

*It's Not That Simple: A Complex Journey of an MFA Applied Project*

by

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## ABSTRACT

*It's Not That Simple: A Complex Journey of an MFA Applied Project* discusses the experience of graduate student, Molly W. Schenck. Schenck's applied project, *It's Not That Simple*, was an interdisciplinary dance theatre performance piece that challenges rape culture on college campuses. While the focus of the applied project was this performance, it was the obstacles and highlights that were related to the project that made the journey memorable. This paper will discuss the history and evolution of *It's Not That Simple*, the creative process, the research, the trajectory of the project, and reflections on the journey.

## DEDICATION

This bound document is dedicated to all who have been involved with and supported *It's Not That Simple* from the past, present, and future.

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## ***It's Not That Simple: A Complex Journey of an MFA Applied Project***

The journey to my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) applied project began in 2008, junior year of my undergraduate career, when I began searching for an MFA Dance degree program. I completed three auditions in 2009 and was rejected from each school. Over the following three years, I altered my career path and through a series of serendipitous events, I ended up at Arizona State University for a job with the Herberger Institute. I was thrilled when I learned about their creative practices focused dance program – it felt as if I was destined to be here. Being accepted into an MFA program was a dream that a few years ago seemed so unobtainable; yet, here I am a few months from graduating wondering if this journey was worth the employee discounted price. In this document, I will highlight the journey of creating my applied project, *It's Not That Simple*, by discussing its history, the creative development process, the research, and where the project will go next. In many ways, the development of this specific project reinforces the evolution of my artistic values and creative practice during my graduate studies

### **BEGINNINGS AND EVOLUTIONS**

Aren't humans fascinating? The material they supply for inspiration is –for better or worse - never ending. It is this curiosity for human behavior and ethos that cultivates the beginnings of all my creative frameworks. These frameworks are manipulated in my collaborative rehearsal process and developed into purposefully packaged, full-bodied, semi-devised, experimental dance theatre products. The purpose of my process and products are rooted in finding the best version of each individual who is in or observes the work by increasing personal awareness on a journey towards self-actualization. This



results in a pleasantly chaotic and commanding performance environment for audiences to immerse themselves in whether it's in a black box theatre, activated studio, or some other container in the world. The performers take ownership of the product through this process by making new choices on a regular basis and being able to stand-alone or in a crowd on stage.

I first truly noticed the transformational power of performance in 2008 when I created a performance titled *It's Not That Simple* with the purpose to raise awareness about sexual assault on a college campus. After the final dress rehearsal, the performers seemed unusually quiet and disengaged. They shared with me how heavy the show had weighed on them. Some said they had experienced repeated dreams that were "borderline nightmares" in which they were the characters they portrayed. A woman who played a victim/survivor dreamed she was being chased by her attacker. A man who played a bystander dreamed he was witnessing an assault and, when reaching out to intervene, his hands turned to sand. Three years later, I decided to re-create the performance and study the impact it had on the cast, crew, and audience through a mixed methods research approach. I presented the findings of this study at a national conference for educators who focus on violence prevention in schools and colleges across the country. They were quite interested in the detailed information about the performers' experience with a work about sexual assault because it fills the gap in the current research about how the performers are impacted by staging work like this. This inspired me to continue with the project because it combined my interests in social justice, higher education, and the arts.

### **It's Not That Simple (2008)**

In the fall of 2007, I received a work merit award to focus on a special project with the Safe Campus Project (an initiative at the University of Maine). In a conversation with the director of the Safe Campus Project, she and I decided that the special project would incorporate my interests in the performing arts and tie directly into the purpose of the office. This is where *It's Not That Simple* was first conceived.

I spent the first four months gathering information for the performance. I wrote thirteen versions of the script before the final product. I took full ownership of the production, created, and found monologues for the show, and developed original choreography. I placed all of this work in the hands of the performers to bring to life. I worked closely with each duet, soloist, and the ensemble to ensure everyone knew every step and every line; it was a very hands-on approach. I was motivated solely by the product and pushed this performance and the performers to the best of my ability. I consider this rehearsal process to be aligned with a traditional actor/dancer and director/choreographer relationship where the performers are asked to execute movement and text exactly as the director/choreographer wants; I call this a “cookie cutter approach.” Upon reflection of the work and this approach, I found the weakest moments in *It's Not That Simple (2008)* were when the performers tried to portray a scene or experience exactly as I asked. This was one of the last times I used this approach in a rehearsal process.

### **It's Not That Simple (2011)**

The experiences I had with *It's Not That Simple (2008)* are something I carried with me as I shifted my career path into higher education and decided to pursue a Masters in Education. I shared the observations I had from the original performance with my

graduate advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Allan. We decided that I would restage this performance and study the impact of it on the performers and the audience through a mixed methods research approach. I developed a pre- and post-test for the audience, cast, and crew and the reflection questions that the cast and crew wrote about in journals.

