experience with social ballroom dance, hoping that what made me unique would make me an attractive candidate. I couldn't believe it when I received a letter that I had been chosen for the position. This one summer and one show did so much for me that I wish I could go back and relive it again, even if just through a lens.

Jumping into that summer, I didn't know what to expect. At the time, I lacked the skills and experience of a choreographer. I had choreographed line dances and some small numbers for shows at the junior high when I was in high school, but I had never viewed an entire show from the choreographer's seat at the table. I don't think I had any idea of how to start. I just knew I could show up with myself, and the skills I possessed, and offer all of that.

The usual choreographer whom I had worked with on a previous show was not coming back this year. Instead they asked an alumnus of the program named Chris Boerner to choreograph. So, I would be working with a choreographer whom I had never met before. I was quite nervous for our first meeting, but came out of it feeling very capable. We met so he could share some of his thoughts on the show with me and start to make me familiar with some of the choreography.

One of the first pieces we looked at was the tango section in "Be Our Guest." He had a jazz style routine worked out that he showed me and had me learn. It was

exciting and invigorating to be learning choreography for a show in this manner – one on one with the choreographer and part of his team. It was quite simply, a blast for my 18-year-old self. Then, he asked for any of my thoughts. I asked if he would be interested in looking at any partnering tango steps or if he was hoping to keep it in the jazz style that he had showed me. He was completely open to and excited by the idea, so he asked me to teach him some things. Just the fact that I had something I could teach him was amazing to me. I taught him closed position and a couple of the basic steps and turns, and we were off. Chris loved it and decided to use a lot of it for the show. I was beyond excited to already be a contributing member of the team. In that one meeting I learned that you are always qualified to be in the room and contributing if you show up and offer what you have.

Becoming a Leader

Moving forward with the process had both its ups and its downs. While Chris was a wonderful person and a beautiful dancer, it started to seem like he didn't know that much about choreographing a musical. It may also have been that he just didn't have much experience. Some of the steps he set seemed to be, almost step for step, sections performed in the Christmas concert from one of the studios in town. He also spent a lot of time in meetings, asking me to prepare choreography for rehearsals, and he looked to me more and more to lead the rehearsals. I feel that he must have either been very inexperienced, or he was just nervous and not sure how to handle himself. Thus, I didn't have someone to study and learn from in the way

they conducted themselves as a choreographer. What was their process, how did they choreograph, how did they conduct rehearsals, etcetera? I also remember him asking me to start work on a piece while he was in a meeting, saying he would be out to help shortly. It was something we needed to have ready for rehearsal that day. Then his meeting took so long that I ended up having to choreograph the whole piece without him. This may have been his intention as a way of breaking me in, but I'm not sure. It was frustrating not to have any guidance and be expected to do it all on my own so early. Frustrating as it was, I think it pushed me and helped me with my confidence. Throughout the early stages of rehearsal I ended up running more and more of the rehearsals because he didn't seem sure himself. I recall us working on "Gaston" one day and I was sitting just up the hill behind him taking notes. We were stopping and starting a section and he was trying to count it for the cast and call it for them. He tried a couple of times and then just turned around and looked at me like "help," so I started counting and calling the number for the cast. I wasn't sure if this was a tactic to teach me or not, but it didn't come across as such.

The rehearsal process seemed to take on much more of a co-choreographer feel, rather than that of a student assistant. I even remember how in the beginning the director preferred I not even speak up in meetings, as I was the student assistant, but then eventually he actually talked to me about what he wanted for a certain number. Thus, I realized I had even gained the respect of my superiors. I discovered my affinity for seeing patterns, counting, leading, and even teaching. Looking back, I also wonder if some of this newfound confidence in the face of my peers and superiors came from the social dance instruction I had taken part in

during the school year with Dave. I had been teaching people many years or even decades my seniors. I realized that I would always have something to offer even though I still had much to learn.

What amazed me most through this process though, wasn't the respect of my superiors, but was actually the amount of focus and trust that I received from my peers. Many of them I had seen performing on the stage for years before me and had always held in such high esteem (so much higher than myself). Yet here they were, listening with such focus, asking questions of me, and showing me such a high level of respect. I could not believe it. It made me begin to stop thinking so little of my abilities and myself and realize that I could do so much more than I thought.

When I went back and asked some of my peers about working on that show I received some feedback, for the first time hearing what some of them thought of my work during the process. Michael Kearns and Lana (Jackson) Barone let me know that I had been a good leader among my peers and was good at separating the work of rehearsal from the play of our time as friends. They told me that they respected me and didn't feel as though I was placing myself above them and my other peers. Lana reminded me that when I would use terminology that wasn't familiar to some of the cast, I would take the time to break it down and help them understand it. Michael pointed out that even back then, I was a problem solver, thinking multiple steps ahead and being ready to face the problem head on when we got there. Sometimes this is to my detriment as I get too far ahead, but it can serve me well. This whole summer was really showing me that I should have confidence in myself and could accomplish anything I put my mind to.

Early Notation

Looking back over notes I still have from that time period, I had a glimpse into the way I organized choreography back then. I am not sure if it is something I learned from Chris, or if it is simply the way I chose to work at the time. The first thing I noticed was that I used a lot of copies of the ground plan. I would use a separate print out of it to draw where everyone was on stage for each change of spacing throughout a number. This is a technique I then used a lot when I choreographed for pageants over the next decade. However, in my notes from *Beauty and the Beast*, I failed to make any mention of traffic patterns and how we would transition from one of these positions to another. In my latter work and with the pageants I know that I started using arrows and short descriptions to help with that.

I then kept all of the actual steps and choreography in a separate notebook. The interesting thing I discovered about my notes in the notebook was that they would be pretty hard to follow if you were not already familiar with the movement. The steps are all just named in a list format with no mention of timing or counts. The only helpful thing would be the fact that I had little time cues written in for where it matched up with the music on the track. Thus, with time and patience some of the timing could probably be figured out again.

I found research within my notes that I had done for partner lifts and dips. I watched a number of dance videos and notated where within the video the move was, and I also made up names for the moves I did not already know. Additionally, I pulled from my folk dance background and used steps and lifts from that. One of my

favorites was a two couple, spinning lift from a German folk dance called Kreuz Koenig that I had the whisks, some cutlery, and a few of the napkins do. Another interesting piece of paper that I found among my old notes was a vocal assignment sheet from the music director. It was for the opening number and listed the whole song by measure number (in sections) down the left side of the sheet. Then in another column it listed who would be singing in each of those measures. For example:

OPENING NUMBER - BELLE
VOCAL ASSIGNMENTS

Bonjours:	1 - Sean B.			
	2 - Dylan G.			
	3 - Erik F.			
	4 - Lee S.			
	5 - Michael K.			
m. 47	Clara C-W Chloe G. Cassi B.	Ginny G. Jenna B. Caitlyn G.	Jorie K. Emily H Eliza S.	
m. 54	Ashton K. Julia W. Brianna K.	Mallory H. Lanna J. Brianna L.	Sara L. Amy H. Liz W.	
m. 58	Everyone all men			
m. 63	Marc K. Billy H.	Matt C. David T.	Thomas J Alex R.	.
m. 65	Sean B. Will D. Matt H.	Michael K. Luke B.	Lee S. Noel I.	MEN A

I've never come across this on any other show that I can recall, but I can imagine how helpful it was for us when putting together the large opening number. I also discovered in my notes that I started using a shorthand all the way back then that I

still use today, although I always resort to stick figures at some point. Below are some examples of the shorthand.

RH	Right Hand	RF	Right Foot
LH	Left Hand	LF	Left Foot
RA	Right Arm	RL	Right Leg
LA	Left Arm	LL	Left Leg
Sh	Shoulder	Kn	Knee
B.Ch	Ball Change	PDB	Pas de bourrée or port de bras

There was one other thing that I saw I did back then and still like to do today. I prefer to simply cross out changed choreography and write in the new, rather than erasing the old version. I found a few examples of this in my notebook from *Beauty and the Beast* and I know I've done this somewhat recently as well. I am sad to say that sometimes I still do erase the old versions of the choreography, but would love if I didn't, and if the older versions were still there to refer back to. It makes them accessible if I choose to reintegrate them, and sometimes, pieces of those old ideas help spark newer ones yet.

Strength and Weakness

I had a big realization when thinking about the whole experience of working on *Beauty and the Beast*. I don't think I had any concept of using the dance to tell a

story. I simply looked at each dance as a bucket to be filled. You give me the size of the bucket and I will find a way to fill it up. I just knew how many counts needed to be filled, what the style of music was, and whom I had for movers.

From an early age, however, a strength I have had is my talent for recognizing each cast members' abilities and how to use them. I was always aware of using the ability of the performers I had and not going past it, especially due to working with a lot of actors who move or even people dancing for the first time, rather than dancers. Even with their sometimes-limited abilities, I work to challenge the performers and help them grow, striving to push them beyond what they might believe they are capable of. Director and Tony Award winning choreographer Kathleen Marshall said, "you don't want them to be thinking, Uh-oh, here's the choreographer. They're going to make me do something I'm not comfortable with" (qtd. in Cramer 123). Having this awareness may be due to my lower proficiency of technique myself, but either way, it has served me well. I have seen a number of performances where the choreography was too difficult and all it did was make the show suffer. It did not in any way show off the choreographer, it actually made them look worse. When working with a large variety of proficiency levels, Tony Award winning choreographer, Jerry Mitchell says, "My job is to make everybody look fantastic. If they don't look good, I don't look good, and neither does the show" (qtd. in Cramer 150). So while I know now that I wasn't doing the choreographers job of continuing to tell the story through the movement, I am glad that I was there to help the performers feel confident and succeed in whatever was being asked of them.

Starting Path as Choreographer

After that summer, I decided to withdraw from college and take a year off before going back to school. While taking the time off for a number of reasons, the freedom in turn afforded me a chance to be the assistant choreographer for a production of *Pippin* that was being produced at my high school. It was nice getting to work alongside a more experienced choreographer, and especially one that I had previous experience working with as a cast member. Jennifer Bedard, the choreographer for *Pippin*, had choreographed the musicals that I was in at my high school. My previous experience with her and our relationship really helped us work well together. With the choreography for *Pippin*, Jen took charge of the more classical and technique based movement and had me work on the isolated, eccentric pieces. I remember specifically working with the cast on “War Is A Science” and how to do a slow walking step with a very specific pelvis isolation. Another fun tidbit from working alongside Jen on that show was a fun little habit I picked up from her that stays with me to this day. During tech rehearsals, I like to always have a ring pop or tootsie pop with me, to help me watch, think, and focus.

When looking over the sparse notes that I have remaining from this production, I did find one new addition to my choreography notebook. I started my notes off with a full list of the scenes with dance in which we would be involved in the staging, and I listed who all would be in each of those numbers. I don’t think I had a script or score to reference, so I think this list was a version of creating one for myself. However, it might be something that I picked up from Jen and her process of prepping for a show. The comfort level I had with her and my experience from the

previous summer allowed me to be more at ease as I worked on *Pippin*. I also had a great mutual respect with the high school drama teacher and director, Tom Gillen, which helped make it a very good experience for me. I went back years later and worked on a number of projects for him.

Getting to work on *Pippin* was so much fun and helped me know for sure that I loved dance and choreography, and knew I had made the right choice in continuing to pursue it. It was great being back in the school I had graduated from, and getting to work with students with whom I was very familiar and comfortable. I felt right at home in so many ways, being able to be working on a show. I still didn't have a grasp for telling a story with each dance number, but I began to feel a part of telling the story of the show as we brought the whole production to fruition.

Skills Learned:

- Dance and choreography needed to be a part of my life.
- Use the strengths you have, don't focus on weaknesses.
- Push yourself to continue learning and growing.
- We all know things that others don't, and each have something to contribute.
- Never think little of yourself and your abilities; have confidence in yourself and know that you are capable of greatness.

Chapter 2:

The Undergrad Years and Directly Following

Finding a Place to Flourish

While Trollwood Performing Arts School is where everything first started, Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM) is where it started to become a reality. I was lucky enough to find a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre program that not only required all Theatre Majors to take a basic dance course, but also had a dance minor attached to the program. During the spring semester my freshman year I was dancing 30 hours a week due to being in two dance classes and a dance heavy production. I was in the best shape of my life and was soaking up all of the new dance information coming my way. My sophomore year I started getting bored so I began choreographing small pieces of my own for our dance production class. My friend Tyler Michaels King informed me that during that time at school, my actions helped propel him and other classmates into a desire to grow as dancers and theatre artists. It was almost a shock to hear those words when I had felt the same about him and others.

I set pieces every semester of my remaining time at school and even spent two years as the TA for the Dance for the Stage classes. While this choreography was in a concert dance setting, rather than within a show, I still had a chance to stretch my muscles as a choreographer and try out all sorts of interesting, safe, and

strange things. I also began working more and more with the head of our department, Craig Ellingson, who was a director/choreographer. I became the dance captain and/or assistant choreographer for quite a few of our shows during the school year and during summer stock. I also went back to assist with choreography at my high school and choreographed shows at two of the junior high schools in town. During my four years in college I choreographed or assisted on 14 shows.

