This Body's Heart: Leveraging Dance Processes for Cultural Liberation

by

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Submitted to Board of Arts Management
School of Liberal Arts & Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2020

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"No institutions exist to help us survive. We survive because of each other."

- *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (137) by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha

Introduction

Institutional oppression is defined as the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person's membership in the social identity group (Cheney, Carol et al.). Regardless of one's specific disability, individuals with congenital disabilities are inevitably shaped by institutional oppression, as a result of ongoing, forced interaction with institutions that perpetuate abled, neurotypical standards as the ideal to be achieved. However, within the bodily experience of congenital physical disability lies the opportunity to understand one's personal truth and cultural positioning independent of institutional imposition. If the forced interaction with institutions reflective of social norms begets oppression, then participation in anti-institutional environments that encourage diversity in thought and movement are a primary path to liberation.

For the purposes of this paper, the pre-production and rehearsal process of *This Body's Heart*, a six piece contemporary dance production conceptualized and realized at Purchase College, SUNY, from January 2019- March 2020 will serve as a case study of an "anti-institutional environment." My participation in and crafting of this process as a physically disabled queer woman, along with the deliberate leadership and participation of students of various marginalized identities, demonstrates the ways in which ongoing participation in such an environment that encourages diversity in thought and movement serves as an antidote to previous experiences with institutional oppression, ultimately leading towards increased social and personal liberation. This theory is put in practice in my reconciliation of the trauma of being

stuck in approximately 30 dorm fire alarms from August 2019-December of 2019 in the face of a lack of effective fire evacuation policy for physically disabled residents of Purchase College. I examined and processed this trauma through the building of the opening piece of This Body's Heart, a simulation of being trapped in a building when a fire alarm is set off, called *Area of Refuge*. For the purposes of this paper, "Personal liberation" references an emphasis on autonomy, self-development and individual creativity (Shutte, Ofelia). *This Body's Heart* was intended to go up for four, one-hour performances in Purchase College's Dance Theatre Lab from April 17-19th, 2020, but ultimately was not shown to the public as a result of the dangers of COVID-19 in Westchester County, New York, and the world at large.

In understanding the cultural influence of ableism and the impacts of institutional ableism, there must first be an acknowledgement of the racism and effects of colonialism that live on in the United States, since so much of ableist practices and beliefs can be traced to racist dynamics and colonialist histories. There must also be a distinction made between the popularized disability rights movement of the 1980's and 90's that is credited to have catalyzed the Americans with Disabilities Act (*Crip Camp*, Netflix), and the lesser known Disability Justice Movement. While what is commonly referred to as the Disability Rights Movement centered on majority white figureheads whose actions were in response to systemic and architectural oppression, the Disability Justice movement was born from the efforts of black and brown people with a wide range of physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities to live authentically and participate in society despite multifaceted layers of experiences with racism, ableism, and homophobia (Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Leah). On the interconnectedness of

ableism and racism, Patty Berne, Artistic Director of Berkeley-based performance collective Sins Invalid, writes:

> "One cannot look at the history of U.S. Slavery, the stealing of indigenous lands, and U.S. imperialism without seeing the way that white supremacy leverages ableism to create a subjugated 'other' that is deemed less worthy/smart/capable."

Crucial to understanding such complexities is the concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. The significance and specificity of the presence of multiple experiences of oppression intersecting is explained in part by Crenshaw stating on the experience of Black women:

> "...the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast."

Disability Justice responds directly to the tenets of intersectionality, asserting "all bodies are unique and essential, [that] all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We know that we are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them" (Berne, Patty). In response to abled-run entities questioning "how to do" Disability Justice, Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha responds, "You'll know you're doing it because people will show up,

someone will vomit, someone will have a panic attack and nothing will happen on time because the ramp is broken on the supposedly 'accessible' building. You won't meet your benchmarks on time, or ever."

Systemic Understanding of Disability as Limitation

To better understand the institutional view of disability, and examine a source of institutional ableism, let's turn to the largest and most powerful institutions in the world: The United States federal government. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity." Since the ADA's enactment in 1990, this has become a widely used definition in a variety of settings across the United States (ADA National Network). While a helpful categorization, this definition assumes the baseline for functionality is defined by "major life activities", a standard set forth by a society of people *without* disabilities. Because language for disability is crafted and mainstreamed by abled, neurotypical people, people with disabilities are left to fit themselves into the view and expectations of the majority.

There are various 'models' of understanding disability, the most popularized two in the U.S. being the medical and social models of disability (Shakespeare, Thomas William). The Medical Model of disability centers one's disability around the possibility to treat it with medical solutions, arguing that if there is a barrier to access, it is the physical body of the individual in question that should be adjusted to resolve the barrier. The Social Model of disability argues that in the face of an accessibility barrier, the apparatus or social construct creating the barrier should change to accommodate the individual's needs (Shakespeare, Thomas William). This is to say

that if an individual with a mobility impairment (that prevents them from climbing stairs) is faced with a set of stairs as the only method to ascend to the upper level of a building, the medical model dictates the individual is the entity that should be "fixed" by way of medical intervention. Contrastingly, the social model dictates that in this scenario, it is the set of stairs as a singular method of ascendance that must change, by way of installing an elevator or ramp to accommodate the individual who, by way of disability, does not climb stairs.

In addition to the ways in which ability, and lack thereof, may be viewed, there are different ways disability itself can manifest in an individual. There are physical disabilities, which affect one's motor function or sensation within the body; cognitive disabilities, which affect one's ability to process information; developmental disabilities, which are defined by a stunting of a person's development, whether that be physical, emotional, or and/or cognitive development over time; perceptive disabilities, defined by a lack of, decreased, or the extreme ability to utilize one of the five senses; speech disabilities, which affect one's ability to orate; and behavioral disabilities, which place one's behavior and personality patterns outside of the affected individual's control. While there are many diagnosable disabilities that fall clearly into one single category, there are many that fall into multiple, rendering an individual disabled in more than one way. An example of a disability that affects someone in an isolated way is Dyslexia, which is strictly a cognitive disability, as it hinders one's ability to process written information. An example of a disability with multifaceted effects is Down's Syndrome, a genetic condition that affects one's motor skills, speech, cognitive processing, and overall growth and development. In a majority abled, or non-disabled society, assumptions about one's overall ability are common based on one way they present. For example, if an individual has a speech

impediment or a physical impairment, onlookers are more likely to assume they possess a cognitive disability regardless of where the individual's processing skills lie in actuality (Museum of disABILITY History).

The combination of blurred lines between types of disability that an individual may have, and the determination of disability centering abled societal standards, results in an externalized understanding of ability. One's ability is not defined by how the individual is affected by it internally, i.e., pain, overstimulation, fatigue, confusion, etcetera, but by how it exists in the world beyond the individual in question. This is to say that mainstream acknowledgement of ability status is contextualized by limitation within the standard for abled people, as opposed to how the disabled individual is affected, societal variables notwithstanding. This is because abled people do not know the sensation of not being able to process information, sound, or movement, so the only way for the abled population to understand disability is through a *lack* of capability to fulfill the maximized ability they themselves know as truth. Virtually every conversation about disabled people by abled people is contextualized by a lack of capability. A widely accepted determinant for disability in the context of social services, an institution created by the abled majority, is the lack of ability to independently accomplish two of the following Activities of Daily Living (ADL's), or Major Life Activities: Toileting, bathing, dressing, eating, transferring, and moving (ADA National Network). However, abled people do not exchange among themselves or rank one another's worth by their superior ability to complete these independently. "Major life activities" are only specified with the purpose of identifying who *can't* do them, and this is the only identifier; there is no mainstream understanding that examines disabled bodies as physicalities unique to themselves.

Furthermore, the medicalization of disabled bodies is based on the belief that the only way to interact with disability in a forward thinking way is to constantly strive to eradicate them (Shakespeare, Thomas William). Even the disability rights movement is remembered as disabled people working to create space for themselves they had historically been barred from. A prime example of this struggle-based communication is in the telling of disabled activists' efforts to have access to public transportation in Denver, Colorado. In February of 1985, a group of people with physical disabilities formally known as ADAPT blocked inaccessible buses with their wheelchairs (Rudolph, Katie). This protest is considered to be a key part of the fight to gain access to mainstream society that started in California, and later spread to the rest of the United States. While these efforts undoubtedly furthered the dignity and inclusion of people with physical disabilities, our big first moments in the media were defined by a struggle, something we as a group could not do: take the bus. In this narrative, the institution -- the city of Denver -- is centered as much, if not more so, than the disabled activists themselves.

Congenital Disability as a Means to Bodily Liberation

There is a population that has the chance to understand their bodies and minds free from the confines of an imposed normalcy: those with congenital disabilities, meaning those who were born with a specific set of disabilities that remain present in some form throughout their life (Veritas Health). Individuals born with disabilities experience this set of given circumstances well before they are required to interact with the various institutions that comprise our social landscape, learning what their specific body and mind feel like before ever having to make themselves fit into the requirements of school, law, organized religion, capitalism, and so forth.

Because these individuals get a head start on projections and expectations from the abled world, even the youngest have some understanding of their scope of ability, and can identify it as their "normal," as it is all they know of their body's ability. Because there is some level of normalization of their ability, they are more likely to form a sense of identity when they *are* thrust in front of the majority's expectation, because this set of abilities is the only set of abilities they have ever been able to conceptualize.

The most concrete example of the natural forming of identity around disability is that of the Deaf community. With a lowercase 'd,' 'deaf' refers to the actual inability to hear. 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' refers to the culture one adopts as a result of being unable to hear, most often congenitally (Holcomb, Thomas). A defining aspect of Deaf culture is that the community does not view Deafness as a disability, but simply as a difference in communication and lifestyle. Ulric Neisser, an American Psychologist who has been called the "father of cognitive psychology" noted to this point "no living creature organizes its behavior around something it does not have" (Holcomb, Thomas). By living within an established community, the individuals deafness-related needs are automatically accounted for and normalized. Therefore, the condition is not alienating.

This contrasts those with the common experience of those with onset disabilities, or disabilities acquired later in life (Shakespeare, Thomas William). For example, someone paralyzed as a result of a car accident knows the sensation of the ability they lost, in addition to the newer sensation, or lack thereof. Their conception of ability is by default relative to their first understanding. An example of such relativity is seen in the experience of Laura Grace Beck, a woman who was rendered quadriplegic as a result of a car accident in 2016 (Beck, Laura Grace).

In the context of spinal cord injuries (SCI), quadriplegia is defined as "affecting all four limbs, plus the torso (quad originates from the Latin word for four). Most people...have significant paralysis below the neck, and many are completely unable to move (SpinalCord)." Prior to her accident, Beck was completely able-bodied. She consistently documents her life on instagram. On her experience with the onset of disability, she wrote on the popular social media platform in March of 2019:

> "This SCI life isn't as awful as life could be, and I know that. but sometimes, I just want to dream it away… my whole body ached yesterday, ached for a good 6 mile run, for hiking, trail running, swimming in the gorge, cliff jumping, camping in the middle of nowhere. Many will say 'you still can'. Yes, I can. I understand there is adaption -- but my legs will not be carrying me. wheels will" (Beck, Laura Grace).