I took what I considered a more “relaxed” approach when working with the performers in *It's Not That Simple (2011)*. I went into rehearsal with less material and tried to bring out the best of the performers’ abilities by allowing the materials to be manipulated in the rehearsal process. The overall process aligned with my values as an artist, which made the overall process smoother. This was partially due to the graduate work I went through at the same time in counseling and advising. Because of my work in counseling and advising, I was able to work with group dynamics in the rehearsal process to build a strong ensemble that allowed for more fluid communication between me and each of the cast members. The rehearsal process was more efficient and the product more successful because I let others into my creative process earlier. I spent less time emphasizing the performance than the first time and more time building a group that would be invested in the show, the message, and each other. In hindsight, this was the start of my collaborative creative process where I would aim to maximize each performers’ skill set in the work.

### **Schools and Colleges Organization for Prevention Educators**

In 2012, my former graduate school advisor asked me to present my research from *It's Not That Simple (2011)* at a conference on prevention education, specifically for the bystander intervention track. I presented the initial findings of my research along with a short video of the performance. In the audience were several arts educators who had

theatre groups in their local communities who did similar theatre for social change work. The feedback I received at that conference energized and inspired me to create *It's Not That Simple* again and study it deeper. Some conference attendees expressed that they already knew the impact of performance on social change. However, they found it intriguing to see how dance in particular could be used to address sexual violence on college campuses; it was a gap in the field of education. Another gap in the field they pointed out was insight into the performers' experience. Research exists about the impact performances for social change have on audiences, however, there is little to no research about the impact these performances have on the performers who spend a greater amount of time in the process and with the content of these works. These two gaps, pointed out by members of InterACT and Catharsis Productions, shaped where I initially took the performance and inquiry in 2016.

### ***It's Not That Simple* (2016) Preparation**

My mission in creating work is to devise provocative interdisciplinary performances that lead to community engagement with current concerns and issues that empower both the audience and performers. By activating these performance environments, my work challenges social norms and serves as an artistic vehicle to deliver a message. The first step towards reaching this goal was to further the development of *It's Not That Simple* by re-shaping it with a new cast in a new environment. This is also the first step for my future plans where I will contribute to the field of dance in higher education and my local community by finding innovative ways to fold education into performances. I planned to start a dance theatre company with two groups of performers, one local and one touring. The local performers will be heavily

involved in the artistic direction of the company by contributing in a collaborative creative process for performances in the local community. The touring group will concentrate on interpersonal violence education prevention performances in higher education and high schools around the country. Additionally, I planned to create a scrapbook script of these educational performances that could be utilized by drama directors and student affairs professionals to develop their own work to better serve their local community. I viewed *It's Not That Simple (2016)* as step one to achieve this plan and as an opportunity test out and refine my current approach to making dance theatre works.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARTISTIC VEHICLE

My artistic interests lay in the intersection of multiple art forms, specifically dance and theatre. This overlap began in my undergraduate program where I was studying theatre and trying to sneak as much dance as possible into the productions I directed. I created two “one-act plays” in my undergraduate degree: *It’s Not That Simple* (2008) and *Finger Painting [for grown-ups]* (2009). Through the rehearsal process, an interdisciplinary structure emerged where the two disciplines, dance and theatre, supported each other through using movement to say what words cannot and vice versa.

In *Finger Painting [for grown-ups]* (2009), I instilled my own movement, thoughts, and ideas on the performers expecting them to regurgitate what I had created. In one rehearsal, I broke away from the original scene in the script and asked the performers to ignore all of the directives I had given them. I asked them to say their lines, simply react to each other, and be present in the scene. By allowing the performers to act naturally, I was then able to edit and manipulate what they did through improvisation into the final performance. I began to realize how improvisation and working collaboratively benefitted the development and performance by effectively communicating the message of the work.

### **This History of the Artistic Vehicle**

In the Spring of 2012, I decided to take a few classes from Arizona State University for fun. I missed being in the classroom, and thought a few fun online classes would satisfy my craving for a creative learning environment. One class I took had a huge impact on filling gaps in my previous research. It was a class on writing in the popular culture style of author Malcolm Gladwell, which can be described as a mix of

intriguing research and stories blended together in an informal, conversational tone. For the final paper, we were to research any topic we wanted and compose a piece in Gladwell's style. I used this opportunity to look further into the arts and social change.

Through this final paper, I was able to find some freedom that I was not able to find previously in my research, and because of this I saw a new framework and vocabulary emerge. Looking back on this now, I can see connections between my interests in the arts, creativity, education, and social change. Below are the final paragraphs from the paper:

“The emphasis of the arts being taught in schools at a young age is strong and creativity is high; however, that emphasis steadily declines as students go through the education system. The arts are thought of as “natural talent” not something that could be taught like science or math. Students stop creating once they learn they are not creative and therefore many individuals have not partaken in creating artistic vehicles since they were children. The arts are a powerful tool for communities and are a necessity for changing human culture.