Drill Sergeant

While working at college, I didn't have a very relaxed nature when choreographing. I was much more "go, go, go," and "product, product, product" focused. Some of this was most likely due to trying to prove myself in the eyes of my peers and my mentors. I was known to be a bit tense or uptight in rehearsals. I demanded focus and great attention to detail. One of the dancers, Nick Kaspari, told me how I was pretty intense in rehearsals and it could be a strained atmosphere trying to keep up. He happened to be my cousin, so I think he was a little more comfortable confronting me about it than some of my other classmates. He was nice enough to also say that he knew it was due to my goal to get something wonderful out of them, but thought I should be made aware. It was a bit of a wake up call, yet I think it was still years before my demeanor really shifted over to the gentler side. Katie Adducci, another of my classmates, put those thoughts more specifically when she told me that she thought my style was "Tough Love and Technicality." I could be

abrasive, but she felt that the product spoke for itself. I guess at the time I had a bit of the attitude of Jerome Robbins, Tony Award winning director and choreographer. While I admire his work, I am glad to say that I have moved away from his aggressive rehearsal style that I've heard and read so much about. Tyler Michaels King saw my intensity in a slightly different light.

Rehearsals with Brianna were always about getting it right, with as much joy and passion as possible. There was always an expectation to come in prepared, know your stuff, and hit the ground running. There was little wasted time. When you didn't get a step right, she would give you a note. If you did it again, she would call you out. Never was any of this done with negativity. But it was approached with a directness that we could always recognize as coming from a place of passion. It was always fun too. Even on the long days. I remember mostly laughing and sweating. [When Brianna did get upset] . . . the frustration was passion and it was supremely evident. . . . We were always expected to be the best we could be, and we were always expected to grow. Brianna was hard (but not harsh) with us to get it right and to get a particular combination with power and presence. It was important to her that it look as clean as she had pictured it. Her demeanor and attitude made us want the same. We wanted to prove we could do it.

It is interesting for me getting to hear from a few different peers from that time in my life. There is the way I perceived my work, and then there are the different ways my peers viewed it as well. Some of it probably has to do with different personalities and how they each take to different rehearsal environments and

atmospheres. This is something that I was not aware of at that point in my life, but something I have come to try and put more focus on, as I moved forward.

Learning from Youth

I really began to feel a need to shift my level of rehearsal intensity while working at the junior high level. The goal, while trying to put on a strong show, was also about helping the students have a great experience. Many students were trying theatre for the first time, so we needed to help them discover the joy and beauty of working together to build a show. That was the most integral part for educational theatre at this level. I began to realize that the product was not the most important thing here, but rather the process was. Both my father and Kellie Pifer, who directed shows at the two junior high schools, helped me to learn this lesson. I also learned a lot about creating pictures and moving performers around the space, because most of the students in this setting had very little dance experience. Thus, I couldn't just dive in with steps like I had done in the past. Instead I could help them build shapes and tableaux that would help tell the story. I could also move the actors around in different formations or at different times or tempos to help fill in the moment and the music in ways that weren't giving them a lot of steps to have to learn, while still giving substance to the show.

At this time, the focus of my work became helping the students realize what they had to offer and how much they could contribute to and accomplish in a show. I learned this lesson slowly, but I did learn it. This helped me to relax much more in

rehearsals and focus more on the atmosphere and the attitudes of the students with which I was working. I would throw out a joke now and then, take breaks more often some days if needed, and would start rehearsals with a game once in a while. I realized that keeping us all having a good time in rehearsals also kept us more focused and made the students want to work harder and want to accomplish more. I even had one student who learned she was quite a tap dancer, even though she had never danced a day in her life before auditioning for the show. It was great seeing the students grow so much in such a small amount of time and gain new confidences that transferred to the rest of their lives. I still have a Pinocchio pillow from one show which a student and her mother made for me. The students touch your lives so much and it's amazing to me how much you can learn from your cast even though you think you're the one there to teach them the choreography.

Firsts

While at MSUM for my undergraduate degree, I also experienced some firsts for myself in the theatre: working on a thrust stage, doing summer stock, co-choreographing, the importance of research, and choreographing without getting on my feet. Our school year season had four shows with two on the proscenium stage and two on the thrust. *Twelfth Night* was the first show I worked on in the thrust and it was also the first show I had been asked to choreograph for at school. The space posed a new challenge for me as a choreographer that I don't think I was even aware of at first. Eventually, I began to notice how the thrust meant changes were

needed for choreography to fit this space compared to working in the proscenium. In our thrust theatre I also had aisles in the audience and vom entrances from under the audience to utilize for the first time. They gave me a whole other space for playing with and immersing the audience, if the show allowed for that. This did not occur so much in *Twelfth Night*, but there were plenty of opportunities for it in *Back to 80s*.

Due to the fact that *Back to the 80s* was one of our summer stock pieces, we only had two weeks to put it up. Myself and three other students were asked to co-choreograph the show, and I think that was probably somewhat due to the time constraint, so no one would feel overstressed with work. We split the songs and then went to town choreographing. This was also one of the first shows that I really started to realize how important research was. I needed to research the steps that were popular during the songs that I was working on, research the artists that originally performed them, and get the feel in my body. Luckily, I have always loved 80s music, so the research was quite enjoyable.

I was in charge of the opening number for the show, so I went all out using everything the space had to offer. I started with one performer on stage and then had some of the cast running in with cartwheels and the like from the voms to join what was happening on stage. Later in the number I had dancers coming down the four main aisles and then stopping to dance in those aisles. Near the end of the song everyone from the aisles rushed on stage as everyone on stage took up new positions. This created a great 80s party effect to end the number. We even had a couple of people in roller skates. It was great because the energy started with low

burning coals on the stage and then slowly but surely grew as more and more oxygen (dancers) rushed into it. All of this rushing happening from among, behind, and beside the audience, helped to pull their energy up onto that stage with us in a sense, and pull them right into the fun of the show.

Another interesting experience, and another first, came while working on one of the shows I assisted on during summer stock that year. I was choreographing the “High School Hop” number for the top of Act II in *Grease*. I did something when choreographing this number that was definitely new for me. I choreographed the whole number while sitting down. Craig Ellingson, our department chair and director/choreographer, was directing and choreographing *Grease*. He was doing most of it on his own, but he didn’t have much experience with swing dance, so he asked if I would do that number. It was a time crunch; I think it was needed for rehearsal the next day or later that night. I took the music and a notebook and just went and sat in one of the open classrooms by myself. I listened to the music over and over again, counting it out and notating it with tick marks in my notebook. Craig wanted it to look like a high school dance, not a choreographed routine, so I decided to give each couple different choreography. I would utilize different styles of swing dance, and give each couple some sort of trick or flip during the number in order to create a popcorn effect throughout. Once I picked who would be dancing with whom and what style I thought would be good for each couple, I just sat there and wrote out the choreography for each one. I then went back and listened to the music counting each version to make sure it fit, and that was that. I don’t think I even put any of it on its feet until I was with each couple teaching them. It was the

strangest thing, but I remember it making sense and feeling right at the time. I know there have been times since then where I may do part of a number while sitting, but then I get up and try things and go back and make adjustments to my notes. It was one of those strange experiences that I don't think I will ever forget.

Taking the Reins

With all of the shows I had worked on at MSUM up to this point, I was just assisting, co-choreographing with another student, or only in charge of a small dance sequence or two in one of the plays. I hadn't been the main choreographer for any of the musicals. That all changed when I was asked to be the choreographer for one of our summer stock shows. They wanted to do *SWING!*, but as I had said before, our department choreographer didn't have much experience with that style of dance. Craig asked me to choreograph the show and said that he would then act as director and assistant choreographer. He would be in charge of the staging for the vocalists and choreographing just a couple of the numbers with more of a Broadway/musical theatre feel. The show was going to have a small group of dancers, and I was excited because he would also like me to be in it.

This was the first time that I would be in the driver's seat as the choreographer of a show at this level. It was also the first time that my peers would be auditioning for a show with me sitting on the other side of the table. It was a bit nerve-racking, but I figured I should jump in with both feet and give it my all. The first thing I had to do, after the dancers were cast, was to introduce them to swing

dance. (I was the only one in the cast who had done any swing dance, or even any social partnering.) We contacted a group called TC Swing that I had taken workshops from in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota and asked if they would come up and do a workshop for us, and they did. It was great. They brought a few dancers with them, I invited some of the swing dancers in Fargo that I danced with, and the cast was all there. I received a refresher and the rest of the cast was able to try the style with each other and with swing dancers of various levels and backgrounds. They even taught us The California Routine, which is a staple in Lindy Hop choreographies, originally choreographed by Frankie Manning, and we ended up using the routine in part of the show.

After giving the dancers an introduction to the style, I started work on choreographing the show. The introduction they received, not only helped them, but also gave me a better idea of what I was working with, in terms of their abilities. We had a high school intern in the company for the summer, and I was able to use her when in need of another body with which to dance and choreograph. I was given a small room in the art department with a mirror on wheels and that was it. The first step, however, was figuring out what music I would be choreographing to. Craig wanted to use the music as it was on the CD, but that didn't match completely with the score we had. This was one of the instances where I was very happy as a choreographer that I could read music. I was able to sit with the CD and the score and notate all of the differences. This final product was then something I was able to take to the conductor/pianist so we were all on the same page. Another advantage to having an understanding of sheet music was in talking with the

percussionist as well. I had a dance section where I wanted to add a couple of accents in the band to go with the choreography. I was able to tell him which measures and which counts, and even show him the movement and talk about what kind of sound I wanted with it.

After the music was set and the choreography done, it was just rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. I really enjoyed working with all of the dancers, as they were my peers, and were all wonderful people to have in rehearsal. It was a whole new vocabulary for them, but they picked it up very quickly. I even continued in my fashion of making up names for moves I didn't know a name for and this helped in creating a nice, shared vocabulary between the dancers and myself. I was also known for scating rhythms and tempos when I was teaching and rehearsing choreography, which is something I still do to this day. Working on a show like *SWING!* made it fit even better into the atmosphere of rehearsals.

The only issue I can remember was that one of the girls didn't understand her role in lifts and tricks. She would expect the guy to do all of the work, so I had to work with her a lot on what she had to do to assist in each of the flips and tricks (and I also chose to have other people do a lot more of them than she did, because I didn't want her lead or her to get injured). There was one other hurdle that I remember presenting itself the morning of the day before we opened. There were two ballads in the show that the director decided he no longer wanted to just take place with the singer on stage. He wanted a small dance duet happening as well, at least for part of each number. So, he approached me and told me I was free to pull Tyler and Sean (the two who would dance the lead opposite of me in each of those

two pieces) from shop duty and use them as long as I needed; there just needed to be a duet inserted into the two songs. All I could think was, WHAT?!?! Ok, here we go I guess. It was intense, but so exhilarating. We pulled it off, with two new short pieces added in time for opening. I was happy with all we had accomplished and couldn't be more proud of my peers for all they had learned and performed in those two weeks.



U-Turn Opportunity

My senior year I continued choreographing and made plans to move to Minneapolis/St. Paul with many of my friends after graduation, however, love had a different idea. That year, I met the man who would become my husband, and moving to the Twin Cities was taken off the agenda. As luck would have it, my mentor from undergrad was taking a sabbatical that next year, so the department

was going to be hiring a guest artist to choreograph the shows. My still being in town gave me the wonderful opportunity to be that choreographer. They were going to be doing *Cabaret* in the fall and the faculty member directing the show, Jennifer Tuttle, was someone who I hadn't had the chance to work with very much because she had started at MSUM my senior year. So, I was quite excited to get to work with her.

Cabaret proved to be a show that would make some changes to the way I prepared and worked as a choreographer, much of it due to working alongside Jen who is a formidable force as a director and artist. It was also my first time choreographing, not as a student, but as a professional, so I had the chance to dip my hand into the cookie jar a little further and be part of the bigger discussion. With the design team I was involved in the discussion of what would be on stage for the performers to interact with. At this point, I only asked what they were providing for us, I never had any specific requests. I also spoke a lot with costumes about what movements the performers would be doing and how it could work with the costumes being designed.

My preparation work for this show also began to go much deeper than for any other show I had choreographed. Initially, that came from Jen. She gave me research to read on the Weimar Republic and three and a half pages of notes on her wants for the choreography. She listed each number, how she saw it, and what she wanted. After reading all of her notes I began researching more in depth than I ever had before when prepping for a show. I researched Nazi movement to use for the kick line number in the show, specifically looking at the goose step by watching *The*

Goebbels Experiment. I researched era dance styles like the varsity drag and delved even deeper into my folk dance knowledge, focusing in on the styles of that area, which weren't styles I had spent much time in previously. I also found a note in my notebook that I took while talking to Jen in which she had said that she wanted movement of the Broadway revival with storytelling of the movie, less spectacle and more raunch. While familiar with the movie, this took me back to examine it, as well as to research the Broadway revival. This was also one of the first times I can remember really thinking about story while building a number. I still did not understand how important it was to the whole, but I was beginning to play with the idea.