While the knowledge of another physical body is not something people with congenital disabilities can commiserate with, the heightened understanding of one's physical experience is common among those with disabilities, whether it be congenital or onset. Beck references the difference between 'adapting' abled society to her disabled body, versus her formal participation within the majority, because the sensory and emotional experiences between the two vary greatly. In comparison to a body that had full access to the world as it stands, the body that requires adaptation is limited. But when there is no comparison to be made, and what the rest of the world considers "disability" is the baseline, adaptation opens up possibilities to access the world, and embedded in one's physical experience is an expanded personal understanding of the body by way of learning which methods of adaptation are effective.

An Autoethnographic Testimony

An example of said expanded personal bodily understanding can be seen in my own experience with physical disability. Born with Mild Spastic Diplegia Cerebral Palsy in 1997, I've lived a life of constant physical negotiation from the start. Spastic Cerebral Palsy is categorized as a brain injury resulting in disordered neuromuscular communication that is acquired during or immediately after birth due to a lack of oxygen to the infant's brain (Cerebral Palsy Alliance). Because today's U.S. society does not account for my jerking movements and tight muscles, and I experience stimuli at a higher rate than those without Cerebral Palsy (Cerebral Palsy Alliance), I was constantly made to explain to doctors, parents, teachers, peers, and to myself what was going on in my body. This forced me, and still forces me, to keep a close eye on what it is I'm feeling physically so I can articulate it at any moment to a variety of audiences as soon as the need arises. Where others could complete a physical task such as vacuuming without a second thought, I have to plan my physical approach, deliberately telling my nervous system what to do. By virtue of having to plan out how I do physical tasks, by the time I reached adulthood, I quite literally had my body down to a science without consciously realizing the level of self-awareness I possessed. I knew whether a task was doable or not before ever having attempted it, armed with a cumulative library of past falls, missteps, and triumphs informing future "coulds" and "could nots."

In a movement class in my first year of acting school, the professor, who I did not know at the time, was manipulating my limbs in an effort to adapt a yoga pose that would create the same desired effect my able-bodied classmates would glean from said pose. Though I had not done yoga previously, I knew exactly where my body's thresholds lay, gently guiding the

professor “Move me slightly to the right” or “that won’t work” or “let’s try this with a chair for me to lean on.” After a series of adjustments, we found the optimal pose for me, and the professor, who’d specialized in movement technique for over 25 years, looked at me and said “It is incredible how well you know your body.” This moment of practical application of the knowledge I specifically hold of my body justified my continually grueling negotiation of what I’d been conditioned by the medical model to view as an issue to be solved, because the smaller moments of independent physical navigation that had previously existed in a private sphere were now operating as an advantageous skill of communication and refined self-care that was externalized, notable, and productive in the eyes of a superior.

This heightened awareness can be employed far beyond yoga poses, and translates to one’s emotional experience in addition to the physical. I know how to keep myself safe, how to push myself, how to empathize with those struggling emotionally, how to interact with children more effectively, and how to interact with people with disabilities entirely separate from Cerebral Palsy, as a direct result of negotiating my own non-linear physical form. Danielle Sheypuk, a psychologist who specializes in romance and sexuality in people with disabilities, reports that people with physical disabilities tend to be more creative sexually (Sheypuk, Danielle), as their ability to think outside of traditional confines translates to the bedroom. Additionally, people with physical disabilities are likely to be more resourceful in situations of survival, because the population is accustomed to finding solutions to everyday barriers in the face of an “inadequacy” as dictated by the existence of disability. Furthermore, people with congenital physical disabilities are generally more relationally empathetic, as they are grounded

by an understanding of oppression and/or the need for assistance from others (National Disability Services).

A deeper knowledge of the workings of one's body, whether that body is 'abled' or not, is desirable because it allows one to have more control. Humans are wired to crave control. If humans amass as much knowledge as we can about ourselves, and in turn, the world we live in, we can minimize conflict and maximize both efficiency and meaningful emotional connection. In the experience with my movement teacher, I had agency because I knew my body. If I could not have led the adjustments, we would have had to experiment in a trial and error pattern for an undefined amount of time that could have been uncomfortable, painful, emotionally violating, or inconclusive. Furthermore, when one understands the body as a scientific entity -- a natural being that follows patterns and has certain needs and tendencies -- it is possible to then knowingly position it within a variety of landscapes, cultures, relationships, and expectations. For me, those patterns and tendencies fall under the diagnosis of Spastic Cerebral Palsy. But even the ways I do and do not fit into that medical category are individualized; there is no one out there with my exact physicality; no copy and pasted version of Cerebral Palsy somewhere else waiting to be matched to me, its exact pair. Similarly, no two abled-bodies are exactly alike: they each have their own pain and fatigue thresholds, strengths and weaknesses, psycho-social response patterns, walking speeds, etc.

Contextualizing *This Body's Heart*

Time alone experimenting with contemporary dance phrases allows a person to find out exactly where their own thresholds lie and what their individualized internal patterns are,

because the body is not serving as an operative to another task or institution. The mover is not trying to *do* anything, so in the absence of a product, there is a forced focus on the process. While many forms of dance require one to focus on one's body, other more defined techniques such as ballet, both Russian and French, require a certain product in and of themselves of clean lines and a following of specific universal foot positions. Contemporary dance rejects the rigid 'rules' of ballet and modern dance without losing the technical elements found in the two other forms. [Contemporary dance] tends to combine the strong but controlled legwork of ballet with modern that stresses the torso. It also employs contract-release, floor work, fall and recovery, and improvisation characteristics of modern dance. Unpredictable changes in rhythm, speed, and direction are often used (Scheff, Helene; Marty Sprague; Susan McGreevy-Nichols).

Similarly to physical disability, contemporary technique forces dancers to pay specific attention to their limbs, muscles, motor function, and how the body is relating to the space they are in. Over time, this results in an acquired awareness in how the body moves through the world, both literally and metaphorically, based in the knowledge amassed over years of training, just as a congenitally physically disabled person amasses knowledge about their specific physical abilities over the course of their life, specifically during childhood and adolescence.

Those who view disability as a limitation are likely to view physical disability and contemporary dance as diametrically opposed. That presumed opposition coupled with the aforementioned parallels in understanding personal physical thresholds are exactly why contemporary dance was the best fitting medium to telling a story that unmistakably centers physical disability. "Disability is a set of innovative virtuosic skills" (Lakshmi Peipzna-

Samarasinha, Leah). Without the physical awareness gleaned from my experiences with physical disability, I would not have been able to conceptualize or choreograph such varied narrative movement. Likewise, I would not be able to have such a full, retrospective understanding of my experience with physical disability without reflection specifically through a lens of contemporary dance.

The meeting of physical disability and contemporary dance is explored in the six piece dance production, *This Body's Heart*, an autobiographical account of my physical disability told through contemporary dance. The aim of the stories told are to explore and convey the social/emotional experience of physical disability. Most commonly, mainstreamed stories of disabled experience center on difference and struggle. While both are elements of disabled experience, they are created and perpetuated by the abled majority, and do not comprise the whole. Disabled people are only "different" when juxtaposed by the abled majority. It is impossible for difference to exist without a standard of comparison. If 'abled' did not exist as such a standard, stories of disability would not be othered. For those with congenital disabilities, conceptualizing oneself as 'other' is completely a result of projection from the majority, because the individual knows not what the standard of comparison feels like organically. *This Body's Heart* analyzes and depicts congenital disability as a standalone experience: symptoms such as overstimulation and spasticity simply as physical sensations, and ableism that is not at the center of emotional life, but instead is presented as an externalized experience that is part of a larger whole. *This Body's Heart* featured 18 dancers, (though two left the project at the end), a production team of 11 artists and decision-makers, plus faculty advisor Janis Astor del Valle, four voice actors, and one musician external to Purchase College, Katy Corbus. This totals 35

individuals, 34 of whom are Purchase College students, that made *This Body's Heart* possible, as I both danced and produced.

***This Body's Heart*, Choreography and Direction**

In this section, I detail the concepts for the choreography and direction of *This Body's Heart*. Stage directions are used to describe the choreography: D= downstage, U=upstage, R=Right, L=left, S=stage (as in stage direction), and C=center.

1. *Area of Refuge:*

Center: Female protagonist, sleeps on bed or raised cot. Lights up: She is abruptly awakened by fire alarm. MIA's *Birdflu* overlaps the fire alarm. Disoriented, protagonist tumbles out of bed, moving toward a raised sign to CSL that reads "Area of Refuge". As she leaves the bed, a line of bodies attached at the wrists (a chain) intercepts her diagonally, throwing her back towards the bed as she tries to break through. This repeats three times before finally, on the third try, she breaks through them to the other side. The chain "re-links," and continues to wrap around the stage. While this sequence takes place, another mass of bodies forms a tower-like structure underneath the sign. Protagonist makes her way up the structure, hands from structure extending to aid her ascent. When she finally gets to the top, the score stops abruptly, leaving a moment of silence as she catches her breath. The chain and tower move in slow motion like a wave. Protagonist pulls out cell phone and dials; we hear the following call VO: "Hello, this is University Police, what's your Emergency?" "My name is Sonya Rio-Glick, there's a fire alarm in Fort Awesome. I have a disability and can't get out. I'm on the third floor." "Okay, we'll be there shortly." An elongated telephone noise as the line goes dead. Protagonist stands still on top

of the structure for another 10 seconds. The chain below has dispersed and exited. After 10 seconds, the chain dancers re-enter as students signaling the end of the alarm. Lighting change. *Birdflu* resumes softer. Slowly, protagonist descends the structure, stumbling as she makes her way back into bed. As they climb into the bed, the human structure and the students dissipate and exit. *Birdflu* ends after protagonist returns to bed and tosses body three times. After third toss, they shoot up to face the audience. BLACKOUT. Run time=2m 45s.