You are the audience, I am the performer, and there are plenty of individuals – all of whom, I have not met – working behind the scenes to support the importance of building a strong connection between the arts and social change. It is a safe environment to start and continue discussions about concerns in society, communities, and our lives. These artistic vehicles work best in small, intimate groups within each of our own communities where we know the culture and share concerns about rising issues. This is a large movement that needs to be created through lots of small performances of the arts. As a collective whole, those little

impacts in each of our communities can lead to social change within the human culture.”

My favorite idea to come from this is that of the artistic vehicle delivering a message of social change. I enjoy this image because the vehicle can take many shapes. For my applied project, the vehicle is a dance theatre performance filled with content surrounding the topic of sexual assault and interpersonal violence on a college campus.

### **Artistic Vehicle Test Drive: Experiencing a Collaborative Process From Within**

In the summer between my first and second year of graduate school, I went to a one-week intensive choreography workshop with New York City based dance/choreographer, Susan Marshall. Marshall has been running her award winning company for over twenty-five years. During the week of the intensive, I was in the role of a “dancer” and not a “choreographer,” and I gained enormous insights through observation and experience with several choreographers in a short period of time. One of the biggest takeaways was how imperative the dancer and choreographer relationship is in the rehearsal process. I realized I enjoyed the choreographic process when I, as a dancer, was given agency in the choreography because I felt my voice mattered in the piece. I felt empowered as a dancer when the choreographer would ask for our input and give us the freedom to make choices throughout the piece. I greatly appreciated this as a dancer. This realization made me think twice about how I go through the rehearsal process as a director/choreographer. Do I empower the performers or oppress them?

The experience of having control over the movement and then allowing the choreographer to be the final decision-maker was very gratifying as a dancer. Observing Marshall was the first up-close experience I had with a professional choreographer who



has a clear philosophy and approach that I could relate to as both a dancer and choreographer. She has developed a collaborative approach over her career in dance and was able to share her wisdom of over 20 years of experience. I found spending this time with her beneficial in clarifying my philosophy and approach as a choreographer. Her collaborative creative approach and process was one that I had not seen clearly outlined before. This workshop was useful for me because it led me to make different choices as a choreographer based on a greater understanding of the choreographer and dancer relationship.

### **Customizing the Artistic Vehicle: Creative Practices in Graduate School**

Taking four semesters of creative practices was the highlight of my first two years of graduate school because I had the time to play and refine my process and practices. I experienced a variety of methods that continually honed my creative process. The first significant experience was the use of improvisation in an ensemble. In these dances, the group had predetermined boundaries that we navigated through and continuously found a variety of compositions based on those boundaries. I had not used improvisation on a regular basis in this way, and it was amazing to watch the group become a cohesive collective in a short period of time through simply moving with each other. This experience made me realize that I had become accustomed to looking at teambuilding through an educational framework instead of an artistic lens. The aforementioned realization gave me permission to blend my experience in higher education with the arts. Building improvisational scores together created the same benefits as those teambuilding or ensemble building experiences that I used in student affairs. Below I will discuss in

more detail the development of my creative process in graduate school and teaching creative practices with non-dance majors.

**Creative Work in the First Year.** In my first year of graduate school, my main goal was to create pieces efficiently because I had very little time to develop them due to my personal schedule. My hope was to create an effective, efficient creative process formula to use where I knew I would be satisfied with the final product. The first piece I created was an extension of a solo I had performed as part of my MFA dance interview. I did not create any new material for this performance; I simply gave the performers raw material from the solo and then asked them to insert some of their own work. This was my first attempt at a conscious collaborative process, however it did not work as I had anticipated. The piece became an array of snippets of my own choreography with random interjections of other pieces created by the performers. The next piece I performed was a duet exploring the relationship of text and movement. In the rehearsal process, we accomplished this by pulling apart form and content. While I do not consider either of these dance works successful, they were good explorations of content and form in dance theater pieces. Through both pieces, I let the collaborative creative process get the best of me in that *my voice* was not always heard. This epiphany is in the forefront of my mind as I move forward in other collaborative endeavors.

**Creative Practices in the Second Year.** In my second year of graduate school, I once again worked on one dance piece for the fall graduate show and one dance piece for the spring graduate show. Both pieces stemmed from the same idea and allowed me to experiment with various levels of choreographic control.

In the first piece, I decided to let go of a lot of control in the development of the piece. I created eight 15-second segments of movement that I gave to the dancers and asked them to double its length. For this piece, I concentrated on generating material not on the editing part of the creative process. The piece was successful because it allowed me to show what half of my process looked like as a final product, however there was a lot of potential in that piece that was not realized until it was performed.

To fully realize the potential of this dance piece, I decided to continue working on it to see where it would go if I let go of control in some ways but regained it in other ways. Many performers withdrew from the piece, but those that returned to the work were very dedicated, which made me realize that commitment is one of the most valuable characteristics I seek out in performers. This process also allowed me to see the piece for what it truly was, and what it could be, instead of what I thought it should be.