Moving into rehearsals for the show I was hoping I didn't let the new-found *power* go to my head, but I'm sure I did, at least a little bit. I set a daily workout for the Kit Kat Club dancers as I realized they weren't conditioned to do some of the work we were going to ask of them, and we wanted them to be at their best to protect against injury. Also, I asked the ladies to rehearse in their character shoes and the gents to be in jazz shoes. While having fun in some rehearsals, sometimes the fun went too far and focus was gone, so I think I corrected too far in the other direction, falling back into my old drill sergeant ways, and was sometimes quite a force, a sort of task master in running a number.

I've always been a bit of an organizational neat freak (type A as many will tell me) and I think those qualities lend themselves to my study and observance of steps as well. When learning choreography I would always latch on to the specifics of counts and angles, and I think I had a hard time realizing that other people didn't

work that way, so I needed to give them time to ingest the movement their way. I also became more aware of not “over-choreographing.” The movement only needs to be what it needs to be. You shouldn’t force it. I was also becoming more adept at utilizing the music accents and different instrumental lines, sometimes moving with the main instruments and sometimes working with ones in the background.

Throughout the rehearsal process I had the chance to collaborate with Jen on a level that I hadn’t been able to collaborate with anyone before. We discussed the pieces as they evolved. Together we decided how many and which dancers would be in certain numbers, and when it came to the daily schedule my input and thoughts were valued. I even had the chance to work in tandem with Jen and the actors as we set the beginning of a couple numbers that had more musical staging than choreography to them. While I had initially been upset about not moving to the city with most of my friends, I was glad for the opportunity, challenges, and growth provided to me by having the chance to work on *Cabaret*.

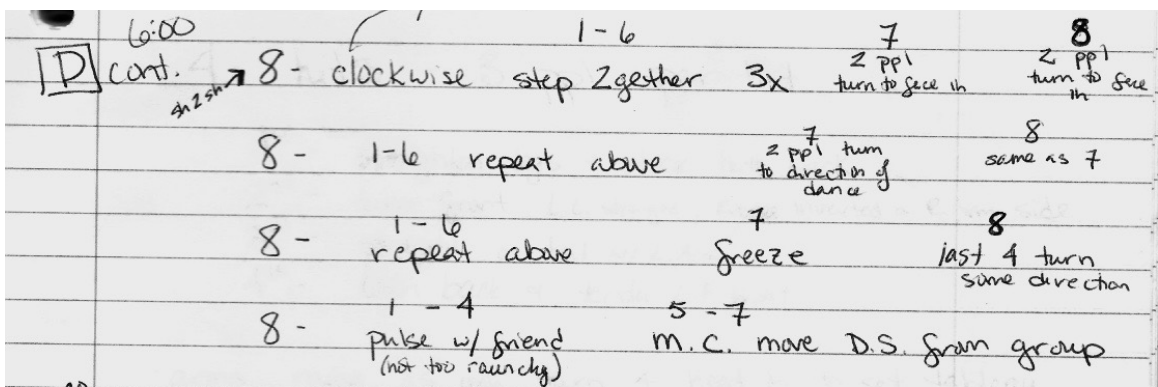
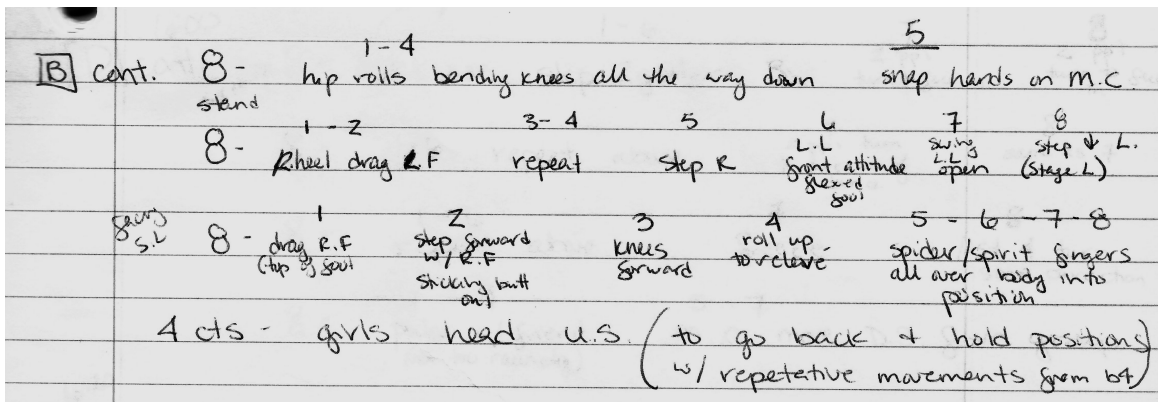
My Emerging Process

Thinking back over the work I did in college on different shows and looking through the paperwork I still have from each of them, I did come to notice a few things about changes in my process over the years. First, I used small objects to work out formations and their movements. I would place the objects in formations on the floor and move them around as if they were the different performers on stage. I remember working on some folk scenes for *Twelfth Night* and in order to

show the director, Shelly Gaza, what I was thinking, we sat down on the floor and I took out my chap-stick, some coins, my cell phone, and a few other objects and proceeded to lay them out on the floor and move them around explaining to her what I was thinking. It was great because then she could move them too, in order to share her thoughts with me. I haven't done this in a number of years, but I remember doing it for a time, and loving its ease and simplicity. Years later when talking with Shelly about collaborating on the show with me, a then young student, she told me that she felt I taught the choreography from a place of understanding the cast as performers and said I was really able to connect with them. Her comments lead me to realize how much I've lost of being able to communicate with the actors as a fellow performer. It has been so long since I have been in a show. I hope to change that and give myself a chance to be on the other side of the table again soon, experiencing what it is like to be in a cast. Then I can start to bring some of that back to my work as a choreographer again.

When pulling my binders from *Cabaret* I was able to see even more about shifts in my process, because it is one of the first shows that I still have almost all, if not all, of the paperwork from working on the production. This allowed me to really look at my work and my notes from the past in detail. I noted that I still did not write in the script or score except for a few small notes here and there which would directly connect to my notes on separate paper. Often these notes in the script/score were as simple as a time stamp or a letter to correspond to a section of choreography in my notebook.

Within my choreography notes I noticed that the cues I was writing were the lyrics. I myself was thinking in counts, but had the lyrics written in as a cue for the performers. My notes still showed the songs counted out using tick marks (usually one for each 8 count, grouped in sections) and then labeling each of the sections with a letter. When each section was written out I had one through eight listed across the top and then eights listed down the side, so that each row was an eight count of choreography. Then the letter of each section was listed on the left with the time stamp listed as well. Here are two examples:



The only other thing that stuck out for me in my notes was my *notes* themselves that I took during the run of a number or act. All of my notes were mixed in together and written out somewhat long. I didn't have any way of quickly seeing which notes were for the cast, individual cast members, or if they were questions for Jen or any

of the other departments. I would have had to read each note before realizing whom it was meant for. Even the notes that were specifically just for me were hard to pick out from the pack. Looking through all of my notes from college, I definitely see some things that have stuck with me, or helped me move forward with my process, but it was still a long way from where I find myself today.

Scared, So I Must

Moving forward to the time after college while still in Fargo, ND I found the binder of the one other show I had the opportunity to work on with Jennifer Tuttle. Initially after working with her on *Cabaret* I had told myself that I wouldn't work on a show with her again. This was not because of anything she did wrong, but because she scared me. Looking back I know that she scared me in a good way, but at the time she was such an intimidating, formidable force, that I had told myself I wouldn't do it again because it was too much. However, there is something that stays with me always in my mind that she actually said to me my senior year of college. I had expressed my interest in teaching theatre at the college level and was looking at applying to graduate school, but I had told Jen how much the prospect scared me, so I might hold off. She then told me that if it scared me, I should do it. Those words are with me whenever I come across something that scares me, and I'm glad I had them when the offer came to work on another show with her, the summer after *Cabaret*, during summer stock.

They were going to be doing *Shout! The Mod Musical*. Due to the show being in a condensed timeframe it led to a somewhat different process than what I had experienced with Jen previously. I knew that the condensed timeframe may lead to even more of a drive from her in regards to our progress on the show, but I also knew that I couldn't let that scare me this time, I needed to meet it with my own level of drive. Similarities from my previous experience with Jen were that she again provided me with specific research, and her thoughts on each of the numbers. With my research for this show I had to be even more specific because the show moved through the decade, so I couldn't use a popular 1960s dance move that became popular in 1967 if I was choreographing one of the hits from 1962. The steps needed to follow the progression of the era just as the show and its songs did. One of my favorite dance fads to come across was the Freddie, made popular for a short time by Freddie and the Dreamers.

My music knowledge came in handy again. Certain songs needed to be adjusted for length and others songs were listed in the show, but we did not have prerecorded versions of them, or the recordings we did have were very different from our sheet music. I didn't have a piano conductor score, but only the vocal score for this show, which proved to be its own challenge. However, with that in hand I was able to get together with the musical director and we made the adjustments and extra recordings needed for rehearsals. I was relying more on the sheet music, and this was the first time I noticed a number of notes within my score. They were still minimal with most choreography in a separate notebook with only the lyrics for cues as to how it went with the songs, but I was keeping track of changes and the

broad strokes of different sections within the score itself. Previously, I had stopped using the ground plan to take notes for my shows, but I made a small exception with this show.

The center of the set had an oval platform structure with four different levels. After I had staged the first two songs, Jen said, that's great, but can we use the platform from now on. It was like someone hit me on the back of the head and a light bulb went on. Duh! For some unknown reason I seemed to have been avoiding it or forgetting about it since I didn't have a copy of the ground plan. I went home



and drew a picture of the platform at the top of the first page of each song's choreography notes, and then placed the girls on and around it, making sure that no two stage pictures were

alike. It is one of those things that seems so obvious to me now and I'm glad how quickly Jen said something to me about it so I could rectify the situation.

I had made progress as a choreographer, but my notes taken in run-throughs still left something to be desired for quick reference. I did notice an increasing number of complimentary notes to the performers. I was shifting back to a positive place of working and had taken one big step, pushing myself to try the things that scare me, so I could continue to grow.

Skills Learned:

- Your actions can encourage others, just as their actions encourage you.
- Rehearsal environment and atmosphere is of the utmost importance.
- There is a balance in the importance of process vs. product and this can change at different levels.
- If something scares you, you should do it.
- Choreography can be in traffic patterns and pictures that tell a story, rather than just in steps.
- Importance of research.
- Strong collaboration/communication with all departments is key.
- Everyone works a little differently and you need to respect each individual's process.
- Utilizing all the music has to offer you in movement and telling the story.
- Rediscovered the joy of creating together and my enjoyment in helping others to realize their abilities and potential.
- Shared vocabulary.

Chapter 3: Graduate School - The Beginning

The Search for an MFA

After the journeys that were high school and college, what could I have expected next but graduate school. It was actually while choreographing my senior thesis project for my BA that I made the discovery that I wanted to work with students in higher education. I found great joy in working with all of the students involved in my piece. I loved watching their excitement as they discovered more about their abilities with dance and became more aware of their bodies. I immediately began looking for graduate schools, but was turned away, being told I should gain some real world experience first and then reapply. I kept working and turned my sights out east. My husband, Nick, and I moved to Roanoke, VA so that I could be closer to more school options. I continued to work in Virginia and then applied to new schools. I was accepted to the MFA in Choreography program at UNCG, but something just didn't feel right in my gut. One of the things on my mind was something Craig had said when I was talking to him. In a conversation we had about my reticence and all of the pros and cons I could see, he brought up one main fact. He told me that an MFA in Choreography could have the negative effect of pigeonholing me into just one category. He said it might be harder for me to get a job at smaller institutions if I only had the single focus, and after much deliberation I ended up turning down the offer from UNCG.

Nick and I talked and I made the decision that I just couldn't find the program I wanted right now, so we would settle down and start a family. I planned to keep choreographing and thought I would go to graduate school later in life. Then the whirlwind began. A co-worker of mine mentioned a movement pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, VA. My response to her was, "what? Tell me more." I went online that night (October 30, 2014) and read a bit about the program. I found a contact email for more information and emailed David Leong, the Department Chair and professional movement director and fight choreographer, with a request for more information about their program. I received an email back from him requesting my resume and other information pertaining to my academic and professional background. Within days, we had emailed a few times and I had been invited up to chat some more about the program, view some classes, and see the show they had running. My husband and I were also still in the middle of our house hunt, but I thought it was worth at least checking into the school. I thought that maybe I would think about applying for the next fall depending on what happened with our house search.