2. *Walk With Me*:

A gobo backdrop with a single orb of light in USR corner. Lights up on two female dancers positioned UR. 8 second instrumental intro composed by Mya Forbes. One dancer holds the waist of another, taking an exaggerated step DSR. They stop to adjust, now side by side, holding each other's waists. Another exaggerated step, stop. *Friendship Song* by Katy Corbus begins. For the first three minutes, dancers travel diagonally DSR through a combination of ballet walks, a lift of one that mimics floating, a simulated game of tag. At one point, they sit and mimic watching clouds. At another, they backwards run US and complete a grand leap together on the lyric "soar." At the three minute mark, once they reach the DSR Corner, they run back to USL and position themselves with one holding the other up, one behind the other, and walk in a belabored way to DSR, representing what "actually" happened -- an abled friend assisting a friend with physical disability to navigate the beach at dusk. About halfway through this minute and 13 second belabored walk, *Friendship Song* naturally concludes and they move in silence for the remainder of the piece. As they move diagonally, the orb rises and sets in a slow arc to mimic a sunset. When the dancers reach their endpoint DSR, they sit together, one leaning up against the chest of the other, content. Run time: 4m 13s

3. *Keep Breathing:*

The only solo piece, and the only piece not based in contemporary dance. Originally planned to be between 8-10 minutes in length, the piece was ultimately 20 minutes to account for all clothing changes and transitions, which all were found to be vital to the piece as a whole. At Center: a folding chair facing house, and a full length mirror facing chair (SL of chair). Acting block with necessary costume pieces SR of chair. Lights up on empty stage. Protagonist, played by me, enters from SL. Walks to mirror, faces audience, examines face in mirror before walking to chair. Upon sitting, *Dancing On My Own* by Calum Scott plays. Slowly, she takes off her clothes: An "everyday" outfit, starting with shoes/orthotics. In nude undergarments, she walks to mirror and examines her stomach briefly before walking to block, putting on school uniform facing audience. Looks at self in mirror, goes to chair and sits with face in hands for a beat before taking it off and folding it on block. When *Dancing On My Own* concludes, *Are We There yet* by Ingrid Michaelson plays. Picks out hospital gown from clothes on block; puts it on; walks to mirror. Examines self for 10 seconds before turning to face the audience, ripping it off and holding it out with Right arm for 5 seconds before dropping it and crossing to block. Puts on little black dress, crosses to mirror. When *Are We There yet* ends, *She* by the Riveters plays. At the mirror, she applies mascara and lip gloss, and briefly dances before returning to block, taking off the dress and folding it on block. Retrieves and puts on workout outfit; rolls yoga mat out DSL of chair, lowers self to mat and begins rotation of crunches, leg lifts, snake pose, and 15 second planks. When rotation concludes, carefully comes to standing on mat and takes a breath facing audience. When *She* ends, *Back In My Body* by Maggie Rogers plays. Takes off workout clothes, folds on block. Re-gathers everyday outfit and puts on starting with pants and socks,

then orthotics and shoes, followed by shirt. *When Back In My Body* ends, Keep Breathing by Ingrid Michaelson plays. When finished dressing, protagonist stands and takes DS from chair. As music cuts out at lyric "All we can do is keep breathing" protagonist fills in, singing "All we can do is keep-." BLACK OUT. Run time: Approx 20m

4. *Overstimulated*

Opening of Act II. A combination of flocking patterns and bobbing and weaving, over a chaotic score is employed to simulate the sensory experience of being overstimulated. The largest piece of the six, utilizing 14-16 dancers. Costuming consists of earth-toned street clothes with each dancer wearing one extremely loud and colorful item. The piece opens in silence as two dancers walk leisurely in a wide counterclockwise circle from DSL back to Center. Throughout the following sequences, featured dancers are weaving through the ensemble movement, frequently dodging limbs and getting "shoved." Impactful percussion comes in suddenly as four groups of three dancers cross from all corners in various flocking patterns. Two dancers do five cartwheels on opposing diagonals across the stage, followed by a dancer completing a front walkover from DSR to DSL, exiting to reveal a dancer doing several spins USL while two dancers "crabwalk" from USL to DSL and exit. As they exit, five dancers form a DS diagonal line starting USR by throwing one another left from the left arm. Once they are all onstage, the sequence is punctuated with a group clap over the head, which catalyzes the entrance of the rest of the dancers from SL, ALL run to fund partners in designated spots onstage, evenly spaced, and engage in 27 second tango inspired sequence. During tango, featured dancers are frozen in partnered position CSL. Immediately out of tango, ensemble runs to form tight line across stage all the way DS, yelling a unified "HA" as soon as in formation, then dropping into a squat revealing featured dancers USR

and USL, respectively. Slowly and animalistically, all turn to US in clockwise motion, half crawl slowly USL towards one featured dancer, the other half towards other USR. The featured dancers register the creatures and react in fear, but are frozen still. Those crawling have insect-like quality to them, and frequently stop to interact in fluid contact with one another before continuing on. This path takes approximately two minutes to complete. When the groups meet their destinations, they come to standing by slowly touching featured protagonists, as though vines of limbs are growing up their bodies. This transitions into each group lifting collectively, lifting each protagonist over their heads in a lying down position, walking in and outward loop towards CSL and CSR, respectively, before meeting back at center with featured dancers facing one another in the lift and being set down. As soon as both are in standing, ensemble scatters in a run, stopping after eight counts, three consecutive times to "leap frog" with various partners. Again, protagonists walk through this, giving the impression they are dodging bodies. Following the third leapfrog, the ensemble runs and stops in a formation where they are evenly spread throughout the stage, protagonists at the center, watching. Ensemble brings arms to chest and begins to twist torso from side to side, beginning quite slowly and incrementally building to a violent twisting motion involving the entire torso; the twisting build occurs over three eight-counts, follow by the entire ensemble throwing themselves towards SR in a sudden collapse with SR arm extended, facilitated by a slight leap to create a more dramatic fall. The protagonists look at the bodies in confusion, before carefully stepping over them to make another 20 second arc around the stage, in reverse of their entrance. Lights fade as they exit, ensemble bodies still on the ground. Run time: 5m 50s. Score: Edited version of *Collide* by Jacob Remington makes up the percussive score throughout.

5. *Sacred Tension*

Danced by four people, *Sacred Tension* is based on portraying spasticity, depicting the physical experience of ongoing muscle spasms as a result of Cerebral Palsy. All four dancers begin in black folding chairs facing the audience at Center. *Til Enda* by Olåfur Arnalds begins. Two dancers in alternating seats begin to move in sharp jerks, starting with their limbs before building to their torsos and heads. The movement begins slow, but becomes faster, reaching a pace that is consistent for the duration of the piece. As they begin, the remaining two dancers rise to their feet and begin a contemporary duet that is easy and controlled in style. It will utilize the stage in its entirety, making circles around the four chairs. The dancers depicting dramatized spasticity maintain the jerking movements throughout the duet. When the duet concludes, the dancers sit back in their chairs, and all four find stillness as the music ends. They look out at the audience for a beat. BLACK OUT. Run time: 4m 17s.

6. *As I Am*

The finale of the production, *As I Am,* is a 5-7 minute piece that portrays the emotional impact of social ableism and social acceptance, respectively. The concept is inspired by Mat Fraser's performance in Sins Invalid's 2009 piece *No Retreat, No Surrender.* Sins Invalid is "a disability justice-based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized." The full script with movement notes can be found in Appendix A. Run time: 6m 10s.

The program for *This Body's Heart*, written by myself and designed by graphic designer Gabriella Carnevale, (not including production team bios) can be found in Appendix B. A

promotional video for the production entitled *Making This Body's Heart*, shot and edited by videographer Lea Jaffe can be found online at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LHqJ0LSf74&t=1s

A Uniquely Disabled Dance Education and Choreographic Process

Individual reluctance to be defined by disability is a direct response to being "sold the lie that disability is a bad thing" (Young, Stella). My being disabled is a defining part of my personhood: as a result of being visibly disabled born into predominantly abled settings, I have been consistently "othered," forced to adapt to inaccessible spaces, and to respond to situations that require social/emotional and communication skills incongruent with my age at any given stage of development. This combined with a lack of representation of physicalities resembling my own in the media I was consuming culminated in my understanding of my physical experience as "different" from the majority, which colors all of my experiences and understandings.

The ways in which my disabled experience informs my choreographic approach and vision are a key part of what distinguishes me from other choreographers of contemporary dance, and *This Body's Heart* served in part as a vehicle to share specifically the point of view of a choreographer whose access to movement has been labeled "limited." Just as the view of disability as a limitation is an externalized understanding by the abled majority, the idea that physical disability limits my access to or understanding of complex movement is a projection based in ableism, where 'abled' is the standard to which all else is compared. On the contrary, physical disability enables me to see movement in unorthodox, non-linear ways, as a result of the

extra time spent adapting to inaccessible physical spaces, explaining my physicality to abled individuals, and exposure to a wide array of physicalities by way of both the physically disabled community and the world of dance at large.

Witnessing abled individuals perform dance is nothing short of miraculous to me, because their scope of movement is far from my own frame of reference. I do not view my own movement as limited because it is my baseline; abled movement is above the baseline if the standard is flipped and physical disability is the standard of comparison. As such, I was eager to build choreography on traditionally abled bodies because therein lay the opportunity to experiment beyond what I could physically understand in my own body. The casting of majority traditionally abled bodies was also born from the reality of the participant pool I was working with: Purchase College has predominantly abled students, and so within the confines of only casting students, it was unrealistic to anticipate a cast that was diverse in ability status, despite there being significant diversity in body type and dance experience. I can seldom try the movement sequences I see in my mind's eye, because my understanding of dance was cultivated by way of abled dance training and abled dance productions.

With the exception of one failed ballet class when I was five with a teacher who did not know what to do with my spastic feet and precarious stance, the summation of my dance training in childhood was by way of community musical theatre. I would find my way to contemporary dance at age 14, when I began to dream up three sequences of abstract movement from a folding chair. My exposure to contemporary dance having been minimal at the time, I was inspired by music the way a writer is inspired by reading books. I'd hear a piece of music and the beginnings of a sequence would unfold. I took a chair, cleared the space around me, and began

experimenting with simple movements. I tried out different qualities of movement that I'd learn terminology for years later in Laban technique. I thrusted and pushed and pulled; was bound and unbound; I floated; was light and then heavy. When I found something that was particularly exciting, I'd refer back to the music as the source text, matching movement to lyric and then scribbling a note in shorthand. Then I'd play the same 20 seconds over and over and over until I had the phrase clean and memorized. I call this process "committing it to my body." In this instance, improvisation was my foundation, as it is for many abled choreographers. As I grew and learned more about dance, my vocabulary quickly transcended what I could improvise.

Both in these early moments of experimentation and today, I prefer using seconds instead of counts. Counts were never helpful to my spastic body, as I could never hit the mark just so, even if the rythym was perfectly timed in my head. Striving to use counts left me frustrated with my body, and this disconnect was one of the parts of abled dance practice that made me feel like I was not "really" a dancer. Eventually, my understanding of the Social Model of Disability led me to taking the parts of dance training that are helpful to me, and disregarding or modifying the rest: Seconds it is. The fact that I dance makes me a dancer. In order to successfully craft, one's needs must steward the process.

After many hours of this tedious improvisation/lyric matching/cleaning process, a three sequence piece denoting a story of general self actualization was realized. I am inclined to create narratives through movement, because having a story to tell provides an objective I can clearly accomplish as a choreographer. I entered a local talent competition and placed third out of 22. A musical theatre director I was working with at the time appreciated the piece and asked if she could build a similar piece with me to enter in another local competition. I obliged, happy to

have real coaching that started with material I already knew I could work with, as opposed to the traditional, spacisticity excluding ballet of my early childhood. This mentor taught me some terminology and pushed me to incorporate elements of ballet into the new piece. I received a standing ovation in the next competition and placed again. With a little bit of training and encouragement, I was off and running, if not still reluctant to identify myself as a dancer.