The second version of the piece took a completely unexpected direction because I allowed the creative process to become a collaborative experience, allowing the meaning to emerge by actively involving the performers as choreographic contributors and situating myself as an active editor. I have observed that my process is quite cyclical on the macro level (the types of pieces I develop and work on over the years) and on a micro level (the process that goes into each piece). I find that I reach a point in my creative process where I just need to sketch out everything that the performers and I have created and put it together to see what needs to be added and taken away. For me, the most important part is what I choose to take away. I try to generate a lot of material so that way I have plenty to pull from.

**Teaching Creative Practices.** Teaching creative practices gave me the opportunity to not only observe the development of creative processes among my students but to also gain a greater understanding of my own creative practices. The advice I gave was often the same advice I would give to myself. Sometimes, I could see things in their work that I could not see in my own.

In developing the curriculum for this course, I realized the design of the class relates directly to my own personal creative practice and process when developing a piece. In class, the first portion of the semester was used as a period of time where students can explore movement and find new ways of moving. This movement development is where I begin in my own creative process. I begin with the contents of my box and use that to develop series of movement sequences. From there, I analyze the material I have generated. In my class, after we explored movement development, we began to look at some overarching themes that fold into the movement development process. Those ideas included: vulnerability, success versus failure, creative barriers, and creativity in education. In the class, we discuss these topics. In my own practice, this discussion is an internal dialogue where I analyze my current place in my creative practice to best determine how I move forward. The next step in my class was to look at the compositional part of creating a dance, which is the same next step in my own choreographic process. I have found a true faith in the evolving work by observing my students explore their own processes. The faith in the performers allows me to take risks and have confidence in them. The final step in any of my work – in the classroom, in a performance, or on my own – is letting there be a real ownership of the work by giving the performers full agency over the material.

## **Finding My Artistic Voice**

I have been searching to find my artistic voice throughout graduate school. In conversation with Claudia La Rocco, former *New York Times* dance critic, during the fall of 2014 we discussed finding one's voice within his or her work. I sought her advice after struggling to find my voice in the development of *Finger Painting [for grown-ups]* (2014), specifically the marketing components of it. She suggested looking at many other resources and artists' work to help discover my own voice. She also mentioned the idea of having a multitude of voices as my voice, meaning for each show I create I could use a tone that supports the vibe of the performance. That could be my voice; the ever-changing voice. In my conversation with her, she also brought to my attention to how the work I create in non-proscenium settings seems to be stronger. She challenged my choice of always settling for working in a proscenium setting when it is not serving my work. This statement was a strong reminder for me to thoroughly examine every aspect of my creative choices.

## **Driving the Artistic Vehicle: A Semi-Devised Approach to Creating Dance Theatre**

In finding my voice during *Finger Painting [for grown-ups]* (2014), I began to lightly mock the traditional theater and dance processes. Through this gentle mockery of the traditional performing arts processes, I made some comments about my work not being devised theater, but a semi-devised piece. I was not comfortable using the word "devised" because I was not "devising" in a pure sense. Devising theater is a collaborative creative process where the performers create original work, typically with someone in the role of the director or decision-maker who says what stays and what goes. Traditionally there is no script available prior to the process of devising a new work. For

all installments of *Finger Painting [for grown-ups]* and *It's Not That Simple*, I came in to rehearsals with a script already prepared. For me, devising is this idea of planting a seed that the group as a whole will nurture until it blooms into a performance. In what I am calling a semi-devised approach, I come in with the framework or scaffolding that the ensemble will use to create the work. This allows me to have a stronger voice in making the work but permits the performers to have ownership of the work.

The semi-devised approach to creating dance theatre gave me the permission I needed to blend the different roles I have and experiences I carry into one place. The semi-devised approach is a place where everything melds together for me. I can pull from educational lenses, movement development tools, and theatrical modalities to create a holistic approach to developing performances that are well suited for a college campus population. The semi-devised approach has the flexibility to accommodate the educational, the artistic, and the social justice aspects of the work.

## **CREATIVE RESEARCH AND PROCESS**

The creative research and process for *It's Not That Simple* (2016) came out of my experience developing both the 2008 and 2011 versions. Each iteration of the performance addressed trends in the field of sexual violence education. This field seems to have emerged about when I started college in 2005. At this point, the field addressed this topic with basic information regarding sexual assault and rape on college campuses (ex. statistics, prevention measures, etc.). The first version of *It's Not That Simple* broadly addressed the concerns around sexual violence in higher education. When I

revisited the work in 2011, the focus of the educational field was on bystander intervention; *It's Not That Simple* reflected this trend. The content was created out of news stories and scholarly research around the topic of bystander intervention in sexually violent situations on college campuses. The sources for inspiration were much easier to find in 2011 than earlier in 2007-2008.