Tuesday, November 18th, I was in the car and on my way up to visit VCU. I was nervous due to other life factors; my husband and I had just put an offer down on a wonderful house and were anxiously awaiting updates. The next day I observed a couple of undergraduate classes taught by TheatreVCU faculty member and 40 year Broadway veteran, Patti D'Beck, and then went for a 3 o'clock meeting to chat with David. I don't remember a lot about that meeting, but I do remember David sitting down on a chair right across from me and asking me to name the first

five things I do when I choreograph a show, and name them in order. I also have vague memories of him asking me about my past experience and my goals moving forward. Then he informed me that Patti, who taught movement and musical theatre, would be retiring at the end of the school year. Due to her experience and knowledge from her decades working on Broadway as a performer and choreographer, he mentioned that it would be a shame not to study with her before she retired. So, he asked me if I would like to start in January to at least get a semester with her. I don't know of many times I have been speechless, but this was definitely one of them. I regained my tongue, and said I would need to discuss it with my husband. David then took me in to meet Noreen Barnes, the Director of Graduate Studies.

When I talked to David about that first meeting and what made his decision to talk to me about starting in January, he informed me that it was my eager, enthusiastic energy and my desire to learn. He felt that if I was someone with that strong of a desire to learn, that I should learn it from the right person, and with Patti retiring at the end of the year, my only chance was now. Nick and I found out that we didn't win the bid on the house, so with first time home buying no longer being on our plates, the decision was made that I would attend VCU. Everything started rolling and by January I was moved in to a room in Richmond and began rehearsals on *9 to 5* with Patti and Brad Willcuts, a graduate student in his final semester. Patti was the Director/Choreographer for the show and Brad was her Associate Choreographer, with me as the Assistant Choreographer.

My Crisis and My Rock

Now reality set in. I had a big existential crisis as I began to experience living apart from my husband, reentering school, and realizing I knew so much less about theatre than I ever thought possible. I questioned whether or not I had made the right decision, but didn't know who to talk to about it. I was worried I would get too biased an opinion from all of the people I thought about talking to. In the end I reached out to a former professor that I was really close with who talked me through it and brought me closer to getting out the other side. The rehearsals for *9 to 5* were the main thing that kept me sane as I worked my way through the crisis, and they ended up teaching me so much more than just how to have confidence in myself again. While I was coming in to the production joining an already moving train, I still felt that rehearsals were the one place at the time that I knew what I was doing.

Starting graduate school had been a whirlwind, but jumping into rehearsals with Patti and Brad turned out to be one all on its own. I had met them both on only a couple of previous occasion and began rehearsals with them before classes even started, only two days after I moved to town. I remember how insane that first day of rehearsal seemed to me. Patti picked us up at the school and on the one-hour drive up to Fredericksburg they talked to me a bit more about the show and what they were doing with it. Brad showed me videos of the dance we would be working on that night, and when we got to rehearsal, I actually helped him teach it. Later when I talked to Patti about working on that production, she even remembered that first day as vividly as I did. I asked her about working on the show and her first

recollection was about that car ride. She told me how amazed she was at how hard and quickly I was working right from the beginning. It was wonderful hearing such great things from a woman who had become my mentor. Knowing I made such a strong impression, and a good, lasting one is always nice to hear. She also said,

I learned soon that you learned fast, you were able to teach it and take charge . . . I was quite impressed with that. . . [Y]ou were also not afraid to ask questions or clarify. . . You hadn't worked together, in this capacity [with Brad], but then actually being put in the same car, the three of us, and the two of you working and talking about it and then having to do it an hour and a half later. I mean that was a case of going from zero to sixty.

It was crazy, awesome, and invigorating all at once. I learned so much from the process of *9 to 5* that it took going back over my notes to realize what things I had not been conscious of before then.

Lessons from Patti D'Beck

The first lesson I learned from Patti was that we do not have permission to dance unless we're engaging our whole body. The idea of having permission to dance was one that I had never thought of before but cling strongly to now. She talked about really getting the character out of the performers to go with the movement and to always know what the acting story, or the scene of the dance was. I had never thought in these terms before and it began to change the way I viewed

the pieces we were staging. I started seeing everything that the movement was there to convey to the audience, rather than just clever and fun movements.

Another couple of wonderful lessons I learned from Patti while working on this show were the high productivity of collaboration and not being afraid to try different options on your cast. For the longest time I had worked solo as a choreographer. Yes, I collaborated with directors, but I created all of the movement on my own, and for the most part, I had what I was going to set on the performers figured out when I came to the first rehearsal. I set that and I kept it. I never had work-shopped or played with different options either before or during rehearsals for a show. Patti showed me how working with other artists to create the movement and giving yourself a chance to see different versions on the cast were both gifts. There was one specific cross we were trying to figure out and it just wasn't what she was wanting. She told me what she was thinking and asked me to try a couple of different things. So I went up and did a couple variations of her steps and ones that came to mind. She picked a couple and I showed them to the cast. I then joined her as we watched the cast try each of them and we picked out what worked best. It was such a different way of rehearsing than what I had previously experienced, and I loved it. That experience also taught me the lesson that I didn't need to have all of the answers right now. Twyla Tharp, dancer and choreographer, tells us that you can find a trap "in the belief that everything has to be perfect before you can take the next step. . . . This type of perfectionism is more like procrastination" (Tharp 124). I realized it was ok to have some of the answers and then work with others to discover the rest.

I think the biggest lesson I began to learn during this production was the importance of transitions. Later on, in my graduate studies with David Leong, he would emphasize the importance of transitions and how they can really make or break a show, but working with Patti on *9 to 5* was where I was first introduced to their importance and strength. Patti worked artfully to make each transition a part of the story and choreography, and as seamless as possible. She said to be sure the audience knows that if they are seeing part of the transition, they know it is something they should see, that it is also a part of the story for them. Also, know how big or small to make it. We had two little transition flourishes in the show that speak to this perfectly. One was moving into the Xerox room where there was supposed to be paper all over the floor. A set piece was coming in, Jeremy, a cast member, was bringing all of the paper in, and the actor for the scene was entering. It didn't work when we had Jeremy toss the paper because it became too big of an event and it also spread the paper over too large of a space. In the end, Jeremy entered, living in the world of the transition music, and did a small flourished spin at center, letting the paper loose as he did. It was simple, but obviously meant to be viewed by the audience so it didn't feel like they were just watching a transition. They were instead still watching part of the show. The other transition I am thinking of, was one dealing with a backdrop flying in and a bench coming out, but we could never get it quite fast enough to not slow the momentum of the show. Patti added a beautiful moment to fill the time with Sylvern, another of the ensemble men, entering down stage right with a flower. He took a moment making sure the flower was perfect and that he had mustered all of his courage and then crossed the

stage to exit down stage left. It was a great little addition to the story and kept the audience engaged. In a later scene in the office, we got to see him give the flower away.

My experience with Patti on the show taught me to challenge myself not to repeat, to find the acting beats during musical interludes, to only move if you must, to honor the music accents (really listening for everything, but finding out which ones you will have for sure), and to not be afraid to make things more pedestrian if that is what fits the show. It doesn't need to be all steps, steps, steps. We did a lot of trimming and simplifying as the show came together (or as Patti would say, we "tszujed" it) and it was all the better for it, not the worse.

Moving through rehearsals I was able to observe how Patti would build certain scenes or numbers by starting with the broad strokes with the principle characters and then as it began to form she would add many more layers with the supporting characters and the ensemble to give it more life. Patti taught me how important it is to protect the non-movers who are often some of your leads. "They have to be protected in such a way that the question never comes into your mind that they can't move" (qtd. in Grody 103). You can do that in these numbers in the way you have them interact with those dancing with or around them, or even by introducing a prop. She pointed out how props not only bring some of the scenes to life and give them different flavors, but they also help out an actor who doesn't know what to do with their hands.

I hadn't been aware of it at the time, but I came to realize that I was not only learning about choreography, but I was also learning about directing. In the words

of multiple award winning director and choreographer Rob Ashford, “the lines between a director and a choreographer should be blurred” (qtd. in Cramer 19). Not only does this remind us that you don’t want to see where one’s work ends and the other’s begins, but also that they each do a bit of both jobs. Thus, I shouldn’t have been surprised that I was already learning about directing. Patti told me that theatre is about conflict; you need to have an obstacle and a strong need. She talked to me about having the actors make their crosses on thoughts as well, not just on actions. She told me that you could use a cross to make a moment stronger or more special. When working on a large scene at the end of the show with the full cast on stage she also made me aware of looking to find ways to rearrange spatial relationships and really making sure the ensemble is fully in the scene; that they are acting – having thoughts and reactions in character to what is going on. One great thing she said to them was how she was here to direct the traffic, but how she couldn’t do that if they didn’t drive the cars.

Patti was wonderful in so many respects. One of the best lessons she taught came purely from the example she set. She understood that even if they weren’t “driving their cars” one day, and she had to show them where the ignition was, there was no good to come from her getting overly upset about it. She always kept an uplifting demeanor in rehearsals and worked to foster a positive working environment. As we all know, happy people are more productive. Working with Patti has helped move me even further away from old tendencies of being so strict in rehearsals, and while I do still expect much from my cast, I ask for it with more honey and less vinegar.

As we moved into spacing and tech I noticed Patti's request for the actors to stand with their feet together for spacing and to have a small notebook on them at all times to write down the specifics of any adjustment they got as we worked through the show. I learned how this really expedited the process. She said that we had no time to wait for the actors; they needed to be ready to go. We would spike items, space any of the larger sections of numbers, run the number, and then move on to the next scene if all went well. We did pause to work transitions and make sure they were ok, but we worked our way through at a good speed. (Except for when the blizzard shut us down and Patti and I were stuck in Fredericksburg for a couple of days. What an adventure).

One last thing I would like to mention is something that Patti said to the cast one day. She said, "Acting is a muscular activity, not an intellectual activity." I love that. It constantly reminds me not to sit and think too long, but to get up on my feet and try things. It also applies to when giving the cast notes and reminding them that they need to physicalize the notes for themselves, they can't just write them all down and hope they'll remember. The whole experience was really a grand adventure and completely changed who I was as an artist and choreographer from the one that I had been when I started graduate school only a few months previous.

More Firsts

Thinking back over the whole process of *9 to 5*, not only did I learn an enormous amount from the experience, but I also had a lot of firsts. It was the first

show I had worked on that had a swing for the ensemble, and I remember how interesting it was to me, having someone needing to know multiple tracks and going in for different people at different times. It was also the first time I had taken part in the group process of creating choreography. While Patti and Brad had most of it prepared in their pre-production work, there were still a number of things that we worked on or continued to hone as the process moved forward. It was wonderful reaching a place where I felt Patti respected my opinion and would ask my thoughts on different sections or would let me play and try something out for her. I took notes for Patti during runs of different numbers, but she even told me to feel free to write notes on whatever I saw. I would then take all of my notes to her and see which she agreed with. When looking over my notebooks I was reminded that to make this easier, I took my notes in a different color.

It was my first time taking notes for someone else and in taking notes for Patti I was also given a system for keeping the notes organized. A system that as a person with neat freak and organizational junkie tendencies, I'm surprised I hadn't found sooner. Patti would simply place a letter or letters inside a circle in front of the note to let her know what department it was for or what it referenced, and to make it clearly visible. I simply chose to put mine in boxes. Examples being:

[R] Needs to be rehearsed

[CL] Needs to be cleaned

[SM] Stage Management

[M] Music (music director)

[C] Costumes

[L] Lights

[SD] Sound

[PDB] A note for herself (Patti D'Beck)

Then, notes for the cast would simply have their name in front or shorthand if it was for a whole group, e.g., [Ens] for the whole ensemble. Another first and new development that I noticed was that I had begun to start taking down choreography in the script and the score. I hadn't realized that this was really the first time of me doing that until I went back to look over all of my old show binders.

A few other firsts for me during this show were that it was the first show I remember doing videos of all of the numbers for the cast to have to rehearse with at home, it was the first time having a complete set of rehearsal tracks, the first time having full renderings for the set, and it was the first time experiencing an artistic director who would come check in on things and had a running dialogue with the director/choreographer. I also learned the phrase, "strong and wrong" while working on this show, which our cast member Darian said after he made a bold choice one day that Patti said was a good try, but not what we were looking for. I've come to use that often with my casts. I like them to dive in and try things because only then will we know what we have, and possibly find some gems. The whole process was a lot of new information and quite a blessing.

Old Stomping Ground – New Brianna

After working with Patti on a show, the semester ended and I went home, back to Fargo, ND. I would be there for part of the summer to assist my old mentor, Craig Ellingson, with two summer stock productions with The Straw Hat Players. He had me on as his assistant director/assistant choreographer for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and *CATS*. Their season had already started when I arrived to join in on the work for the first show, so most of the choreography and blocking had already had its first draft set down. This gave me the chance to look a bit more at the directorial side of things, taking what I had learned from Patti and making use of the opportunity to pose many more questions to Craig and the cast about character motivations and ideas to fine-tune what was there. I was able to lend my eye to Craig by focusing on detail work and making suggestions for small moments. One of these simple moments being, instead of having the dads pretend to take a picture with the cell phone they were holding, why not have them actually take a picture. On many occasions I also know I talked with the cast about earning the movement. Specifically, I have notes about it for some hand choreography in “Pandemonium” and for Leaf when he sang “I’m Not That Smart.”