I would continue to piece together dance training through college, as I did not possess the confidence, stamina, or communication skills to enter a traditionally abled dance class with women who had been training since infancy, and teachers for whom my body was an enigma. When abled institutions were not actively excluding me, the learned internalization of abled as the standard of comparison caused me to self-select out of predominantly abled spaces. If the application of Disability Justice principles were common place in abled settings, then I would have felt comfortable to enroll, knowing time and space would be made for my body as is, and I would not hold shame about my disabled body being a minority, because the abled dancer next to me would not be the standard of comparison. Instead, the many movement based actor training techniques offered at Emerson college would provide new language and ideas for what bodies can do to tell a story. Timing through breath and beats and stillness and contact vs. no contact were just as valid, if not more commonly used, than the eight count system. Even in this more creatively open environment, I was still aware of my disabled body being perceived as lesser, and struggled to independently modify exercises I had never been exposed to before in the face of professors who had never taught someone with Cerebral Palsy prior to myself, and who consistently tokenized me.

Following a particularly traumatizing experience in which a movement professor forced an abled student to imitate my physicality for a graded project, another student in the course, a trained dancer, approached me about crafting a movement piece of our own. While this process also began with vague improvisation, we quickly realized the opportunity in naming and leveraging our bodies many differences. *Shoes Off* was born, with a mission to "create a confrontational acknowledgement of two dancers whose bodies may appear to contradict one another in the social context in which they exist, but ultimately exemplify a wholeness in bodily understanding" (Rio-Glick, Sonya; Genoud, Liana). Free of abled onlookers or a large group of classmates reminding me of all I was not capable of, I learned more about contemporary dance in our four month rehearsal process than I had in any one class or independent process to date. My dance partner Liana Genoud had enough training and patience to teach me about terminology, editing, and variation, but enough curiosity and awareness to work with my body as is, carefully exploring where our movement complemented each other's. In December of 2016 we presented the 15-minute work for a total of three performances in two venues in Boston, Massachusetts. *Shoes Off* concludes with the performers rolling out long drawing paper and distributing markers to the audience while dancing, encouraging all to draw and move together to invite individuals into the idea that "every body can dance." *Shoes Off: A Movement Piece* can be viewed in full at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73uyuofU8qI&t=463s

Eager to expand the knowledge I had begun to unearth in *Shoes Off*, I shadowed a contemporary ballet class at a studio outside of Boston that had received widespread media attention for their inclusion of a young dancer with Cerebral Palsy. Instructor Katherine Proulx seamlessly taught myself and the other dancer with Cerebral Palsy while conducting the class

that had 10-15 traditionally abled dancers. Proulx would approach me during stretches and discreetly offer corrections, would hold my waist as I experimented with leaps, and encouraged me to focus on correctly positioning my fingers, arms and elbows, instead of wasting energy on footwork not meant for spastic feet. She pushed me within the context of my own physicality, as opposed to trying to get me to do what an abled dancer would, because she knew that my body and that of an abled dancer could not and should not be compared. I could accomplish more within contemporary dance when my body was regarded as individual; not as "lesser" or "special", but simply as whatever it was that day. The principle of Disability Justice that bodies and their capabilities are uniquely individual and ever-changing does away with externalized projections and allows for more interesting dance to take place in the absence of irrelevant standards.

It is in honoring individual capability, and in the realities of my own abilities and symptoms that my choreographic process for *This Body's Heart* was as informed by disabled experience as the finished product. Before soliciting dancers to audition, I choreographed as much of the show as possible without bodies to set movement on. I first worked on the group numbers, *Area of Refuge, Overstimulated*, and *I Am As I Am*, and hired a dance captain, Leslie Mered, so I could test movement ideas and receive initial feedback on movement concepts, transitions, and screen for possible safety issues on more complex ideas such as specific lifts. Additionally, she eventually taught the ensemble of *Overstimulated* how to properly share weight, and refined my idea for a tango within the piece, providing terminology and counts I lacked. Perhaps most importantly, Leslie served as a proxy to try out ideas and improvise before setting choreography on dancers. This saved valuable rehearsal time, and provided the creative

trial space many choreographers use their own bodies for, as my ideas surpass my physical ability. Merced and I regularly met outside of rehearsals, where I would talk through my choreography notes and I'd watch her move through the sequences, and then I would stop her and change or clean pieces so that the sequencing was ready to be set on dancers come rehearsals.

The very first part of choreographing any piece is defining what kind of movement or thematic elements drive the piece. Is it soft or hard? Is it based in ballet, more abstract contemporary, or is dance type secondary to a narrative, so it reads more like performance art or theatre? Is there a significant setting, like the beach in *Walk With Me*? Often I will have in mind specific movement elements such as flocking, various acrobatics, contact improvisation tableaus, or a certain lift or spin. Research and development is key to representing themes and movements that drive a piece. I will pour over YouTube videos of pieces that involve just one movement or theme I want to incorporate, or images that remind me of the idea I started with before writing out any timed movement. When building a piece with a clear narrative beginning, middle, and end, such as *Area of Refuge* and *Keep Breathing,* I then write down the different "events" that occur within the piece in order. Next, I write down more specific movement notes under each segment. If there is a corresponding score that I have in mind, I will then locate the score and do a preliminary cut of the music to get a sense of the timing and soundscape.

With pieces that are not narrative based, but are driven by a specific score and concept, such as *Walk With Me, Sacred Tension,* and *As I Am*, I follow the initial research and development stage by listening to the score and breaking the piece into smaller segments, and then setting movement from the beginning of the score onward in seconds. For example, in

building *Sacred Tension*, I knew there were two distinct groups of dancers: the two representing spasticity, and the two representing fluidity. I knew I wanted the fluid dancers to be more ballet based than the spastic dancers, to denote my experience with the rigidity of ballet being less accessible to spastic bodies that abstract contemporary. Once I communicated the concept to sound editor Mya Forbes, I was presented with various scoring options. I had done enough research and had enough thematic and length specificity that the score selection process was straightforward -- once a score was selected, I started from 0:00 and in chunks of seconds, I choreographed the 'spastic' dancers and 'fluid' dancers completely separately. Once I had the 4 minute, 17 second score choreographed for both groups, I cross referenced my notes for moments of similarities and differences, and began to adjust to ensure they were responding to one another cohesively. I double checked my carefully researched ballet questions with the ballet dancers, and then I set it on my dancers also in two halves, because each grouping required a different type of specific attention. Once each group was confident in their track, I had them rehearse together, and cleaned it as one piece.

Traditionally abled dancers have protested my methods of exclusively writing notes down and seeing what movements look like on YouTube. The traditional belief is that dance cannot be learned from a book, but is instead learned through action. This judgment of one methodology over another neglects the privilege of being able to improvise on oneself or through a proxy. While I was grateful to have Leslie when I did, my time with her was limited, and outside of *This Body's Heart* I do not have such a proxy or access to large groups of dancer-peers that will experiment with my half-baked ideas. Thus, note taking and YouTube are the most readily available resources to build movement. It should come as no surprise that the view that

dance cannot be learned or crafted through second hand methods is yet another arbitrary ableist barrier: I translated my ideas from the page to the body smoothly and succinctly, with Conservatory of Dance Student Catherine Escueta remarking that the "specificity of my notes and timing," along with my ability to communicate my choreography to dancers was "incredible," my ideas being "very clear and straightforward." Just as the abled choreographer must build the dance vocabulary in their body over time, my note taking, score matching, internet-research process takes practice, active focus, and artistic vision to get to a point where it is effective in a multi-faceted project such as *This Body's Heart.* I utilized similar processes in all of my earlier works, and regularly pull out a notebook when struck by an idea while listening to music recreationally, throwing myself into the process of building sequences and research even when there is no larger project or product calling for it.

While the planning for the smaller pieces was completed during the rehearsal period from September 2019 forward, much of the research and building for the group pieces (*Area of Refuge, Overstimulated,* and *As I Am*) was completed in pre-production from January 2019-September of 2019. By the time I finally auditioned dancers, I was not looking at dance ability at all -- I was confident that the movement I had planned was doable by all bodies with some creative thinking. Instead, I was looking for a diversity in movement styles and body types, lack of self-consciousness in trying a wide variety of movement types, comfort with contact and improvisation, energy and enthusiasm, discipline and ability to interpret direction, and of course a sense of rhythm.

Furthermore, in selecting featured dancers and soloists, I was not seeking the most technically advanced dancer to highlight physique or technique. Instead, I sought to highlight

dancers not commonly seen in contemporary dance, fitting the piece to them, as opposed to making the dancer fit the piece. A prime example of this is *Overstimulated.* I was hesitant to ask two dancers, who were new to dance performance, to learn the varied techniques that fueled *Overstimulated*'s organized chaos. It was vital that the piece had two dancers that were navigating the chaos of the ensemble, their personal space invaded as they represent the overstimulated individual. Each lifted over the heads of five ensemble members at one point, they were unmistakably the focal point of the piece, providing the audience a central point to look at amongst the chaos. One a tall Latina and the other a shorter white trans man, the juxtaposition of the pair enhanced the piece: Conceptually, they denote that anyone can experience overstimulation, and in the context of contemporary dance, it was a deliberate statement to lift and pair two dancers that vary from the typical white/cis/thin profile. In responding to their lesser familiarity with dance, I was honestly assessing how I could maintain their comfort and safety, without diminishing their contribution to the piece as a whole. They were both still expected to learn and perfect a specific, multi-faceted track of choreography and bring life to each performance. I did not decrease my expectations of them in acknowledging their needs, and thus the value of their completing a "simpler" track was a non-issue.

Examining *This Body's Heart* as a Marginalized Production

Rather ironically, *This Body's Heart* took place at, was supported by, and was originally inspired by the failings of an institution. While the production could not have been realized without the support of faculty and the use of campus facilities and equipment, *This Body's Heart* was not under the supervision, or operating with the endorsement of a specific department: it was

not a requirement of the Arts Management department or senior project, nor was it sanctioned by the conservatory of dance. Student participation was entirely elective, as opposed to mandated by academic bodies for educational or evaluative purposes. All participating students were recruited independently, and the majority did not receive academic credit. Resources used were specifically sought out by production leaders, and were granted as a favor by various academic departments, the granters of which could have elected to withhold said resources. The granting of these specific resources was ultimately a kindness, whereas conservatory students are expected to know and utilize the same resources. This is reflective of a larger cultural phenomenon, in which marginalized people and endeavors are seen as charity in the absence of institutional acceptance and affiliation. The production's practical success was a result of the grit and resourcefulness of a seemingly random group of students, some of whom had no previous production experience. The obtaining of space, funding, equipment, and dancers was a slow and careful piecing together from multiple departments within the college as well as entities outside of the college, including the Conservatory of Dance, the Arts Management department, the Department of Theatre Arts, the Department of Natural Sciences, Music Production & Composition, the Athletic Facility, independent musician Katy Corbus, and the ongoing support of the families of production personnel and dancers. While I will specify the resources and equipment used and the ways in which they were each obtained, it should first be noted that this so-called piecemealing in the face of institutional exclusion and lack of resources is a time-honored pattern of projects led by and featuring disabled voices, and is an unmistakably defining element of Disability Justice initiatives.