For 2016, the sources for inspiration were beyond abundant. Electronic and print media always had headlines related to celebrities being accused or coming out as victims of sexual violence, college campuses were making the news regularly for protests around rape and rape culture, and the scholarly research on the topic had expanded greatly since I last looked at it. Sexual violence has become more prevalent in the mainstream media – although, I do not believe there has been an increase in acts of sexual violence, simply, more discussion around it. The biggest news stories about sexual violence and the research around it directly impacted the development and content of *It's Not That Simple* (2016).

### **Research and Writing**

Three themes emerged throughout the nine months of developing the work: humor, gender, and hope. These three themes had popped up through the nine-year trajectory of *It's Not that Simple*, but I was not able to make sense of them until this edition of the show. Perhaps this was due to perspective, new lenses, maturity, all of the above, or none of the above. Regardless, these elements created the perfect combination for taking risks with this version of the work.

A piece of feedback I received from the 2011 version from my theatre history professor was, what if you could find a way to make the performance funny. I've seen

this done before, and I always thought it was just corny. But the use of satire and dark humor were more interesting to me this time around because they resonate with audience members in ways that slap-stick comedy does not. I found a lot of inspiration for this rendition of *It's Not that Simple* from comedians. Comedians have a powerful platform because they are able to use humor to draw attention to issues in society. I especially was drawn to how comedians use dark humor to talk about sexual violence. I was watching an older comedy special that featured only female comedians. I was struck by how each of those comedians talked about rape, rapists, and gender issues – something I don't often associate with stand-up comedy. I started looking for more male comedians who also addressed these issues and was able to find some poignant moments. Dane Cook (2009) talks about how people throw the word 'rape around' too much. Luis CK (2015) has a bit about how he thought he was respecting boundaries of his date who didn't seem interested in his sexual advances and thought he wasn't interested in her because he didn't push those boundaries. He states in his commentary about this that he wasn't going to rape her on the off-chance she might be into being violated like that. And Amy Schumer (2013) discusses her belief that everyone has been 'a little bit raped.' These – and several more – became inspiration for finding the humor in a heavy situation.

Throughout the original performances of *It's Not that Simple* to today, I have been interested in the male experience and role in work around sexual violence. I remember speaking with a colleague who has created some original physical theatre pieces about sexual violence; she said how she will never be able to fully understand the male perspective in this. While I agree with this, that doesn't mean I ignore it. I am quite fascinated with the male perspective and was cognizant of it throughout the entire process



of the development of this show. Jackson Katz (2015), a leader in the field of the male role in sexual violence education, believes that sexual violence is a male problem so therefore only men can fix it. I struggle with this notion because I believe women can do a lot for this issue too. Since sexual violence impacts everyone, it is everyone's problem, which is why I brought attention to it in the work.

One question I always get stuck on in this work is how I show hope or a positive outcome within all this negativity. I have never been fully satisfied with how *It's Not that Simple* has ended because I want viewers to walk away with a sense of hope and that they can do something about sexual violence. The 2008 and 2011 versions both ended with this forced dance sequence that always made the performers look to be magically all better after a very heavy forty-minute show. There was inauthenticity in this that I have never been fully happy with, and I have faith there is a way to end the show with feelings of genuine hope. In my quest for finding the positive in the negative, I discovered the term 'post-traumatic growth,' which was developed to explain how people can survive and thrive after a traumatic experience. This concept, along with ideals around resiliency, were brought into the devising process to explore positive outcomes from negative situations.

### **Interviews with Student Affairs Professionals**

In addition to understanding sexual violence on college campuses at a national level, part of the research was to understand the community in Arizona and at Arizona State University (ASU) to ensure the success of the show. The previous two versions were created in at the University of Maine, which is made up of entirely different demographics than ASU. I chose to get to know the campus community by speaking with

campus professionals who work with this topic and the educational components on a daily basis.

My first point of contact was a woman who I met in a class I took, *Relationship Violence and Theatre for Social Change*. We talked about the efforts happening on campus and the current trends in educational approaches. She shared with me that their office's initiatives are dedicated to sexual wellness and healthy relationships – leaving the negative topics of rape and sexual assault behind to focus on the positive. She also expressed how there are many student groups on campus that stem from different perspectives and philosophies on how to address this growing crisis of rape culture on college campuses who support the initiatives. I thought it was quite fascinating how the campus initiatives for sexual violence education were so vast that the opinions and perspectives differed greatly. Due to the size of ASU, I thought it was probably worthwhile to have multiple student groups aligning with the same mission – to reduce sexual violence – even though each one may approach it in their own way.

A cast member connected me with her supervisor in the provost's office who oversees the campus-wide sexual violence prevention initiatives. The supervisor and I talked about how their offices are seeing an increase in reporting, which is good, even though it looks like the campus has become more violent. They believe this increase in numbers reported is due to more education in the freshman residence halls and with Greek Life. They have expressed that they support the use of performing arts in the effort to reduce sexual violence on college campuses by supporting groups like (Dis)Orientation. However, they struggle to understand how the performing arts can reach a larger audience.