The first semester at VCU I had also been a TA and an observer in a couple of the classes that Patti taught (movement and musical theatre). I learned a lot from her in that setting as well, and a few of those things I took with me to the rehearsals that summer. I had notes to talk to the actress playing Olive to really make the discovery of the words she was going to say during “My Friend, the Dictionary.” Specifically notating when she would sing about species, Nicci’s, and Ricci’s. It was a

discovery for her character as she worked to make the rhymes. Another discovery I worked on was with the actor playing Vice Principal Panch and how he truly needed to discover how much money he had in his pocket before he could announce the last minute second prize. A couple of the other skills I took from Patti's classes into those rehearsals were talking with the cast about dealing with the accident of something falling or being left in a random spot on stage. Their characters were real people, in a real gym, at a real spelling bee, so if someone dropped a piece of candy, wouldn't they pick it up? If someone dropped a ball, wouldn't they go grab it? I also talked to the cast about not back-peddling (walking backwards) during a "park and bark" section of a song, but to instead hold their ground or come forward. The last thing I consciously remember applying was asking the cast where their song comes from, what does it do for them, and why do they need to sing it. Almost everyone in the show had a solo they sang at some point, so what was the motivation behind their character singing it? I also came to notice that in my notes, in place of [PDB] as I would take notes for Patti, there was now a [BL] for notes to myself.

We then moved into work on *CATS* and I was a little more involved with the creative process for that. Craig had already taught the cast a number of combinations that were being utilized for some of the larger numbers in the show like the "Jellicle Ball," but he still had much to choreograph and teach the cast, as well as a number of songs or sections of songs that he wanted me to choreograph. One interesting thing about this process with Craig was how he chose to attack the "Jellicle Ball." He had multiple combinations of differing levels of difficulty which he had taught the whole cast. We then sat down one day and had an audition for the

sections. Not everyone would be dancing everything, but he wasn't sure of whom he wanted for what yet. We named each section and everyone had a chance to do each of the combinations for us. Then we started to put the puzzle together.

As I began doing work on my own pieces, I noticed that quite a large amount of my work was written into the vocal score above the staff. Either that, or I had taken small videos of myself doing the choreography so that I wouldn't have to stop and take the time to write it down. I'm guessing this was due to the time crunch of putting up the show in 2 weeks while simultaneously working on other shows. It probably also had something to do with the videoing and notation we did in my work with Patti.

After the whole show was staged we began going back over it and I found notes I had on a number of things I was either looking at or trying to remind myself to focus in on. I wanted to look at entrances and movement timing to really establish what was happening and to tell the audience where to look. I also wanted to be aware of how we could do cat movement around the stage to adjust the picture, but not let it seem like superficial moves just for a change of scene. We had to remind the cast that they didn't all need to come up to almost a standing position in reactions to things, but could react in many ways and on many levels to help with the stage picture. We worked to help the young man playing Old Deuteronomy to find what was an old cat, rather than a sneaky cat. I also looked for the specificity in moments between unison and not unison movement; why it was or wasn't and how it looked. I had to keep reminding the cast to earn the dance break in "The Rum

Tum Tugger” number, and I even used the metaphor I had heard Patti use about being there to help direct traffic, but that they all needed to be “driving their cars.”

Coming back to work where I had gone to school and done summer stock, but with new experiences under my belt, set me up for a wonderful and collaborative experience. Especially working alongside my mentor from that earlier phase of life. One of my favorite experiences from the whole summer was the day that we staged “Skimbleshanks, the Railway Cat.” Craig had said that he wanted to set it together, but wasn’t really sure of what he wanted, he just had some ideas. So I went home that night and listened to it a lot and notated in my score how I might stage most of it, in somewhat broad strokes. The next day at rehearsal Craig said we could just tag team it, and that I could start. I had butterflies in my stomach because I had never worked like this before, but it was great. I started setting some things and when we would get to a section where Craig had an idea, he would jump in and start staging. If he then got to a point where I had something really fun I wanted to try I would ask him if I could jump back in. We went through the whole number like that and then went back over it for some cleaning and adjusting. It was such a rush.

When I asked Craig about what he noticed in me that was different from my time at school, there were two things he pointed out. He said, “you have grown a great deal in your capacity to empathize with dancers. Early on the ‘task master’ took control more often, and now I see a nice balance of ‘task master’ and ‘nurturer’ – which I believe is wonderful.” Craig also said that he “saw how [I had] grown from a ‘my vision only’ artist to one who understands the larger picture, which now includes many more people at the table.” It was wonderful hearing from one of my

early mentors how I had indeed made perceptible changes to my process, and that it wasn't just in my head. My most recent mentor, Patti, even backed this up as we were talking about our collaborations when she told me, "you're fun. You always come with ideas, and if something doesn't work, I don't like it, you don't like it, it doesn't work, it's on to the next thing. It's not like you're married to your idea. I think you're really good Brianna in many ways, and one of the ways is you're very good at finding solutions." Having heard this from both of them now, I know I am growing in the right directions.

Takeaways from Summer Stock 2015

I had two main takeaways from the experience back home. One was something I found when looking at my notes and the other was in something one of the cast members said. The first was seeing how even though I was acting as assistant director on top of assistant choreographer, most of my notes still focused heavily on the specificity of what the performers were doing in the choreography and not much at all on the technical aspects that a director also has to be aware of. I realized that I needed to work on being able to open my focus wider to look at the bigger picture. According to Rob Ashford, "being a choreographer is about being able to sit out in the house and see everything at once. It's about having some kind of an overall vision, as opposed to a vision of detail" (qtd. in Cramer 6). So even as a choreographer I need to be sure I am opening my view. Yet, I also saw how maybe it was fine in this instance. Working together Craig and I had two sets of eyes and

Craig was able to focus more on those other aspects because he knew I was looking at the nitty gritty of the actors.

The other thing I came to learn was my true affect on the cast/students. The Straw Hat Players pulls mainly from colleges in the area with some students brought in from a bit further away. There are rarely professionals in the cast, so you are usually working with student performers during their summer break. One of the company members was someone that had been at school the same time I was, but had taken some time off and was back finishing up. We were out catching up and swung by a house where some of the cast lived. The minute we walked in, one of the cast members said, "Brianna is here, there's an adult here." They were goofily making a big deal about it, pretending to be shocked, but then being excited. My first thought was, hey, I'm not an adult, almost like it was a bad thing. I mean, they are all legally adults just like me, but I'm not an adult adult. Am I? I still feel so young. Then it hit me. I may only be 4-5 years older than some of them, but they view me so much differently. I realized that I was an adult with a capital A to them and due to that fact I could so easily engender their own feeling of accomplishment, or worse, I could just as easily, with a simple comment in a rehearsal, lower their self image. The way I am viewed as an adult by students can give my words and actions greater affect in the way they impact them. It was the final switch over. I realized that the idiom of "getting more bees with honey" was a practice that I did need to adopt.

New Role as Associate

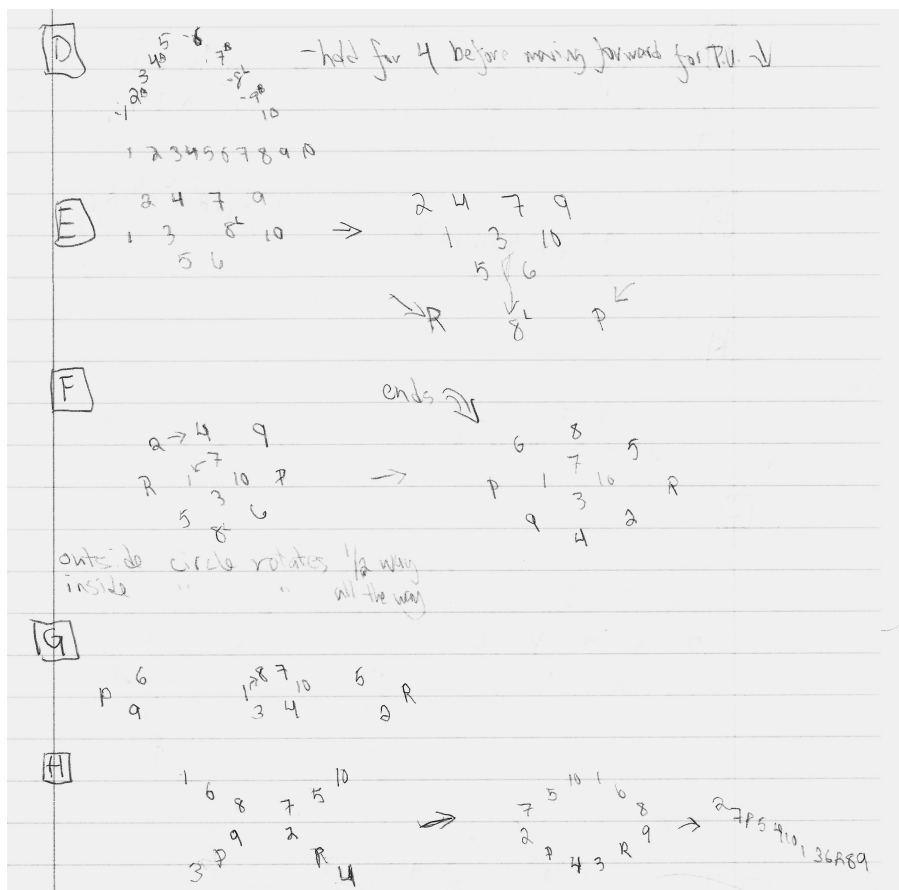
The summer shows wrapped up and I was back to Virginia. Once back I jumped into two more shows that I would be working on, slightly in tandem. I was to be Patti's Associate Choreographer for *Sister Act* at Riverside Performing Arts Center and I would also be working alongside two other graduate students on a production of *The Rocky Horror Show* at Virginia Commonwealth University.

I dove into *Sister Act* with Patti more in depth first because it would start rehearsals and open sooner. It was my first time experiencing a large amount of collaborative pre-production work. It was a bit of a learning curve to get used to the process of meeting for many hours over a couple of weeks to listen, brainstorm, and choreograph/stage some of the numbers. I was still used to doing it mostly on my own, or coming in with a lot of it already being started and already being in the rehearsal process. It gave me a chance to spend more time with Patti one-on-one and learn some of her methods. She taught me to try all ideas, even the bad ones. She made me aware of how a choreographer was entitled to request props for certain numbers. You don't know you'll always get them, but ask. We requested some specific props for how we were staging a number with homeless people. I switched almost completely over to taking all of my notes within the script and score alongside the words and notes, with some formation and transition drawings taking place on the blank pages in between or on a single inserted sheet of notebook paper. I also always kept a notebook around for random thoughts and ideas as well.

An extra challenge during the process of this show was that just before rehearsals started, I had wrist surgery (on my dominant wrist) that placed me in a

long arm brace for over a month. I had to get creative in a whole new way. It was weeks before I could even use my fingers again let alone have my arm out of the sling. So, many of notes were taken left handed and I took to teaching the choreography one side of the body at a time. I would face the ladies and show them what their right side would be doing (like a mirror) and then I would turn away and show them what their left side would be doing. It was frustrating, but I'm sure it was a bit hilarious as well.

Sister Act was a show with quite a few numbers with a lot of moving bodies. I pulled from my pageant work and ended up giving each of the ladies a number and then drew large traffic pattern formations using the numbers. It was easier to track someone through the whole piece this way. You can see one such page below.



This method of tracking came in handy when Patti trusted me to stage one of the biggest numbers while she blocked a scene in the other room. We managed the original staging in less time than planned, so that was great. I started with the ladies in one formation and would teach them the steps. Then, I would place them all in their next formation so they knew where they were going. We would then back up and I would tell them how they were getting to that new place. It also helped that I had all of my drawings, because if they got confused I could show them some for a visual reference. It worked quite well, and the whole cast had a lot of fun with the number. Sometimes too much fun was had, though, especially with such a large number of ladies in the room all the time. They were very “chatty cathy” and it really showed the strength of Patti’s resolve to always stay positive in rehearsals and how she was able to bring them around to focus without getting upset or raising her voice.

In working with Patti, I came to see how much more of a place at the table the choreographer had, compared to what some of my previous notions had been. At first, I thought it was possibly just due to the fact that Patti was directing and choreographing, but as I’ve learned moving forward, they are indeed a bigger piece of the puzzle than I had thought in my earlier days.

A new experience while working on this show was having dance captains that ran cleaning rehearsals. I had been a dance captain who ran cleaning rehearsals and I had been a choreographer with dance captains, but I guess I had always been too much of a micro manager to ever have them clean. It was wonderful being able to work with Patti on one thing, knowing that one of the dance

captains was cleaning in the other room. Then one of us could go check in with them and see if they needed any help. It also gave me the ability, once the steps were taught, to step back and look at the bigger picture with Patti. I didn't need to keep every little step in my head because the dance captain would have it. If there was a disagreement over how we had set something, like the movement of an arm, after a couple of changes one day, I could ask the dance captain and they would know. It was wonderful and I wish I had stepped back and shared the responsibility earlier in my work.