As a result of the lack of official departmental affiliation and the inability to receive conservatory credit, the production team was comprised of many students whose roles did not align with their area of study, and many of whom had never done their specific role in another capacity prior. The production was to be funded entirely by ticket sales, the costs being fronted out of pocket by myself, with the exception of one (1) one hundred and fifty dollar grant provided by Purchase College, which I applied for and obtained independently. The complete operational budget for *This Body's Heart* can be found in Appendix C.

If *This Body's Heart* is an example of Disability Justice in action, then Purchase College is a relevant example of institutional oppression in action. Purchase College is a State University of New York (SUNY) located in Westchester County, 35 minutes north of New York City. Established in 1967, it has an enrollment of approximately 4,100 undergraduate students as of Fall 2018 (US News and World Report). Campus accessibility to students with a wide array of disabilities has been a known issue among students and staff for several years. In 2018, the college received widespread media attention after denying an incoming freshman a dorm that accommodated his live-in aide, only to find the space following the negative press coverage (Selim, Algar). Also in 2018, on campus protests took place and local news responded to an ongoing lack of effective fire evacuation policy for students with disabilities, catalyzed by the struggles I faced as a residential student upon entry that Fall (Rosenblum, Tara). The abandonment of physically disabled students in the case of dorm fire alarms going off originated *This Body's Heart*, serving as the narrative for the production's opening piece, *Area of Refuge*. The title references the designation of certain physical spaces as the place for disabled

individuals to wait in the case they cannot actually evacuate a possibly burning building, called Areas of Refuge (Purchase College).

The college is primarily known for its arts curricula, which boasts notable BFA and MusB conservatory programs in theatre, acting, music performance and technology, visual arts, and dance. Conservatory programs are meant for students who exclusively specialize in one artistic discipline to receive focused pre-professional training. The conservatory programs at Purchase have predetermined course requirements for all four years, limit a students ability to take interdisciplinary courses, have specific graduation and evaluation requirements, and most importantly, offer students exclusive resources and opportunities specific to that board of study. Admission is highly selective and the academic expectations are notably rigorous. In essence, each Conservatory functions as an institution within the parent institution. As a result, a certain status is attached to being a conservatory student; students have proven they are good enough in their craft to get in, and must prove they are good enough to stay. They have fulfilled the often rigid expectation of what a pre-professional "should" be, and must maintain that image, because they are the faces of the mini-institution that educates them. The ever present realities of reputation and 'type' reinforce aforementioned normative standards of beauty and ability that beget oppression, allowing those who meet normative standards access to coveted resources and opportunities. Even in dance training programs considered ethnically diverse, the student body is overwhelmingly abled, cisgender, and thin, meaning within clothing sizes not considered "plus." This is reflective of the criteria for professional dancers in the United States, which has historically excluded people of size, people of color, people of size, and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Though there are exceptions to this rule, such exclusions are generally

pervasive. Therefore, students that fit various identity profiles labeled “marginalized”, such as the leaders of *This Body’s Heart*, are in turn barred from resources made available to conservatory students.

In the Fall of 2019, there were 186 students enrolled in Purchase College’s Conservatory of Dance BFA program (Purchase College Factbook). In order to graduate from the program, individuals must earn a minimum of 120 credits, at least 30 of which must be liberal arts credits, as determined by the Conservatory. Six of these credits must be performance credits, earned by performing in the Conservatory’s bi-annual productions, or senior project productions (Conservatory of Dance, Purchase College). In order to accomplish completion of the program, students are provided several resources not available to the general student population. While this list of resources is wide ranging, the items most relevant to the process and production of *This Body’s Heart* are: free, ongoing use of copious studio space, whereas non-majors must obtain special permission. They are provided (and in some cases mandated) use of a black box theatre fully equipped with a lighting grid and sound system entitled the Dance Theatre Lab; non-majors must submit an extensive proposal for use of the space months in advance, and approval must be granted by the department’s executive and production leadership. Additionally, conservatory students are not granted performance credit for working on non-conservatory led productions, largely preventing cross-departmental collaboration, and the use of trained dancers in independent productions such as *This Body’s Heart.*

Access to physical space was the first and most urgent resource barrier to navigate as a non-conservatory student facilitating a non-conservatory production. Inaccess to physical space is a timeless tactic of oppressors, because to take up space is to exist. An institution permitting

one type of individual to easily inhabit space, but creating barriers for another connotes exclusion in the most literal sense. In order to ensure *This Body's Heart* could utilize the rehearsal studios for the entirety of the seven month rehearsal process, I obtained verbal permission from Conservatory of Dance Board of Study coordinator Darrah Carr, and alerted Conservatory Director Nelly Van Bommel of the production's existence. This need was then further insured by the onboarding of a senior dance conservatory student as Dance Captain, who was in part strategically involved so there was always a conservatory major in the room should our presence be questioned.

The other physical space vital to the success of *This Body's Heart* was the aforementioned Dance Theatre Lab, which would serve as our performance space. While the space was ideal because of size and type (a 250 seat black box), it was important to me that we used the performance space typical of the conservatory, in part to draw in conservatory students and faculty who may question the project's validity as a dance production, and in part as a statement about marginalized groups inhabiting space that is specifically institutional to share anti-institutional work. It is in this spirit that it was vital the production happen *at* Purchase, so that *Area of Refuge* would be presented directly to the community that birthed the issue. The securement of the Dance Theatre Lab was contingent on the timely submission of a multiple page proposal that provided a detailed account of the project's subject and scope, and most importantly, the people making it happen. I eventually did successfully submit, but not after the wrangling of several student resumés and confusion about who to submit the proposal to, that my conservatory counterparts do not have to go through when planning for their own performances. There was no written guide for the proposal or review timeline provided, further convoluting the

possibility of securement for non-conservatory majors, and reflective of the rarity of outside proposals. The proposal for use of the Dance Theatre Lab can be found in Appendix D, excluding student resumés to protect their privacy.

The primary purpose of the proposal is to demonstrate that “qualified personnel” would be operating the space. “Qualified personnel” are in quotation marks because the requirement therein is the presence of at least one student enrolled in the Design and Technology program, another conservatory/mini institution of the college. Again, the permission to use the institution's space was contingent on the presence of someone specifically approved by the institution. While enrollment in the Design & Technology program denotes knowledge, there are undoubtedly students in the general population (perhaps non-conservatory theatre students) that are qualified to operate such a theatre, and in turn there are inevitably students in the Design & Technology program that are not actually ready for such responsibility. While all students must demonstrate capability, conservatory students are defaulted to, which is reflective of the aforementioned cultural attitude concerning conservatory status.

A primary tactic to securing conservatory resources was to strategically partner with conservatory students. Beyond needing sound edited, parts of the soundscape involved voice overs and original music that needed to be recorded in a studio. The only ones that can access the on campus recording studios are music production majors; beyond needing the production to be recorded, the only ones who can access and operate the caliber of camera required to adequately capture a dance performance of such length are those within the film conservatory. The challenge in realizing such partnerships is that conservatory students are systematically siloed with their cohort and academic track, which further perpetuates the social-political hierarchy

between conservatory and non-conservatory students. This systematic separation is enforced by the academic requirement that conservatory students spend a certain amount of time on conservatory projects, leaving little capacity and interest for so called “independent” projects like *This Body’s Heart*, that therefore end up on the margins of student work.

The conservatory students that participated did so simply because they were passionate about the concepts and mission of *This Body’s Heart*, taking on the non-credit bearing responsibilities in addition to their already larger-than-average course load. Of the 34 Purchase students consistently involved in the making of *This Body’s Heart* over either a part of or the duration of the 14 month process, nine are conservatory students. The conservatory students involved are as follows, listed with their academic standing and role within *This Body’s Heart:*

- Leslie Merced **|** Conservatory of Dance Class of 2020 | Dance Captain
- Otto Martinian | Conservatory of Theatre Arts, Design and Technology - Lighting, Class of 2021 | Lighting Designer
- Mya Forbes **|** Conservatory of Music, Studio Composition, Class of 2022 | Sound Designer
- Gabriella Carnevale | School of Art & Design, Graphic Design, Class of 2021 | Graphic Designer and Social Media Manager
- Lea Jaffe | School of Film and Media Studies, Film BFA, Class of 2021 | Videographer
- Charlotte Aucella | Conservatory of Dance Class of 2023 **|** Dancer
- Angelina Laguna | Conservatory of Dance Class of 2023 | Dancer
- Isabelle Tudor | Conservatory of Dance Class of 2022 | Dancer
- Catherine Escueta | Conservatory of Dance Class of 2021 | Dancer

Beyond the physical spaces and equipment garnered, there were specific production elements made available to *This Body's Heart* simply by the kindness and trust of those facilitating conservatories and other campus departments. The costuming for *Walk With Me* was provided on lend by the Dance Conservatory's head of wardrobe, who oversees the Conservatory's costume closet; an acting block was provided on lend by the Conservatory of Theatre Arts to serve as a set piece in *Keep Breathing*, and a several hospital gowns were donated by Heath Services for costume use for *Keep Breathing*.

Applying Disability Justice Principles to the Creative Process of *This Body's Heart*

It is important to distinguish that *This Body's Heart* is in no way the first theatrical or dance production to prioritize aspects of Disability Justice, be it knowingly or unknowingly. Axis Dance Company of Northern California, Spoke N Motion Dance of Denver, Sins Invalid of Northern California, Deaf West Theatre of Los Angeles, and Phamaly Theatre Company of Denver, are a handful of established theatre and dance producing entities that center disabled performers, stories, and well-being, while holding an understanding of the intersections between the experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and ability status. Said understanding is demonstrated through their casting and programming choices, missions, visions, and work practices, all of which stress the importance of complex representation, multi-faceted diversity, physical and emotional well being, as well as a professional caliber of production.

This Body's Heart is a descendent of the work of these companies -- I would not have been able to understand theatre or dance if not for the existence of such entities, much less

disability justice and its applications to the performing arts. *This Body's Heart* differs from the aforementioned companies because its creators are not, nor do we strive to be a company; we did not have the support of major donors or a history of programming and community presence to rely on. Another significant contrast is the fact that *This Body's Heart* was comprised of majority abled people, despite being uniquely disabled in leadership, concept, and practice. Perhaps most notably, *This Body's Heart* existed within a state institution with ongoing ableist practices, which both fueled and inhibited *This Body's Heart's* practice of Disability Justice.

It is in the spirit of Disability Justice that in casting *This Body's Heart*, performers of color, trans performers, non-thin performers, and performers with chronic conditions were featured over performers that fit the more traditional "dancer" profile of white/thin/cis/abled, depite the latter generally having access to more dance training. It is to be expected that the profile accepted as "dancer" is in line with the profile that perpetuates institutional oppression- because white/cis/thin/abled is the ubiquitous profile that is allowed to thrive in institutions, having full access to educational opportunities, and inevitably growing into the very force that allows institutional oppression to carry on.