The aforementioned conversations took place in the middle of the rehearsal process and were affirming because they made me feel that the performance was on the right track to meet the needs of the community. The conversations were energizing because I felt the expansive reach of the performance as I heard other's excitement about the creation of the work. The support from people whom I had recently met was heartwarming and motivated me towards completion of the project.

### **Rehearsal Process**

In the 2008 and 2011 version of *It's Not That Simple*, the rehearsal process lasted only a month. It was broken up with small rehearsals (e.g., just a solo, duet, monologue, or single vignette rehearsed at a time) at first and slowly the rehearsals would build into full ensemble rehearsals. I did this for a few reasons: 1.) to allow performers to get comfortable with a tough topic in smaller groups, 2.) to allow time for performers to process the content of their scene(s) before hearing how their content fit into the rest of the show, and 3.) to reduce the amount of time they needed to commit to the rehearsal process and performance to prevent burnout and desensitization to the content as a defense mechanism. The holistic approach to rehearsals aligns with my values of finding balance.

For the 2016 version, I developed the work over a period of about ten months. This was a huge challenge for me because I do not believe an ensemble should be submersed in this content so deeply for so long. Therefore, I consulted with counselors and trauma experts on methods to reduce the risk of secondary or vicarious trauma over the long rehearsal period. I incorporated their advice throughout the rehearsal process and was quite forthcoming with the performers on previous interactions and observations of

performers in this show. After consulting with other professionals, I chose to incorporate self-care and grounding techniques into the rehearsal process regularly and to separate form and content to reduce the time performers would need to spend grappling with tough – often triggering – content. I also chose to stop rehearsing for nearly a month about halfway through the process as a method of self-care. We started with what I refer to as invisible work, then went into a devising process to create new material, and then edited the material to what was necessary for the final work. Below, I will go outline this process and how it influenced the development of the work.

**Invisible Work.** The beginning third of rehearsal period was dedicated to what I refer to as invisible work. Declan Donnellan (2002) defines this portion of an actor’s work as doing periphery work in rehearsals such as vocal exercises that will never be performed on stage. I define invisible work slightly differently to include everyone, not just actors, in an interdisciplinary cast. For me, invisible work lays a solid foundation with the group before starting to work deeply on the content of the show. I used this time to develop a healthy team dynamic, a shared vocabulary within the group, and build up basic movement and vocal skills since there was such a range of skills within the group. It was important to me for the performers to feel comfortable in the way they expressed the characters. Below, I will highlight a few examples of my favorite invisible work moments.

A straightforward team building exercise I had the ensemble do was a circling trust falls. I did this partially to build their understanding of contact improvisation and their awareness of their own weight, and also to build a solid team. The performers would stand in a circle with one person in the center who would “fall” towards the outer circle

and be passed from one person to another. As the circle and the center person grew confident in this practice, the circle would widen. I saw this as a sign the group was really beginning to trust each other, which allowed us to take more risk with the performance.

In developing a shared vocabulary, I tried to look at how we discuss movement, text, and composition so we could understand each other when creating new work. One of my favorite games to play is commonly referred to by performers as ‘make a new choice.’ It can be a frustrating experience for the performers but most are almost always up for the challenge. We would start with some movement material – often generated by a prompt given to the performers – and then I would start to choreographically manipulate it. The performers would only go through a few movements before I ask them to pause. I would then tell them to either keep what they had done or make a new choice and in some rare cases ask them to do something specifically. Not only was it a way to develop a vignette for the show, but it was also a way for me to get to know their choice making habits and for them to get to know my preferences.

A final example of invisible work was developing basic movement and vocal skills. I would lead the performers through a series of warm-ups: movement, then vocal, and eventually simultaneously as a way to situate the group in the present. The movement warm-up was comprised of Bartineiff fundamentals, proprioceptive neuro-muscular facilitation sequences, and conditioning for strength, cardiovascular capacity, and flexibility. The vocal exercises were based in release techniques of how to allow sound to resonate within the body instead of forcing it out. We started to combine all of the aforementioned warm-ups so performers could work on speaking as they moved. It was

important for me to set up rituals that would increase performers comfort with each other and in the space.

**Devising.** While there was a script from the 2008 and 2011 versions, it was still necessary to develop new material to address regional and national trends that have been brought forward. I asked cast members to bring in material that inspired them and to create new material. We used several methods to create new material. One particular method that was incredible helpful near the end of the process was the use of moment work. Moment work is a technique used by Tectonic Theatre Company (2015). It is a way to pull apart form and content to explore the structure of a piece without the content interfering. For example, we would look at how we can use the architecture in the room and later see how that exploration informed someone else's creation. I would pose questions to the group such as, how could they use the wall to expand their movement vocabulary? This resulted in new material that could be incorporated in the show. Each week we would play with a different element. My two favorites elements to explore were architecture and lights. These were my favorite to explore because so often the attention is on bodies in a large space and lighting them well; not necessarily how they relate to the larger space and how lighting can be used with them. While the moments created around these elements were not officially used in the show, they fed the process in ways that we did not know we needed at the time.