The Rocky Transition

Once we had things going steady with *Sister Act*, I started to spend a bit more of my time at rehearsals for *The Rocky Horror Show*. A third year graduate student named Rebecca Frost Mayer was the show's Director/Choreographer, with second year graduate student Alex Burkart acting as the Associate Director and me as the Associate Choreographer. There wasn't very much group pre-production work as Rebecca had figured out most of what she wanted on her own, but we did get together on a couple occasions to play with some ideas.

This experience was a bit of a rocky one for me. It had its ups and downs, as I guess any production does. The first thing that was hard for me, was coming in still not being completely sure of what we were doing, due to not having a lot of time with Rebecca and Alex beforehand. Rebecca definitely had quite a bit on her shoulders with the show, and I just wish I could have been more help to her from

the beginning. I've come to see how much I enjoy being around for scenes being blocked and not just the songs being worked. It helps me with the through-line and connecting it all together. For this show, I was only there on days we were working on dance and that may have been part of the disconnect for me. There were some great days with the cast where our dramaturg shared information, the director shared her thoughts, and even a day we got together to watch some old B-roll films for reference. Somehow it just wasn't all connecting for me, though.

Only being involved on the choreographic side, since Alex was there, I had some specific things I was in charge of that Rebecca didn't have much experience in. I headed up all of the lifts and tricks, partnering work, and pole work that was used in the "Floor Show." Rebecca told me what she was looking for in the partnering sections and I came in with some stuff to put on the cast and show her. When it came to the pole work, we worked on it a bit together. I showed her a list of moves and she picked certain ones and then we played with each characters' entrance and stringing it all together. I was also a set of eyes for focusing on the choreographic details, so that Rebecca could look at the larger picture, and I helped with some of the transitions as well. Some of it was rough going and the cast had a hard time getting the specifics and the styling that Rebecca wanted for some of the numbers.

Due to my lack of knowledge on what exactly Rebecca wanted, I didn't feel I was able to give very many notes to the cast; so for the most part I had lists of questions for her. I do have one note I found that I had written down from something she said when I had inquired with her about some of the choreography. She said she wanted it "as correctly and choreographed" rather than "as everyone

else.” I think I remember what she meant by that, but I also think that we should have chosen our battles. The show had a lot of movement that at times seemed to be melting the brains of our ensemble (known as phantoms). I think there were certain places where we could’ve stuck to our guns asking for them to perform the choreography a certain way, and times where they all were doing the same thing, just slightly different than what was set, and we should’ve left it. It was very frustrating though, to know which battles to choose, because it felt like the cast wasn’t doing their work outside of rehearsals. They would come back to a number with the same level of knowledge, and sometimes less, than the last time we visited it. It was even little things like forgetting a head turn or a forced arch, or knowing how to hold their newspaper prop to match the other phantoms. It just didn’t seem excusable. One of the actors never once managed to repeat a roughly twenty-four count solo section of movement. It was different every time, no matter how much I worked with her on it. I also found plenty of notes where I was asking the cast to raise the energy and earn/motivate the movement. It kept coming across as choreography they were told to do rather than movement they were motivated to do. I’m not sure if the choreography was somewhat to blame, but that is always a possibility. I just wish the cast had worked more at jumping in to play with it or had come to us with questions on how to do that, or had asked about what they didn’t understand.

David Toney, performer and writer as well as TheatreVCU professor and the department artistic director, came to rehearsal one day and when he talked to the students he told them, “don’t show off, show up.” I guess he saw the same lack of

focus we were seeing. It was nice to have David at rehearsal for support and guidance. Since it was my first time working in the interesting space that is Hodges Theatre, which we lovingly call the three quarter round, it would've helped me a great deal if he or Ron Keller, scenic designer and the current Department Chair, had been there more often and earlier in the process to give feedback and advice. Unfortunately we didn't get to see either of them much until we got into tech rehearsals.

Rebecca and Alex had worked in the space before though, so they knew that along with asking the cast things like why they are in the scene and what's in it for them, they also talked to them about what Rebecca referred to as "bacting." She kept reminding the cast to act with their spines. It is quite often in the space that someone is looking at your back, so you need to be acting as much with it, as with your mask. Now, while Rebecca and Alex did have some experience in the space and plenty of experience elsewhere, some guidance earlier on would have been great because our transition into the space did not go very smoothly. Not only were there sightline issues with the set that required a bit of re-blocking so the audience could see, but we were also asked to restage quite a few numbers in specific ways. I think it was really hard for the cast to adjust as well as hard on the artistic team. A guiding light through the dark tunnel of our spacing and tech rehearsals was getting to see the new costumes. After seeing one of our run-throughs in the rehearsal space, the costume designer informed Rebecca of some changes she wanted to make now that she had seen how the characters were progressing. It was really great seeing the cast slip into their second skins as we moved into dress rehearsals.

As had most of my recent shows, this show also presented a couple other firsts for me. There were a couple of character solos that rather than pre-choreographing, Rebecca chose to workshop with the actor in the room. She would listen to the song with them and just play around, having them play around as well. She was then able to see what movements came naturally and comfortably to them. Those movements were then taken and slowly shaped into a repeatable choreography for the show. It was a very organic process that I had not experienced in such depth before. Another first, while not specifically pertaining to choreography, but more to directing was something that Rebecca asked them all to do after our first read through. A group folder in Google Drive was created for the company and the cast was asked to each upload some literal as well as abstract images of what their character meant to them. It became a large cache of images that we could all refer to for inspiration. It was a great way for us all to see and share in the formation of the show. I also learned about Alex's magic elixir of hot water, apple cider vinegar, and honey to stop inflammation and mucus, and ease sore throats and a lost voice. While also not directly related to choreography it is a good thing to have, as every show will always have cast members in need. The show opened and as you would expect with a cult classic, it had wonderfully full audiences for the cast to play with. As the production was winding down I had already started work on my next project, choreographing *Urinetown* at VCU.

Skills Learned:

- You don't have permission to dance unless you're engaging your whole body; you need to earn the movement.
- Should know the acting story or the scene of a dance (character driven).
- There is a high productivity to collaboration.
- You don't need to have all of the answers right away; you can work to find some of them together.
- The importance of transitions.
- Move only if you must and challenge yourself not to repeat.
- Honor musical accents and find acting beats in the musical interludes.
- Protect the non-movers.
- Be aware of fully engaging the ensemble in scenes.
- Happy people are more productive, and the person running rehearsal sets that example.
- Acting is a muscular activity, not an intellectual activity.
- Ease of having choreography in the score/script and organizational notes.
- Importance of discovery and play – strong and wrong.
- Finding the motivation for a character's song
- Specificity of movement: unison vs. not, entrances, audience focus, timing, style.
- Needing to broaden my focus to not only detail oriented.
- The effect of my actions and words on students/cast members.
- Try all ideas, even the bad ones.
- Choreographer has a bigger seat at the table than I thought, and can ask for props/set pieces.
- Importance of delegation rather than micro-management.

Chapter 4: *Urinetown*

Taking Back the Reins

I was asked to choreograph *Urinetown*, the spring semester musical at VCU, and having the chance to be the full choreographer on a show again was both exciting and daunting. I always liked being in control, so I was excited to have a bit more of a say in the movement of a show, but I was also worried, wondering if I had learned enough over the last year to do the show justice. Working with the Director, James Stover (a recent graduate from the program), and the Associate Director, Tim Fitz-Gerald (a fellow graduate student) turned out to be the best medicine for that doubt. One of the great things about it was that James had worked with Patti in the past as well, so we already had a bit of a shared vocabulary from which to work.

The process started out similarly to how I had experienced working with Jen Tuttle. Due to the show's nature of parodying specific musicals and the musical form itself, James gave me a list of the songs and what he and Ben Miller, the Music Director, felt were the musical references for each of them. He also gave me a list of videos he wanted me to look at for what he was thinking. James wanted me to touch on the clichés for a moment, but not live in them. The other initial information I received from him was a sheet on the difference between parody and satire as well as a list of which songs he wanted me to focus on, which ones he wanted to stage, and which songs the three of us, him, myself, and Tim, would be working on

together. The triumvirate, as I came to calling us, met a few times during the end of the fall semester to make sure we were all set for the spring when rehearsals would start. I was able to have a hand in planning the long-term rehearsal schedule, as we needed to plan very specifically about what we thought needed to be accomplished before spring break.

Auditions had been a lot of fun, but we had called back more people than we originally planned to, so it was a tight schedule for callbacks. There is something that I have said to the students called back in each of the dance calls that I ran at VCU, but I don't know where I got it from, or when I started using it. Once we're getting ready to start seeing them dance, I remind them all to have fun and not be upset if a step goes awry. I say, "There are no mistakes, only chosen solos." So, if you chose to have a solo, sell it. We didn't have a lot of dancers, but plenty of movers with a lot of great stuff to lend to us. They all dove in to the dance call and gave us some wonderful things.

Now that we had our cast, I had a better handle on where I could head with the choreography. From working with David Leong and Patti D'Beck the last year, in and out of the classroom, I had learned about the concept of having a hook for each number. When reading an interview with Broadway director/choreographer duo, Michael Bennett and Bob Avian, Michael mentioned how they "try not to do a number until [they] have an idea, a hook for the number, some sort of a concept, stylistically or in terms of the particular plot, or where the number is happening, or the style of movement that leads [them] to some sort of structure" (qtd. in Grody

96). That was not something I had done before, at least consciously, so when I started planning for this show, that is one thing I made part of my process.

My Pre-Production Process

Tim, James and I did some pre-production work together, but I had to tell James that I didn't want all of the pre-production time that he wanted to schedule for me to work on my numbers at school during the end of the fall semester. I wanted to work on it myself for a while first. While creating is much more fun when involving other people and working together, there is still that time needed alone, at least for me. Twyla Tharp reminds us that "*alone* and *lonely* are not the same thing. Solitude is an unavoidable part of creativity. Self-reliance is a happy by-product" (Tharp 31). While I was more comfortable with and used to the idea of working together in pre-production, I still valued my alone time to think and create before joining with others to work.

While home over the holiday break I did a lot of the work. I found the hooks for each number and the story they were each telling. I then choreographed the three most danced numbers. Then, just before school started, I was able to get together with some students to try the choreography on some bodies. I filmed the three pieces and sent them to James for his feedback, to Patti for her thoughts, as well as to Tim. What I found in my binder was that I had then placed sheets of paper into my score in front of each song so that I could list James' feedback as well the thoughts Patti shared with me so I could discuss them with James and Tim. I love

how much the choreography is so much more about the characters and the acting than so many people think; myself included in that group at one time. “You’re not just getting dancers. You’re getting actors who dance” (Cramer 101). This is a breed of performer that I like to refer to as “danctors.” One of the notes that Patti gave me was to “encourage the ensemble to have opinions about everything [Bobby] says.” This was something we worked on with them throughout the process for a number of scenes. We wanted them to remember that they are acting, first and foremost and that the dance is just a heightened language to help tell the story. However, I know there are different levels of this in different eras and genres of musical theatre. Reminding them to earn the movement also paid off as they dove deeper into the scenes and some really beautiful moments were born. I continue to value my time to think alone as I create, but do come to a point where I eventually want to involve others.

Set up for Success

When the spring semester started and just before we began rehearsals, James and I had a meeting with David Toney to talk about rehearsals with the cast and his thoughts for a productive process. His comments were for being in an educational rather than professional setting. He told us to be sure the students come to work and not socialize. We could pick certain people to pull aside, if we chose to, and ask them to be leaders among their peers. This would allow the students to police themselves and set examples for one another. We did have one

graduate student in the show that would be great for helping to set an example, but one model of rehearsal behavior would not be enough. He said we should also ask the students to expect more of themselves and be accountable; if they are unprepared, have them tell you why. Also, never yell at them, your disappointment is all that is needed. For the rehearsal hall specifically, he also thought we should have different areas set up for understudies to sit at, students that aren't being used to do homework at, and an area for those preparing to work. The last thing he mentioned was that he thought we should reiterate to the students the different hats that we (James, Tim, and Brianna) wear in the rehearsal hall compared to the classroom.

All of this gave us plenty to think about moving into rehearsals and helped set us up for what I think was an amazing process. James also did a few things at our first meeting that set us up for success as well. He told a story that he had read in a book about a particular comedic actor who was concerned when they were no longer getting a laugh to a line in the script where they ask another character for the butter. When they went to their superior to voice their concern and ask why they were not getting the laugh anymore, they were told it was because they were asking for the laugh. They then asked, well what had they done before when they got the laugh, and they were told that they had simply asked for the butter. It was a reminder to stay as completely in the character as they could and not go trying to be funny for the audience. What is funny to the audience is that the character is taking things seriously, not laughing at their own jokes or trying to be funny. James said that in his opinion, drama was when people took things seriously, but comedy was

when people took things too seriously. It gave us our first piece of shared vocabulary in which we could all remind each other to ask for the butter.