This Body's Heart was not an anti-institutional space by default; while the people in the room did not all have to be of marginalized identity, the privileged not being the voice of authority is what prevented the process from becoming a microcosm of oppressive/hierarchical dynamics present in larger institutions. In addition to the multi-facetedly diverse cast, the production team was majority non-male, with disabled people, queer people, and people of color making the decisions and schedules with myself, a white/queer/disabled/cis woman, directing. Lakshmi Piepza Samarahsinha explains in *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* that the

difference in leveraging a team's diversity in a meaningful way lies in the sharing of power, stating “Inclusion without power or leadership is tokenism.”

In an effort to avoid tokenism and minimize hierarchy within the rehearsal room, I did not gather quantitative identity data on my dancers. Building a room diverse in background and dance experience was not to check a box, but to create a picture onstage reflective of the world we live in, and to provide performance opportunities to students that may not otherwise have them or feel comfortable participating in such a process. The concern in asking dancers of marginalized identity to disclose an identity profile lies in that the complexities of identity can never be captured in a handful of terms, and individuals, especially college students, are in an ongoing process of defining our own identities. Someone who may identify as abled today can discover they are disabled tomorrow, and multiethnic individuals might struggle to verbalize their ethnic identities. Furthermore, the existence of such a poll suggests the identities of participants somehow has a concrete bearing on the process itself, as though leadership is seeking to reach certain numbers. This idea is perpetuated by the existence of “diversity quotas,” which have no place in a Disability Justice environment fueled by the belief that all beings have inherent value. Because if all beings have value, the specific breakdown of how many carry identity markers holds no bearing.

My goal was to honor the experiences each individual brought, highlighting difference when relevant (as opposed to dangerous narratives of sameness seen in “I don’t see color/disability/etc.”), while allowing dancers the freedom to leave preconceived ideas about what kind/amount of space they can take up at the door. This was accomplished by way of several specific communication methods, some of which are typical of dance rehearsal processes

and many of which are not. At the most basic, each rehearsal began with an introduction of new persons in the room, and a verbal summary of what we'd be doing that rehearsal, with any other general production updates relevant to dancers. While stage managers of traditional processes would point out this can be accomplished in an Email, *This Body's Heart* valued the in-person check-in in addition to the more utilitarian daily call Email as a small reminder that we are humans relating to one another, not robots that show up and immediately start dancing.

I consistently impressed upon dancers from the first audition that I understood every person has different movement abilities and comfort levels, and in the case someone voiced they could not do or felt uncomfortable doing something, that would be honored with no questions asked. In turn, they were expected to proactively voice when they could not do something or felt uncomfortable doing something, as it was impossible and inappropriate for another to intuit. This directly contradicts the narrative sold to disabled people that "can't does not exist" or that ability is a matter of willpower, which often shames individuals deeply enough to prevent them from communicating and respecting their own limits. To combat this stigma, I presented limitations in dance as a group safety issue, insisting that learning and expressing one's own comfort and limitations kept the group safe in learning complex movements that often involved lifts, jumps, touch, speed, and multiple bodies interacting at once. Additionally, I approached newer performers individually, reiterating my excitement about their involvement, and seeking information on what specifically would make them most comfortable throughout. Ideally this practice of proactive identification and communication of personal limits serves as a model to be used in facets of daily life outside of the rehearsal room, to overcome oppressive institutional expectations of overworking oneself.

A key element of disability justice is understanding and responding to the specific circumstances and needs of the environment you are in, and acknowledging that there is no ideal environment. *This Body's Heart*'s existence within a college campus and the fact the project is the work of college students all ages 18-23, informed every aspect of production practices. While a certain level of "professionalism" was expected from personnel -- timely, transparent communication, willingness to collaborate, and thorough completion of tasks -- to conduct the process as I would a dance production taking place in the professional world would not only have been impossible due to academic scheduling and on-campus commitments, but would have exacerbated students' capability and willingness to be present, asking more of individuals than is healthy for their minds and bodies.

While my work on *This Body's Heart* lasted 14 months, from January 2019 to March 2020, the rehearsal process was half of that time, from the beginning September 2019 to March 2020. January to September was spent on concept building, choreographic research, production team building, and the umbrella of logistics that is "pre-production," which includes team contract writing/signing, rehearsal space securement, schedule building, and networking in and outside of the institution to build interest and support for the project, both in anticipation of ticket sales and for operational purposes such as dancer recruitment. There is no standard time frame dance productions are produced, since they vary so greatly in size, scope, and type of movement. This being said, seven months of rehearsal for 1 hour of dance is longer than expected. The length of the rehearsal process and the production process on the whole is reflective of the ability to rehearse for only two hours once a week. Two hours once a week was the maximum dancers could commit, and studios could only be used for two hours at a time. Furthermore,

accommodating conflicts within that schedule was necessary even when challenging, because dancers were prioritizing class schedules, credit bearing opportunities, jobs, and relationships.

Putting this acknowledgement into practice took the form of planning for a longer rehearsal process well before the pieces were cast, having "extra" bodies in the room that could fill in in a dancers absence, anticipating rehearsal would start five minutes late, the individual check ins with dancers about comfort with various types of movement, and continuing on when individuals needed breaks without pressuring them to return in a specific amount of time. It also meant finding alternate times to meet with our Dance Captain, who often had to miss rehearsals for conservatory requirements, and building in more support personnel than is typical on a production team.

Here, "support" means hiring more personnel than is projected to be needed to prepare for the scenario in which individuals are unable to show up, complete a task, or require assistance to show up or complete a task. This prevents judgement or pressure in the case that individuals cannot be present. In addition to myself as the director and choreographer, *This Body's Heart* had a producer and co-choreographer who acted as a direct support to myself as well as overseeing several logistics. Additionally, there were two stage managers, and an assistant stage manager who doubled as assistant lighting designer, in addition to the Dance Captain. While we six individuals had clear responsibilities, we worked collaboratively to lead, often coming to another's aide on executive tasks. The producer oversaw stage management so that I could focus creatively, the stage managers shared responsibilities of creating and distributing rehearsal reports, and the ASM and producer had dance experience, so they could fill in for the dance captain as needed, having eyes on safety and transitions. The multiple

production personnel in the room during rehearsals created a response team should anyone have an emotional or physical episode within the room, and allowed me to transition from my roles as director to dancer to producer to costume designer and back again.

While the traditional rehearsal process exercises the expectation that personal lives are omitted, the Disability Justice-informed process not only allows but welcomes the complexities of personal lives, because disability justice at its core acknowledges the fullness of human beings. Capitalism preaches that in the case participants are paid, they are paid for this omission of complexity, and some may see my 'leniency' as a concession to the fact that I was not monetarily compensating my dancers -- if they did not show up, what was I going to do? On the contrary, the allowance for my dancers to present as busy, stressed college students was a conscious part of my directorial approach, knowing there was a better option than a process that asked people to withhold parts of themselves. The "better option" required the aforementioned provisions. To clarify, the inability to compensate dancers was reflective of restrictions in funding and rules of the college that dictate students could not be paid for such contributions. In the case that I could have compensated dancers, the payment would not be leveraged to squeeze out "more" work from participants; it would be provided with the belief everyone needs money to survive under capitalism, and dancers deserve compensation for their work.

Even with a lack of payment, the use of transparent communication, a larger-than -average production team, longer than average process, and humanity first approach to rehearsals naturally encouraged honest, enthusiastic behavior and broke down the traditional hierarchy between director/choreographer and dancer without compromising respect. This is to say that a hierarchy is thought to be necessary to maintain leadership or a sense of respect for a leader's

direction, but when there is transparent communication and a priority of individual well-being over the work being done, respect of leadership is natural without an imposed hierarchy. Dancers trusted my direction and obliged in the rarity they were asked to stay for an extra 20 minutes to finish a piece, because myself and the others in leadership had demonstrated we cared for their well-being and had the best interests of the show in mind when asking them to change routine in any way.

Just as the participants were to be valued as individuals, the production itself became an individual we all supported the needs of. In the case someone did not fulfill their responsibilities, I would stress that their contributions were vital to the success of the production as a whole; that *This Body's Heart* was a community inextricably affected by their contributions or lack thereof. By reframing the shortcoming as a cause/effect within community care of the production (community care being a primary principle of Disability Justice), as opposed to an individual failing, the judgment is removed, and refocused both myself and the other person on the common goal.

It is this reframing of thought through proactive planning for human need that leads me to believe the application of Disability Justice principles to performing arts has the potential to revolutionize the standard for participants in the performing arts. Disability Justice allows groups of people -- regardless of need or ability -- to move away from an expectation that we work our bodies and minds to the maximum all the time; an expectation that then excludes bodies and minds that can't work to the maximum for 12 hours at a time, and instead towards a process that allows for comfort. Comfort is favorable because no one does their best work when hungry, exhausted, in pain, or trying to do more than one task at a time. The industry has accepted this

under the guise that it is impossible to honor all of these needs *and* accomplish a full production. But perhaps the performing arts are not an anomaly asking for so much more from people than other work. *This Body's Heart* demonstrates it is entirely possible to take care of people and make meaningful art on time. The key is asking people what they need and being prepared to respond, by having created the necessary infrastructure of time, support, and equipment.

A prime example of this change happening in real time is in an anecdotal experience with Lighting Designer Otto Martinian. Otto, a third year student in the Theatre Design & Technology Conservatory program, is a product of the industry that preaches and practices work-until-you-break. We were building the tech schedule, figuring out the specifics of when he would load in, tech, and load out while simultaneously assigned to tech a show for the conservatory. In deciding on times, he kept saying he could work right up to his call for the second production, which often put him at 12-16 hour work days in which he was leading others and accountable for finishing on a strict deadline. When I suggested we dismiss him an hour before his next call, he insisted he could work straight through, having done it before. I reassured him I knew that he could, but there was no reason he *should*. We could finish what we needed within a slightly shorter time if we rearranged other parts of tech or started a half hour earlier. The idea of our changing other parts of a complex schedule for one person to get a dinner break had not even occurred to him. Once he saw on the schedule it was possible, he took the break, but at first had been willing to sacrifice his food intake for a tech schedule that is ultimately changeable.