My absolute favorite moment in the devising work was a day where I was only working with three performers, and I had very different ideas about what I wanted to work on with them. So, I decided to have one transpose a song on the piano, another make a solo based on a quote about a caterpillar, and the third make a poem with me. I

had no idea what would happen with these ‘dance crumbs’ as we would later call them. After spending about 20 minutes working independently, it was time to show what we had done. After the solo dancer shared what she created, I asked the other two performers to layer their work on top of it. This resulted in the first moment where I finally saw *It’s Not That Simple* (2016) take shape. I got chills (I never get chills). It was a moment of pure serendipity that led to a one of the strongest moments in the show and the closest thing to a satisfying ending that I have experienced in working on this over the past nine years.

I also used the devising heavy portion of the rehearsal process to bring in ideas that I had not completely worked out on my own. For example, we explored how the performance would end with hope before knowing how the performance truly began. I brought in the ideas of post-traumatic growth and resiliency. We must have spent several weeks in rehearsal exploring how to best perform post-traumatic growth in clear and effective ways. The most striking moment for me was when I initially brought in the idea that something positive could come out of something negative. I realized I was up against some personal resistance from the cast; they had a hard time accepting that something positive could come from something negative. I actually spoke with my counselor to discuss how to deal with resistance within a group setting and unpack how unsettling it was to learn the group I’m working with on a piece that should ignite social change didn’t think there was hope for victim/survivors of sexual assault. She and I discussed how to work with resistance in productive ways. It inspired a new vignette that resulted in another form of resistance, a creative block. The conversation around this creative block

was time well spent in rehearsals. I will discuss this piece further in the section of ‘what was left out’ of the performance.

## **Showings**

We had four showings for *It's Not That Simple* (2016). Each one held a distinct purpose in the process and ultimately informed the final product. The first showing in May 2015 was centered around old material. The second showing presented new material generated in the rehearsal process and was performer driven. The third showing was a hybrid of the previous two showings. The fourth showing presented the shape I ultimately thought the show was going to take. I will discuss the process of each showing below by breaking down each one into how it relates to where we were in the process at that point.

**Showing One: Flushing Out Old Material.** Since the last performance in 2011, I have had dozens of ideas of what else should be in the next version of *It's Not That Simple*. I felt the need to start this process by seeing the old material taken on by new performers and trying out a few new vignettes as well. This greatly informed what vignettes were more important than others. It was a surreal experience to (in a matter of six hours) recreate and add to show that was performed nearly five years prior. As the performers took on these daunting monologues and scenes for the first time, I was almost overwhelmed with how clear the influence of the previous cast members showed throughout the work. With this information, I found which vignettes needed to stay, which ones could be developed further, and which ones we could let go of because they were either outdated or didn't fuel this edition. It was also the first time for many performers to dive into intense scene work. We had discussed how this performance has impacted past performers, and I saw this intensity start to creep into the 2016 performers'



experience right away. I noted that there was something about talking about it (i.e. the text in the performance) that has a greater impact on the heaviness of the performance than the movement. There's something about the abstraction of movement that allows performers to disconnect from the show's content that the use of text does not allow. I assume this has something to do with how concrete the spoken narratives are and how abstract the movement is. From the information I took from the first showing, such as physical contact with each performer, I knew where the next showing needed to go.

**Showing Two: Trying All New Material.** The content of showing two was determined heavily by the performers because they generated the material we shared. Much of the showing centered around the idea of post-traumatic growth and resiliency. I received feedback that showing one felt like the beginning and showing two felt like the end, which posed the question, what happened in the middle? There were also comments about how the second showing explored traumatic growth, but without seeing the trauma in the showing, traumatic growth was difficult to imagine. The other informative part of showing two was what content was missing from the first showing. Vignettes that had become old or outdated to me left the strongest impression on the observers. I had not repeated any materials from showing one to two purposefully to see what vignettes were necessary to add back into the piece.

After showing number two, I was feeling burnt out and was observing some disengagement from the cast. I decided to take a month-long break from the rehearsal process with the cast. Prior to performers having a few weeks off from rehearsals, I wanted to have deep conversations about the piece with smaller groups of the performers. This was to allow me to figure out how to redirect the flow of the rehearsal process and

determine the next steps. The answers to these questions were to inform me in the semi-devised approach and in self-care practices that were a part of the rehearsal process. Additionally, the answers were a way to re-engage the performers with the piece and topic by focusing on how this project is bigger than just what we are doing in rehearsal. I wanted to bring their attention to the large cultural shift we are trying to ignite, the impact the shift may have on the audience, and how it may impact them personally. This proved to be a very useful tool in re-engaging the group and helped me determine where we needed to go next. I honored many of the requests that came out of the smaller group discussions and they became highlights in the performance such as the opening dance sequence and the song performed by three cast members. The conversations challenged me both personally and professionally to develop choreography and song lyrics. The conversations gave the performers a sense of agency in the work. In previous conversations with the performers, they had said feeling a sense of ownership of the work was one of the things they appreciated most about this process.