The other two great things James did that day were up on our feet. We had a designer presentation, so the student designers and teams were present and he asked them to join us as well as we worked through a couple of exercises. The first was a simple exercise in Lecoq's Seven Levels of Tension, in which James used the idea of waiting for an Uber to arrive. It was fun for the students, but also gave us a base level from which to work with the cast on the need to pee. The second exercise was a team building one. There was a broom handle held by two taller people at about their chest/neck height. Everyone else was on one side of the broom, like you would be for limbo, but instead of the way it is in limbo, everyone had to go over the bar. It was a group effort to get everyone over to the other side. Watching them problem solve, have fun, and enjoy the excitement of accomplishing a goal together was great. That whole first meeting really showed me a great way to set up the road to success and let everyone experience how important each cog in the machine is.

Learning from Collaborators

Working on *Urinetown* I learned everything I could from James, Tim, and this group of students and artists. As we moved forward into rehearsals, a couple of ideas I learned from James were to ask the cast what their character Polaroid was and to tell them that verbs and direct objects are good operative words, while pronouns and negative words are not. The character's Polaroid gave them a starting

place or a place to go to whenever they were stuck with their character and also gave them a great path into the character's physicality. The comment about operative words was a tool used whenever they were stuck on how to say or interpret a line of text.

I also pulled in and applied as many of the skills as possible that I had gained over the last year working with Patti. I continued to expect a lot from the cast and really pushed the character driven motivation behind all of the movement I was giving them, being sure they were dancing the character. I would explain the scene of the song whenever they were confused and Tim was a really great help with this. The two of us seemed to see so many things the same. I was often unable to put things into words, but Tim was always there to save me and to help make sense of my ramblings.

Tim, James, and myself worked right alongside one another and with the cast when staging the song "Don't Be the Bunny." We had all of the broad strokes figured out, but not the specifics. The cast members in the scene learned the sections we had and then we moved ahead as we (James and I) had become accustomed to working with David Leong; best idea wins and work from the end. I learned for the first time how great building a number from the ground up, with the collaboration of your cast could be. We would talk about what we wanted the different moments to look like and then put the actors in a final picture and try different ways of getting there. More heads are better than one and just as Patti showed me, it's true that you don't have to come in with all of the answers right away. It is also a wonderful

opportunity for the cast to feel even more involved in the production as they get to put their thoughts into the piece and help create it.

While many directors and choreographers do employ this process at times, director and choreographer Casey Nicholaw cautions how much you use it. He says that he lets “actors contribute, absolutely.” Just be aware that “it’s a tricky thing. We are all taught that there is a hierarchy in the creative process. There are times that if you let everyone go wild, you’re simply not going to get anything done. More than likely, you’ll lose respect and whatever vision and structure was in place” (qtd. Cramer 167). The time we spent working like this, however, allowed me to give myself a little more freedom when working on my own as well, and it seemed to be in the right size doses. While I had written a number of traffic patterns within the numbers into my script, sometimes I would just come in with a vague idea and then try a couple different patterns on the cast as we worked the number. Broadway and Tony Award winning performer, director, and choreographer Tommy Tune puts it very well when he talks about young choreographers, saying, “In the beginning you want to control it, you don’t want to let it get out of hand. You’re very determined to make ‘your statement.’ But the truth of it is you pull the statements out of each of the people that you’re working with. Then you get much more texture than you can possibly give if you stamp everybody out in your own image” (qtd. in Grody 145). It was a liberating new way to work and play, and so different than how I had worked before. I learned to have even more trust in myself as I came into the rehearsal room. Doing preparatory work, but being willing to throw it all out.

Finding my Voice

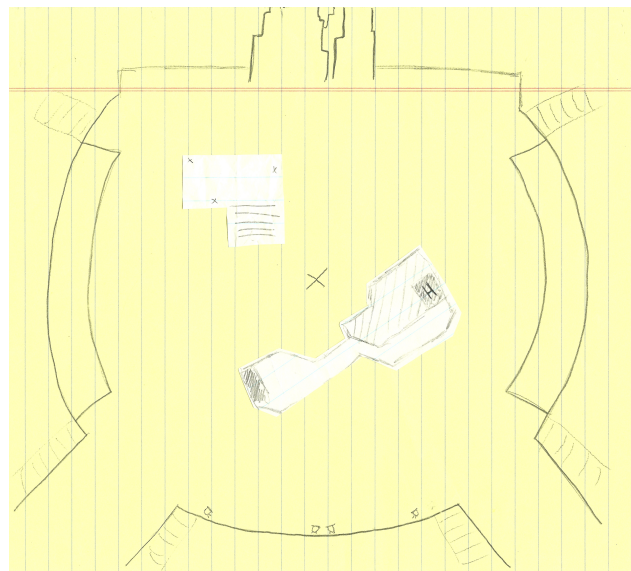
While I was liberating myself in the rehearsal room, I was new to working on a show with this large of a production team and was still finding my footing on how to present my thoughts and myself in design and production meetings. When chatting more recently, James Stover let me know that I could definitely have taken “a more direct route in communicating [my] needs to the director and/or the designers at times.” Never before had I been asked to let the set designer and technical director know what my choreography needs would be for items like the desk and chair, three months in advance of the first rehearsal. I had no idea what I would be doing with them, so I just guessed at all the things I might try and asked if all of them could be possible.

While making a request for something from scenic, Ron Keller, the Department Chair and the scenic faculty for the show, told me to just tell Gren Burgess, our set designer, what I needed. I was asking for some of what I termed “sit-on-ables” to be used in numbers when we were in the hideout and Ron said rather than asking for them, just tell them what I needed. Our technical director faculty member, Al Williamson, also informed us that we should let them know what was a secondary want or need (something that may be cut). This made it so that they could first focus on those things we knew we would be using, because we would eventually get to the point of, if we wanted something new, we would have to cut something. Never before had I been asked to think that many steps in advance when it came to props and set pieces, so it was a whole new way of thinking about the show from the beginning and making my voice heard.

James, Tim, and I were quite a good team and able to work through many obstacles together, but I remember at first trying to find my footing with this larger role that I myself as the choreographer was getting to play and not being sure of my voice with them as well. James gave me the green light to look at and comment on parts of the show that I myself was not staging, and this was a wonderful experience in deepening the director and choreographer relationship for me. I eventually found the equilibrium and had a wonderful time working in tandem with the two of them. I made myself heard and became more confident with voicing my comments, concerns, wants, and needs.

Problem Solving

The show had a number of scenes with moving parts. We did not have a set model in rehearsals to reference, so sometimes we had a hard time trying to communicate. Not only between the three of us (James, Tim, and myself), but also with stage management and the cast. So, one day in rehearsal I decided that this was a problem I could fix and I quickly sat down and put together a small paper version of the basic pieces of the set for us. This allowed us to finally be able to quickly communicate and move through transitions



and movement, as well as look at placement from scene to scene and throughout a number.

There was also a lot of *stair-ography* to work in to some of the numbers once we had the rolling stair units. We needed to make adjustments to the movement and choreography so that the stairs could be moved safely and efficiently to their locations with the locking and unlocking of them being worked into the choreographed movement as well. It was a fun puzzle to solve, and with a quick focused rehearsal we got there. We were also having trouble with a gag that kept coming untied and the actress would just be sitting there with it in her mouth but hanging down. I brought up the idea Patti had mentioned to me about how the characters wouldn't just leave something they dropped on the ground, so why would you. The character Hope was tied up and gagged because the other characters kidnapped her, so if their character noticed her gag untied, they wouldn't just leave it, they would retie it and better.

One of the hardest things to solve was actually some of the transitions. We had a couple that gave us a hard time, but one in particular out of "What is Urinetown" and into the following scene was really frustrating the cast and hard to accomplish in the time allotted. I talked with Ben about repeating a specific section of music and then asked James if he would be alright moving ahead so I could have a few moments to choreograph the transition. It involved the movement of a sign that was on casters, a large oblong wagon, and a number of "sit-on-ables." I sat and thought through the traffic patterns, watching them in my head, and seeing what needed to end up where. It then became apparent that not only did the "sit-on-

ables” need to be placed in different positions to start, but also that the cast would need to end up moving pieces that they didn’t always end up by at the end. It took a couple of tries doing it slowly and watching for a couple of other kinks, but we eventually got it. James and Tim were the genius behind solving the final hurdle, and that’s why you need a team. To make it all work it did require a specific set up of pieces on the wagon before it came on stage, so I gave that to the stage management team and they took it from there. It was a wonderful moment in rehearsal that gave all of us one of those great feelings of accomplishment.

Frustration and Freedom

With this show I gained a new freedom that I had never had before, but with it came a new frustration. As we moved into run-throughs, for the first time, I had someone to take notes for me. One of our dance captains was a swing for the show and she would come sit with me during runs and take my notes. It was wonderful because I was now able to watch so much more because I didn’t have to look down to write my notes. I was still incredibly nitpicky, as I’m sure will always be my way, so I was able to give more of those notes sooner, giving the cast more time to get used to the corrections and adjustments. There were some instances where I needed to realize I couldn’t fix everything so I chose my battles. The frustrating thing was that as we moved upstairs into the theatre, with my freedom of watching everything I began to notice even more things that I hadn’t seen at the angles I was watching from in the rehearsal room. They were things that seemed to stand out

like a sore thumb to me here, yet I hadn't seen them at all downstairs. Some could be rectified, like an improper weight change or direction of a turn, but there were some that I had to just let go due to time. Luckily the "not perfect" also fit within the world of the show. I also think that just being able to do that in itself, and let go of a few things, was a step forward for me and my perfectionist tendencies.

The Tech Transition

The transition up into the theatre for spacing and tech rehearsals went quite well for this show. I even had the chance to attend my first paper tech with the director and the lighting designer. I know they aren't the most exciting of things, but it was wonderful to hear them each talk more in depth and specifically about the effects, where they would go, and being able to put in my thoughts as well.

For the spacing rehearsals I had a list of all of the points within each number I wanted to set spacing for, so when we got to that number we would jump from A to B to C through the list of maybe 5-10 spots throughout the song and check the spacing. We would then go to the top of the number and run it and then move on. James had the same thing for the songs he staged as well as for the scenes. It was also great that we had the three of us, James, myself, and Tim, because one of us could each stand in one section of the house as we set spacing. James and I took turns being in the center section, depending on which of us was spacing the number, and then we could check in with the other two at each picture to see how it looked from the sides. It was great.

James was also a stressor of the little notebooks that Patti recommends during spacing, so he had reminded the cast on multiple occasions, as we got closer to moving into the theatre. It was wonderful seeing them all with their pocket notebooks, taking down all of the spacing adjustments they were getting. It helped us solidify so many things and we had less need for cleaning later, although there were still things to clean as there always are. Due to the performance space being laid out as it is, we weren't able to have numbers down for the cast to reference for their spacing, so the paint treatment on the floor and footlight covers really helped in giving the cast reference points. The technical crews were wonderful and putting all of their work together with all of the cast's work was a really smooth transition. I know how stressful tech rehearsals can become, but all in all the cast and crew were able to keep high spirits and a great group morale throughout the whole process.

Weight Lifted – Final Takeaway

The show opened and was received very well, which was a great relief. I was proud of all of the work, but very nervous worrying about what everyone would think. Feedback was wonderful, and a few people even sought me out to let me know what they thought of the show and how much they enjoyed it. Those specific comments from people meant so much, because it is always hard to believe what people will say to you right after a show in the lobby when they feel they have to say something, but the people that seek you out, you know are speaking their mind.

When I spoke with David Leong about my journey in the time I had been at VCU thus far, he was great in helping me see the progress I had made. Coming in with “a rawness” and not having a true craft, but just “doing what I had seen before” which set a limit to what I could accomplish. To now, at this point, being an artist with “a refinement, . . . a process, . . . [and] . . . a technique” that serves me, not only working on shows, but also in the classroom as an instructor. The Director, James Stover paid me a wonderful compliment in saying, “you know how to tell a story, which is a rare gift in a choreographer. You also know how to work with a variety of levels of talent and skill within the same ensemble and create a product that is cohesive.” I can’t take all of the credit for that, though, as I know it was my time working with Patti and in my graduate classes and other workshop experiences at VCU thus far that had taught me about the stories that must be told.

Urinetown was a show that gave me a great chance to spread my wings and stretch my muscles, and I don’t think I could have had a better group of people to do that with. It gave me a renewed confidence in myself as well as a greater trust in myself as a choreographer and artist. It wasn’t until I really began to feel this way that I was able to open up and trust those I was working with. When that transition happened during the process, I felt like a whole new person.

Skills Learned:

- The importance of the director/choreographer connection.
- It is important to make myself heard.
- The choreography is so much more about the character and the story than many believe.

- My time alone is an important step in my process.
- Use of character Polaroids to help the actors find the physicalization of their characters.
- Enjoyment of sometimes using the cast as collaborators.
- Rehearsal can be a time to try options and make decisions.
- You do all of your prep work so that you are able to throw it all out the window if needed.
- I can always have more confidence and trust in myself as well as others.
- When it comes to the technical aspects, one must think much farther ahead.
- Choose your battles.

Chapter 5: Fresh Insights

Taking a Step Back

After having the chance to work on a show as the choreographer, I continued to look for more opportunities, experience, and knowledge to gain. Those first two opportunities presented themselves in the forms of *The Boy From Oz* and *The Addams Family*. Both shows took place in Richmond, VA and put me in contact with not only new artists, but also new insights.