Another example of creating necessary infrastructure proactively is the holding of a mandatory 'disability awareness workshop' for all cast and crew six weeks into the rehearsal

process, once the production was cast. It took the shape of my sharing language I am most comfortable with around disability, as well as my experiences with ableism on campus and in dance, before opening it up as a discussion for the group to share their thoughts and ask questions. The hour and a half was presented to the group as a way to ensure we were all using similar language and in understanding about *why this story now*, clarifying the purpose of the concept. The meeting did accomplish these goals, but perhaps more importantly, it explicitly presented me to those I was leading as a disabled individual and choreographer, which laid the necessary foundation for me to be fully disabled in my direction throughout. This is to say that by acknowledging and informing that I am mechanically and culturally disabled, I normalized the presence of symptoms, so that when I was symptomatic during rehearsal, said symptoms did not halt or negatively affect the work being done. Too often, making space for individuals who are sick, disabled, or are not sick or disabled but have needs in accessing a given experience is confused with a halting of productivity. On the contrary, Disability Justice does not mean stopping everything for that person, or simply changing the structure of an activity: on the contrary, it is allowing and welcoming individuals to exist fully in the environment however they may be in that moment. This lack of comment, judgment, or forced change actually allows for more productivity.

An example of this playing out in actuality, and proof of the effectiveness of that group conversation, came to fruition right at the halfway mark of the seven month rehearsal process of *This Body's Heart.* The December rehearsals for *As I Am* were the first time I was simultaneously directing and dancing within a rehearsal. While this duplicity is unorthodox due to the obvious challenge of adequately balancing both sets of responsibilities, it was important I

dance in *As I Am*, as the piece was a metaphor of my experiences reconciling social ableism and reaching relative emotional peace -- the text used as the score were phrases said to me (full script with movement notes in Appendix A), and it was too personal and specific to hand to another dancer. This being said, despite the assistance of the producer and stage managers, I was learning my own movement sequences and cues while imparting movement sequences and cues to the other dancers. Only half the rehearsal had passed by the time my body ached and the familiar fatigue of Cerebral Palsy hit me, but my mind was still eager to work and there was more to set of the six minute piece. Without apology or explanation, I lowered myself to the floor and laid on my back to stretch my lower back, and gave instruction to the others to run it from the top, leaving a space where my body would be. I talked them through the sequence while lying down, rehearsal progressed smoothly, and I was able to address my need *before* my pain or fatigue was exacerbated. While abled and traditional rehearsal standards perpetuate pushing oneself to the absolute physical limit, the Disability Justice principle of addressing one's needs as they arise contributes to increased productivity, because the proactive addressing of needs minimizes injury and danger that would legitimately stop a rehearsal. The culmination of previous conversations about needs and comfort in the context of bodies and movement allowed rehearsal to continue, because the dancers trusted that I was okay to continue working because I said I could. We had communally built trust in sharing our limitations, so the nuance in need and limitation was understood: I could continue working if I laid down, which was sufficient because there was a cultural understanding that lying down did not actually hinder my capability as a director or choreographer. There was no judgment of my need to lie down, because the presence of disability was not viewed as a "bad thing" as it would be in the larger institution. This *active*

existence of disability contradicts the restrictive binary of "sick" or "healthy," offering instead a third option of "sick and capable." That is Disability Justice in action.

Of Course A Global Pandemic Prevented the Performances

The ticket link for *This Body's Heart* went live on March 10th, 2020. Also on March 10th, Purchase College announced there would be no public performances held for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester in response to the threat of COVID-19 in Westchester and beyond. The week following, the college sent all residential students home, making the option of filming the production for online viewing impossible. *This Body's Heart* had been run in full just one (1) time in a studio run-rehearsal on March 5th, in which full sound and set were added for the first and last time. While it was the full intention of performers and production personnel for the four performances to take place in full for public audiences, it is perhaps as fitting as it is ironic that a story centering the story of a Sick and Disabled person was impeded by a global pandemic.

The disabled community has been learning to live from home, work from bed, and foster connection without the privilege of meeting in public spaces since its earliest conceptions "Writing from bed is a time-honored disabled way of being an activist and cultural worker" (Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Leah). After decades of abled institutions insisting sick and disabled workers are less valuable or productive employees because of the need to be accommodated, or insisting the need to work from home or work different hours cannot be accommodated at all, those very institutions adopted remote work overnight in an effort to stay functional in a world where sickness is no longer just a threat to those on the margins. When the institution itself is at risk, anything is possible, quite suddenly. For the first time, the world has

slowed to the pace of the sick, adopting and enforcing hygiene and self-care measures that sick and disabled people have been practicing well before “Coronavirus” was part of anyone's vernacular, in the face of already-compromised immune systems, fragrance and sensory sensitivities, etc.

Reconciliation of the cancellation of a 14 month process five weeks before its conclusion is as complex and layered as disabled experience itself. Disability Justice principles -- prioritization of individual well-being over a given product, valuing all individuals regardless of ability to ‘produce’ under capitalism, and proactively identifying meaningful ways for all to be actively included -- directly contradict traditional dogma of theatre operations and the pervasive narrative of “what it takes” to work in the performing arts: A needlessly competitive arena that condones long hours, claustrophobic spaces, complex hierarchies, and the ongoing minimization of individual needs in favor of “the production” (see aforementioned anecdote about Lighting Designer getting a dinner break). Thus, the application of Disability Justice to the theatrical production process requires the active unlearning of the aforementioned exclusionary dogma.

By way of my educational upbringing within and eventual assimilation to abled dance and theatre processes, I myself was indoctrinated with this dogma, believing “The show must go on” at all costs. The understanding of the needs of the production as the bottom line centers creators and performers when processes test individuals or when an issue arises that convolutes reaching opening night. Opening night is, for all intents and purposes, the finish line that everyone is united in movement towards from the very first production meeting; all communications in production meetings and rehearsals center what *will* happen when the curtain goes up. So when that product is abruptly taken away, what is left? If the team had known this

would happen, I could not have justified spending the time or resources we did to either the institution or the individuals hired, because our lives are built around products. If I could not have offered a product, no one would have signed on. And yet, retrospectively, the makers of *This Body's Heart* were hamsters running on a wheel, unknowingly taking extraordinary measures to gather resources in the face of a lack of institutional support, ultimately for there to be no end point.

Taking into consideration this lack of intended end point, it becomes abundantly clear that the "product" or purpose of *This Body's Heart* was the process itself. The concrete measurements of success that were to be taken at its conclusion, including a Post Mortem and evaluation of audience feedback, were impeded by COVID-19. A post mortem is "a practical, nuts-and-bolts discussion about the process of mounting the play or performance piece. How did the director [and actors] approach the play methodologically? What obstacles were overcome, what discoveries made, what issues faced in the rehearsal process? How did the design scheme originate and how did it evolve as part of the overall vision and meaning of the production? The postmortem also engages in a dialogue about audience response, not as a critique of the work but rather as an exploration of the impact -- theatrical, emotional, political, moral -- of the performance on those who saw it." (Rodgers et al.)

The additional goal of creating a Disability Justice centered environment warrants explicit discussion of individual needs being met and comfort maintained throughout. In the absence of more concrete, retrospective qualitative evaluation, there is left the fulfillment of objective, or lack thereof. The still-novel act of consciously, and ultimately successfully applying Disability Justice practices to a long term dance and theatrical process run by individuals within

an institutional setting, was the accomplishment; providing an opportunity to dance and create theatre without having to sacrifice oneself; creating a platform for people (majority femmes) to lead an ongoing endeavor who have historically been barred from positions of power including everyone who wanted to be involved regardless of need or education, keeping everyone safe, comfortable, and engaged within that inclusion, and still producing and marketing a fully outfitted, carefully choreographed, curated, and scored production *on time* was the feat unto itself. Prior to and at its abrupt end on March 10th, *This Body's Heart* was finished and on track to premiere at Purchase College for four, one-hour performances in April of 2020 as planned at its very first conception. We proved we could do this once, so we proved that regardless of budget, access to resources, reputation, the leaders' age, race, gender, ability status or institutional affiliation, it can be done again, and again, and again.

Sonya stands USC, LIGHTS UP

Tell your left leg to straighten out — Sonya tentatively looks around takes small steps forward

Just focus

If you work hard now, life will be better when you're older — Adrianna (A1) enters from USL

You can do anything you set your mind too — like "creature", attaches to Sonya

You're just not trying hard enough — Allen (A2) enters from USR

like

You have to have a better attitude — "creature", attaches to Sonya

You need to lighten up!

You're too young to have back pain!

You're too pretty to be in a wheelchair.

Look on the bright side- It could be worse

If I were you, I'd never get out of bed. — Sonya Leans forward holding onto A1, A2,

You're such an inspiration — holds, returns to standing

Did you break your legs?

What happened to you? — Jen (A3) enters from USL like "creature", attaches to Sonya

What happened to your legs?

I hope your life gets better!

Keep pushin', lil mama, this is just temporary.

I'm praying for you! — Mia (A4) enters from USL like "creature", attaches to Sonya

God will fix you!

My cousin is paralyzed, and he always has a smile on his face! — Start slow ripple

You can walk?

She just wants attention.

You're making too big a deal out of this. — End Ripple

Cripple.

If you can walk, what's with the chair?

Can you have sex? — A's hiss on 'sex'

I couldn't date a disabled person- I'm not a good enough person

You're great... I just...don't see you that way

You just have to love yourself, then other people will love you. Sonya tug of war

I'm sorry if you got the wrong idea.

You expect too much of the world. Tug of war ends, resposition to continue

Cerebral Palsy? I'm sorry, that's so sad.

Ignorance is just a part of life.

If you can't handle a little ignorance, you're not going to make it.

You *work* here?

I've never taught someone like you.

You're really smart for, like, you know

Now that I know you, I don't even see the disability.

What's wrong with your legs? Sonya pushed to ground, A's exit

(Echoing) What's wrong with you? Spotlight on Sonya

8 counts of silence, stillness

Take your time Sonya rises to knees

No need to push yourself Claire (H1) at Center from SL to help Sonya up

You're standing so tall!

It's okay

Tell me what happened Jonah (H2) meets at Center from SR with stick, hands to Sonya

Talk to me Melanie (H3) enters from SR

I'm here for you.

You okay, bubba?

What do *you* want?

Give yourself grace

I see how hard you're working

You're doing your best

What can I do to make this easier for you?

You've given me a lot to think about

You deserve more than that

You'll get through this. Sonya hands cane to Jonah, who puts it to SR

No one fucks with *my* daughter Go into chair lift- Jonah & claire lift, Melanie spots

One day, the things that caused you pain are going to be the things that make you extraordinary Swing Sonya on 'extraordinary'

Fuck those bastards!

It's okay to be angry.

I'm sorry. Jonah cartwheels to SL

It's shouldn't be on your shoulders to teach everyone Jonah spins

I promise, there's more out there for you Melanie spins to SR

You're beautiful Claire spins to SR

YES, girl! Keep going! Sonya spins down whole line, starting w right hand to Jonah

You can dance! ALL step DSR, look to audience, take exaggerated breath

Hey sexy! 'Laser pointer' finger, run

Damn, look at those arms!

I like spending time with you

Thank you for taking the time to explain that to me

You don't have to try to be something you're not.

Wanna cuddle?

Let's stop and rest

You can only do what you can only do

You're not doing anything wrong

You've made a bigger impact than you know

I'm lucky to have you in my life

You must be tired

You're so close to the finish line, honey.