The first show was *The Boy From Oz*, which I worked on at Richmond Triangle Players. It was a great chance to work with one of the local theatres in town as well as a new director and local performers. I worked as the Assistant Choreographer to the Director/Choreographer, Justin Amellio. The biggest adjustment for me at first was to relinquish control and be an assistant again. I had just come off of *Urinetown* and needed to take a few steps back into a more backseat position. This was hard at times because I disagreed with a number of the choreography choices due to them being too difficult for multiple cast members, but I knew it was not my place to say anything to that degree, so I bit my tongue. After I came to know Justin better as we worked together, I became more comfortable and when he asked my opinion, I took the opportunity to gently voice my concern. It did not seem to be something he was concerned with, however, so I dropped it.

As his assistant, I hadn't spent much time in pre-production with him, although we had done some work over the phone and via Skype (he was coming in from out of state). Due to this fact, and the fact that while he had some things set, he also liked to find things in the moment, I spent a lot of rehearsal time notating for him. Given the opportunity to work in this manner in the rehearsals I developed a new system with which to keep the choreography within my score. I began to use different parts of the music stanzas to write different people's choreography. I would write anything for the principles on top of the stanza and then I would write what the ensemble was doing in the middle. If I then had to split the ensemble even further or add another group, I could write them below the stanza. Then I was able to just follow one line of notes for each person's choreography. It has come in very handy since then.

As the meticulously organized and particular person I am, this was helpful, but also led to some other frustrations in my position as assistant. I was often asked to work with the ensemble to clean choreography, and having my bible of movement in hand that I had notated when the pieces were set was great. The hard part was that the choreography would often be changed without much explanation. While I have come to understand that this is a process that is always in flux, and change is good and inevitable, it became hard on some of the ensemble members that weren't movers. They were already having a difficult time trying to understand and learn what was already set, then something would be changed and they would have to relearn parts of songs. I was also having a hard time keeping up with some of it myself because I would be working with one group in a room while he was

working with another and making changes in another room. I was frustrated and felt bad not being able to help. By the time the production opened, everyone had a pretty strong grasp on all of the movement. I just felt that it could have been a smoother ride and stronger show, even with changes, if some of the movement hadn't been choreographed to the degree of difficulty that it was.

Taste of Directing

After working on *The Boy From Oz*, I worked on *The Addams Family* at VCU with Patti. While working on *The Boy From Oz* was an experience I learned from, I know that I grew from my time working on *The Addams Family*. In looking to the future I had been starting to think about directing as well. I had expressed interest and had even taken a class the previous semester at school. This gave me the opportunity to step into yet another role with Patti. For this show I would take the position of her Associate Director/Associate Choreographer. Since most of my knowledge up to this point was in choreography, I took this chance to focus in and learn more from Patti on the directing side of the job. I kept a separate notebook in rehearsals to keep notes while watching her work or when I had questions for her.

The first eye-opening thing for me was sitting down at the first meeting with the set designer, Kate Field, and all of the things that were talked about in those early meetings. Not only were the discussions around the style, color pallet, design inspiration and mood that we were after, but also right from the start, transitions were a talking point. I had learned over the years how very important they are to a

show, but had never realized how early on they can be a big part of the discussion. Once we had our designs and knew all of our moving pieces, Patti wrote up a sheet of all of the transitions and everything that had to happen within them. I was realizing that the director's job is so many more times bigger than I ever thought.

Through the pre-production work Patti and I did on this show, I was able to see a shift happening in the way I thought about the work. I found myself asking 'why,' and justifying what we were doing, more than I had on previous occasions. I later asked Patti about what growth or differences she saw in me during this production in comparison to when we first worked together on *9 to 5*. She told me, "you seemed really aware of the bigger picture and . . . your suggestions or questions or comments that were always very helpful were often related to . . . the actor and intention, which I thought was great." She let me know that I showed confidence "trying to solve problems, whether they're facial, movement, acting, steps, music, [or] whatever." I was glad to hear from her that my first steps toward the director's seat at the table had gone well. For the first time, I even took after Patti, and I also had my script printed single sided so that I would have blank space for taking down blocking and transitional notes. When I went back to look through my binder, I found a number of drawings and notes as well as letter coordinated explanations of what we had going on for the on stage action. We began the shorthand of using a capital 'A' to mean members of the Addams family, and a lowercase 'a' to mean the ancestors. That, along with many other abbreviations or organizational methods, helped us keep great notes between our two scripts and scores. My choreography notes for the most part were still only in the score, but the shift into using the script

for other notes was great. Another part of our process together included a lot of time sitting with the script and score talking through scenes/songs and writing and erasing thoughts to share with each other on the chalkboard. We would then take videos of ourselves with the chalkboard, describing what we had written, and/or being up on our feet running through the numbers as multiple characters.

Observing Patti D'Beck Through a New Lens

Once we were in rehearsals with the cast, I watched and began taking down little tidbits whenever I could; observations, answers to questions I would ask, and what Patti would say to the cast. I asked her what her process was, when blocking, and she said that most simply it would be that first she maps entrances and exits for flow and to be sure of not overusing any one place. Then, the day of, she thinks about intentions and objectives, and then once on their feet she likes to block somewhat organically. In observing her first moments with cast members when preparing to block a scene, I noted how she approaches the scene from the start. She began the rehearsal by sitting down with the cast members in the scene and reading it through. They then talked about what was happening in the scene and the look of it and then read it again. If it was the first time for that actor blocking a scene with her she would also ask them what their thoughts were about their characters, and she would share some of her thoughts as well.

We had the model in rehearsals as well as little figures of each character, so when getting up on their feet to work Patti would use it to show everyone the space

they were working in, and to also sometimes show some of what she would like to happen within the specific action. They would then begin the scene and Patti would pause them whenever she wanted to make an adjustment or try something different. One of the great things she said one day was, “keep following impulses until somebody says stop.” Oftentimes she would even get up and walk part of the scene with them and try it a few different ways before asking them to try something. She was giving herself the chance to understand how it felt for them before deciding for sure what adjustment she wanted to give them, or how she wanted them to try it. Once she found what she liked, she would always check in, though, and make sure it felt ok for them. If it didn’t, she was always up for trying something that they wanted to. Later on in the rehearsal process, I even caught myself moving around in the performance space trying to find things before giving an adjustment to one of the actors. It was like being in a whole new skin, and I think I even turned to Tim Fitz-Gerald, who for this show was in the cast, and said, “I just did a Patti thing, didn’t I,” and we had a nice little laugh.

Another one of the great things I observed was not only Patti’s ease and setting of a playful atmosphere that I had seen before in rehearsals, but the great way in which she would bring the actors around to understanding what she was asking of them. One day in rehearsal she needed something from the cast that she wasn’t getting. She started asking them some random questions: What did you have for dinner last Sunday? What are your favorite lotto numbers? What is your grandma’s middle name? Then she said, “I saw each of you thinking, I need to see that in the scene.” Instead of just giving them the note that she needed to see them

thinking/discovering, she first let them experience what she wanted, and then told them that was what she was looking for. It gave them something to immediately connect with and move forward.

Within blocking rehearsals Patti would also sometimes block by giving the actors a place to end, but then give them the freedom to play with the parts in the middle. It reminded me a bit of the first stages of putting together contemporary violence fights and knowing your end shape and then working towards it. She also knew when to give a note publicly vs. privately. I've come to know that certain notes are fine when given for the whole group to hear, but certain notes should just be given to the actor they apply to. There is also another way to use this idea in the early stages of rehearsal and discovery. Sometimes rather than giving an adjustment to try out loud, Patti would walk up and tell the actor privately. It would then get a true reaction from the other actors in the scene and a chance to truly see where the choice takes the scene with no preplanned thoughts from the other performers. Some other points that I noted when Patti was working with the cast were the reminder that you need to be aware of your inner vs. your outer tempo, each character's personal rhythm will be different from everyone else's. She also said that it is always good to touch the architecture, and also to have some stillness. These are all things that Patti would say are JSYK (just so you know).

Patti's style of blocking was very trial and error with a willingness to stop and try any variation or chase any impulse. Patti always worked to empower the performers, which is something that I hope to work into my practice as an artist as well. Rather than using negatives like "don't do that" she would instead make it a

positive and say, “try this.” She would also say things like, “I was wrong, I think you were right” or “Yes, maybe this. Your instincts were right.” Always working to give them a positive feeling and sense of accomplishment whenever she could. Having a mix of graduate student performers and undergraduate students also allowed for some give and take in the way she would approach working a scene. As much as she was able to build up some performers with comments and discussions like this, there were also times where some of the performers needed to be reminded to focus, stand up straight, and be present in the scenes. Sadly, some of the students’ work ethic left something to be desired at times, but there were also times where we could be extremely proud of them. With most of the performers being students, I realize that we approach the work somewhat differently than in a professional setting.

A new thing I was aware of, especially working in this educational setting with Patti (since this was the first show we did together at a university) was that she worked really hard to be sure the ensemble knew how important they were to the show. For many students I think they needed that reminder because they felt not as integral, when really they are one of the biggest parts of the show.

There are a number of other ideas that I’ve picked up from working with Patti and will continue to refer back to in my notes of my time with her as I continue in my journey. Working alongside someone like Patti, with the wealth of knowledge and experience that she has, her sweet and humble personality were two of my biggest “take-aways” from all of my time with her. She would find time to liven the room by starting a long day off with some 80s hits and fun warm-ups. Even when

things got rough, as they did for us a couple of times, she always kept a calm head to steer the ship, and she is always up for collaboration with all.

The key to working with performers is being able to handle people. That's almost more important than the ability to choreograph. The ability to get the best out of people, to inspire people, to work with them, and create an atmosphere that is not a snake pit. To create trust on both sides. You don't always do it but you sure as hell try. The best work comes out of a room full of trust and love (qtd. in Grody 111).

Patti's work fits this to a T and it is something that I will continue to strive for in all of my endeavors going forward.

Conflict Resolution

We did have some issues with tardiness, which prompted Patti to have a big teaching moment with the cast. She talked to them about understanding what perception comes from their lateness and how it can come across as them not valuing everyone else's time. She also said that as a form of respect and courtesy they need to apologize to those in charge as soon as possible, either once they arrive at rehearsal or as soon as they are able to speak with any of those individuals. (She also said that if you can't get face time with someone then you should send them an email.) There were only a few of these teaching moments throughout the rehearsal, but it was great to see them, and to see the way Patti handled them, informing the

students that this was a moment she wanted to, as an educator, give them some information to add to their knowledge of the craft and professional world of theatre.

There were also some times where the wires of communication were crossed with different technical departments and items we were shown or received were not what we had been told we were getting. Sometimes they were drastically different. When coming back from one of our meetings in which we had been shown something that didn't come anywhere close to matching the last conversation we had had with that department and thus didn't fit the way the piece was blocked, I asked Patti how she deals with that sort of problem. Her advice, at least in this setting, where you can only have certain things that you ask for, or only certain things changed at a certain point, was two fold. One, to ask questions in order to open the conversation and find out why or how things changed and what might possibly be adjusted to fit the original plans. Two, if nothing can be changed, you find a way to make the best of it by using any new obstacles to fuel your chance to be creative. Everything can be a gift.

Skills Learned:

- Know and accept your position.
- Open a good channel of communication with those you are assisting, or those assisting you.
- Transitions can be part of the discussion as early as day one.
- The director's job is gargantuan.
- Mapping out entrances and exits can be a good first step for the director before they begin blocking scenes.

- There can be very positive effects of including the actors in a more organic style of blocking.
- Allow yourself to understand the actor's experience.
- Asking your actors to keep following impulses until someone says stop.
- Empowering the actors.
- Find ways to help the actors understand/experience a note.
- Know when to give a note publicly vs. privately.
- Have actors be aware of their inner vs. outer tempo and know that no two characters are the same on stage at one time. (There is a power in stillness).
- It is good to touch the architecture.
- Importance of fostering trust and respect, and being willing to lighten the mood and give fun wake up calls.
- Be sure everyone knows that they are important.
- Ask questions to open up lines of communication with other departments.
- Use obstacles as a chance to be creative.

Looking Towards the Future

I know that I still have not opened my eyes to the point of seeing all that Patti does as a Director/Choreographer, or to see all that she has to watch for in rehearsals, but it is something that I will keep working towards. This tells me that I'm not yet ready to direct a large show on my own, but I know that I would like to assist again and learn more so that I can direct in the future. I do hope to try my hand at directing soon by choosing a smaller show to whet my palate.

Moving forward with my next endeavors, I know each will provide me with new skills, as I have already seen how my time in graduate school has changed me

as an artist. My pre-production work has taken on a different process of thought and action, and I view the scope of all involved and all the work they are doing and what they bring to the table in a much different light. I also bring a whole new plan to a rehearsal and have so much more trust in myself and everyone else I work with. I am looking forward to what life has in store for me as I am finishing this chapter and moving to the next. I am excited to say that I have the chance to close out this decade of my life with the same two shows that I closed out my last decade, *Pippin* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

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Vita

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