I experience the same thing

It's so nice to know someone else like me

I'm so glad you came

Thank you for being here Land center in line with pointer fingers pointing up/out

I'm proud of you! Clump hug, Sonya at Center

I love who you are

(overlapping voices) I love you

I love you

I love you

I love you

I love you

You are who you are meant to be Take hands in line, looking & smiling at each other, Sonya center

(Sonya's voice) I am as I am Look out to audience, smiling

~ BLACK OUT ~

Contemporary Dance
Production

This Body's Heart

Directed & Choreographed
by Sonya Rio-Glick
Produced & Co-Choreographed
by Alena Brocker

This Body's Heart

A Note From The Director

This Body's Heart was a 14-month process born from a hunger for dance. I needed a place to put all the movement I see in my mind's eye. While a physically disabled person drawn to complex movement may seem contradictory, dance and disability are complementary forces- this dichotomy makes this work possible. Dance allows me to create beyond my own physical reality; seeing all the body can do is nothing short of miraculous.

I needed a miracle when, upon beginning at Purchase last Fall, I was left in what would be nearly 30 instances in which the fire alarm went off, unclear if there was an emergency or not. Unable to evacuate due to a lack of effective school policy for physically disabled students, I was thrown from office to office, meeting after meeting, protesting on campus and on the news in an effort to keep myself safe. At worst, I stopped eating and sleeping. At best, my story was supported by concerned allies. When I emerged from the (almost literal) ashes, I asked "What now?" I started dancing. Then all at once, I saw a sequence where a dancer could not get out of where they were, blocked and then suspended, frozen in midair.

As this played over in my head, I came upon pieces that convey other parts of this thing I call 'disabled experience,' the rest of which is not nearly as scary, sad, or exceptional as mainstream culture insists. High energy group movement encapsulates being overstimulated, two friends walking across the beach at dusk pay homage to the unique care of interabled friendship, a woman getting dressed provides a glimpse into the effort in the mundane. Indeed, there are so many pedestrian parts of being disabled that comprise a story too deliciously dimensional to be left untold. There is heart in what much of the world only sees as a body.

This Body's Heart stood firm in what it is and is not from the first conceptual stages: in today's social-political climate, it can be tempting to speak every truth in one work. Make no mistake- this is the story of one white, queer, cisgender, middle class, Jewish, Sick and Disabled woman. The creation of This Body's Heart is fueled by the belief that the hardest parts of life become more bearable, and the joyous parts more enjoyable, when someone is present to bear witness. Thank you to the many performers, designers, and technicians who put their faith in this story. And thank you, viewer, for bearing witness.

Production List

Director & Choreographer.....Sonya Rio-Glick*
Producer & Co-Choreographer.....Alena Brocker
Project Advisor.....Janis Astor Del Valle
Dance Captain.....Leslie Merced
Fall Stage Manager.....Mona Sewell
Spring Stage Manager.....Anna Giglio
Asst. Stage Manager & Asst. Lighting Designer.....Ashley Tasch
Assoc. Lighting Designer.....Otto Martinian
Assoc. Lighting Designer.....Keri Tanner
Sound Designer.....Mya Forbes
Scenic & Props Designer.....Jamie Lerner
Graphic Designer & Social Media Manager.....Gabby Carnevale
Videographer.....Lea Jaffe
Costume Designer.....Sonya Rio-Glick*
Featured Voice Over Artist.....Sean Gordon
Master Electrician: [pending]
Light Board Operator: [pending]
Sound Board Operator.....Madison Hitchcock

denotes senior project

This Body's Heart is made possible by the work of over 30 Purchase College students, the Purchase Affiliates Grant, and ticket buyers such as yourself. Thank you for supporting the performing arts!

All use of commercial music is permitted under Fair Use for educational purposes within United States Copyright law. All original music is used with explicit permission from the artist(s).

This Body's Heart runs approximately one (1) hour in length including one (1) ten minute intermission. NO strobing or hazing effects are used in this production. Photography and videography of any kind are strictly prohibited.

Area of Refuge

Score: Bird Flu by M.I.A (excerpt); Una Mattina by Ludavico Einaudi (excerpt);
Voiceover written by Sonya Rio-Glick, featuring voices of Sean Gordon and Sonya Rio-Glick
Performers: Lizard Buckley, Megan Seipak, Jonah Cannella, Angelina Leguna, Claire McGlynn, Jennifer Velasquez, Allen Denis, Charlotte Aucella, Madilyn Morrow
featuring Arianna Jurek
Based on true events. To find out more about fire evacuation (and lack thereof) of physically disabled students at Purchase College, visit https://www.purchase.edu/offices/environmental-health-and-safety/emergency-evacuation-procedures/

~ Brief Pause ~

Walk With Me

Score: Friendship Song written and performed by Katy Corbus, edit by Mya Forbes
Performers: Charlotte Aucella and Angelina Leguna
Choreographed in collaboration with performers

Keep Breathing

Score: Dancing on My Own written by Patrik Berger and Robin Carlsson, performed by Calum Scott; Are We There Yet by Ingrid Michaelson; She by The Riveters; Back In My Body by Maggie Rogers; Keep Breathing by Ingrid Michaelson
Performers: Sonya Rio-Glick
Contains partial nudity

~ 10 minute intermission ~

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Score: Collide by Jacob Remington (excepts)
Performers: Lizard Buckley, Angelina Laguna, Claire McGlynn, Allen Denis, Adrianna Jurek, Charlotte Aucella, Megan Seipak, Melanie King, Kayla Carrington, Melissandre Jones
Featuring Jennifer Velasquez and Jonah Cannella
With special thanks to Dance Captain Leslie Merced

Sacred Tension

Score: Til Enda by Ólafur Arnalds
Performers: Allen Denis, Catherine Escueta, Claire McGlynn, Isabelle Tudor

As I Am

Score: Nuvole Bianche by Ludovico Einaudi with text written by Sonya Rio-Glick, featuring the voices of Sean Gordon, Alena Brocker, Georgina Marie Liucci, Mathilda Cullen, James Cellum, and Sonya Rio-Glick
Performers: Allen Denis, Adrianna Jurek, Jennifer Velasquez, Catherine Escueta, Jonah Cannella, Claire McGlynn, Melanie King
Featuring Sonya Rio-Glick

All phrases have actually been said. Some content may make viewers uncomfortable or be inappropriate for children.

~ End of Show ~

You are invited to join the cast and crew of This Body's Heart for a brief talkback in the theater directly following the performance.

This Body's Heart Budget and Funding Summary

Budget estimate:

- Props/Scenic: $100
- Costuming: $500
- Lighting: $250
- Sound composition: $100
- Food: $450
    - Meal provided for cast and crew in between Saturday Matinee and evening performances
- Lobby display/ticketing: $100
- Contingency: $100

Total: $1600

Revenue Calculations:

- Ticket sales
    - DTL= 265 seats
    - 4 perf= 1,060
    - 80% capacity= 848 seats
    - 848 seats @ $3/ea= 2,544

*Any surplus following performances will be donated to an integrated dance company

Funding summary:

- Purchase Affiliates Award: $250 (Fall 2019)
- The Souls of our Feet fund: $900 (Sonya to be reimbursed w ticket sales following performances in April 2019)
- Ad sales to local businesses: $1,000
    - Four sales of 250/ea at discretion of Producer Alena Brocker
- *Should ad sales not come thru, Sonya prepared to front remainder and then reimburse with ticket sales upon providing back ups post-closing

Additional funding sources/Notes:

- Can sell more than three ads if needed, have list of 10 vendors to approach
- Ticket prices:
    - Purchase Community members= $3/ea
    - General Public= $5/ea
    - Disability centric groups= free

Request to house *This Body's Heart* in Purchase College's Dance Theatre Lab

Project Summary: *This Body's Heart* is part of the senior project of senior Arts Management student Sonya Rio-Glick. Running an hour long including a ten minute intermission, *This Body's Heart* consists of six pieces of dance that each tell a story of experience with physical disability. As of 10/25/19, *This Body's Heart* is comprised of a 14 person production team, Project Advisor and Arts Management faculty Janis Astor, and 17 dancers with a range of dance experience. *This Body's Heart* has an operating budget of $2,200 and is funded by a combination of grants, community partnerships, and ticket sales*. The process is chronicled on instagram @thisbodysheart.

**Tickets will be $3 for Purchase community members and $5 for the general public with specialized group pricing for groups of individuals with disabilities.*

Dates Requested: Monday, April 13 - Sunday April 19th, 2020

- 04/13/20: Load In
- 04/14/20 - 04/15/20: Tech set up, rehearsals, and cue to cue
- 04/16/20: Finish Cue to Cue, Dress rehearsal
- 04/17/20: Opening. House opens at 7 PM, 7:30 Curtain, Audience talkback 8:30-9 PM
- 04/18/20: Performances at 3 PM and 7:30 PM
    - House opens at 2:30, 3 PM Curtain, Audience talkback 4-4:30 PM
    - House opens at 7 PM, 7:30 Curtain, Audience talkback 8:30-9 PM
- 04/19/20: Closing and Strike
    - House opens at 2:30, 3 PM Curtain, Audience talkback 4-4:30 PM
    - Strike: Cast & Crew called to Strike 5PM- finish

Production Team:

- Sonya Rio-Glick, Arts Management '20: Director/Choreographer/Performer
- Alena Brocker, Sociology '21: Producer/Co-Choreographer
- Leslie Merced, BFA Dance '20: Dance Captain
- Mona Sewell, Arts Management '21: Fall Stage Manager
- Paola Solís, Theatre & Performance: Stage Management '22: Spring Stage Manager *(tentative)*
- Ashley Tasch, Arts Management '22: Assistant Stage Manager/Assistant Lighting Designer
- Otto Martinian, D/T Lighting Design '21: Lighting Designer
- Nicole Silwinski, D/T Lighting Design '21: Light Board Operator
- Mya Forbes, Music Composition '22: Sound Editor

- Madison Hitchcock, Purchase College Conservatory of Music: Live Sound Engineer *(tentative)*
- Jamie Lerner, Sociology ‘20: Scenic and Props Designer
- Elizabeth Shein, Psychology ‘21: Costume Designer
- Lea Jaffe, BFA Film ‘21: Videographer
- Gabby Carnevale, Graphic Design/Arts Management ‘21: Graphic Designer/Social Media

Credentials: The resume’s of the individuals who will be working in/with the equipment within the Dance Theatre Lab over the tech and performance period are below for reference. This includes that of the director, though she will not be manipulating the space/equipment as she is performing; the fall stage manager*; the lighting designer; the assistant stage manager/assistant lighting designer; and the Light Board Operator, in that order. The involvement of the Spring Stage Manager* and Live Sound Engineer are still being confirmed, but their resumés will be sent immediately upon confirmation.

**Our current (Fall) Stage Manager is studying abroad in Spring 2020. As such, a second (Spring) Stage Manager will resume all management responsibilities through Strike on 04/19 and the following Post-Mortem. To ensure a smooth transition, Spring personnel will shadow Fall Personnel at towards the end of the Fall 2019 Semester*

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