**Showing Three: Letting the Editor In.** Showing three was impactful for the performers because they were finally able to see the show taking shape. Sometimes I forget when working with theatre folks that they are used to having a script available from day one. I work in a more traditional dancer environment (i.e. without a script). While this showing was good for the performers, I found it a bit dull. For me, this showing was what I thought it would be and, unfortunately, it was not very informative for me. The showing also left off mid-performance, which was quite difficult because it left the ensemble in a heavy state of mind. I could sense the unresolved feelings in the room after the showing, something I experienced in earlier versions of the show. I could tell the whole process

was wearing on the performers. For me, this sense of heaviness from the cast always makes me feel a bit guilty for putting them through the *It's Not That Simple* gauntlet. Simultaneously, it was a reminder of why I was doing this work. With this reminder, I was able to start to pick and choose what vignettes should stay and what vignettes should go.

**Showing Four: Finalizing the Content.** The last showing came at the end of a six-hour rehearsal day – just like we began the process. The performers had scripts in their hands, text, music, blocking, and movement for everything. It was a rough stumble through for the final showing but some things really started to pop. I felt a little too close to the performance at this time to really know what the show really was so I opened up the last rehearsal to about a dozen people to join and watch.

After the showing, a few audience members stayed for a short feedback conversation. I saw this as an opportunity for the performers to get a taste of future post performance talk-backs. I have always included an opportunity after the show for the audience and performers to discuss the experience because it often proves to be equally if not more effective than the performance itself. Those that stayed for the talk-back shared their own stories of sexual violence, gave performance critiques, answered the performers' questions, and posed questions of their own. It was the perfect sampling of a real *It's Not That Simple* talk-back.

The performers and I had a discussion after the mini-talk-back that was very comforting for me. They expressed how shocked they were that showing number four had had such an impact on the audience. Allowing “outsiders” into the showing gave the ensemble a new perspective that was reassuring to them. I also knew from previous

experience that this was what was necessary to re-engage the performers by seeing how they were having such a large impact on the audience very quickly.

I should mention that at this point (a month before the show) we were kicked out of our performance venue on campus and had no prospects for another space on campus due to higher education bureaucracy. It was extremely upsetting to have my MFA applied project jeopardized the day we were supposed to move into the space. In addition to my feelings of hurt and disappointment, the students involved in this production were very confused and angry about what happened. The designers were the ones most impacted by this unfortunate event because they had been working on their design plans specifically for the original space. There were several very large redesigns of the show that happened as a result of losing the original performance space. Unfortunately, the redesigns the production crew had to take on took most of my energy. At the time, I was concerned the show would suffer because my focus was taken away from the performance to handle the logistics. I noticed a shift in the performers at this time that was reflected in their journals.

### **Journaling and the Creative Process**

Throughout the creation of the work, journaling became a place for the performers to collect and share their thoughts. When we journaled mid-rehearsal process on the longer days, there was a real sense of groundedness from the performers in rehearsal after pausing to collect their thoughts. There was a sense of calm; it was almost a cleansing ritual for people to write down their thoughts collectively. In future editions of *It's Not That Simple*, I would personally journal more with the cast. I kept plenty of

notes here and there, but I never dated them. I would have been curious to journal my thoughts along with theirs to compare my mindset with theirs.

**Director's verbal vomit.** While I did not really journal as regularly as the performers did, there was rant I went on and recorded. I will share an excerpt of it here.

“Rehearsals are going really well. I was paranoid that there was a pink elephant in the room because we have pulled apart form and content. Right now we are focusing on playing with different forms (improv, moment work, props, no text yet) and later we can layer on and/or fill the forms with content of sexual assault and rape on college campuses. It has resulted in work I never thought I would make. I do feel like I'm wasting their time focusing on stuff that isn't going to make it to stage - but it might. I don't know. I feel very unsure about this process because it is so different than other processes I have gone through with *It's Not That Simple* so far. [...] I've decided to really focus in on the ending of the show and the positive stuff that happens on the other end of sexual assault and rape. It has taken time to find any scholarly stuff to support it, but I found it by looking for resiliency and recovery for victim/survivors. I also pulled the top 10-20 positive emotions and we tried to stage those, but damn it is hard. The performers found it hard too. I think this is where it is going to be tricky. Since we as English speaking humans have a very limit vocabulary to speak about positive thing, I think that's part of the reason we are drawn to the negative, we have a better ability to express it in words. I also think it is somewhat human nature to be drawn towards the negative or dwell on it at least. So, the challenge is staging positive emotions in the context of a negative life event. Holy challenging, but it's going to be worth it I think in the long run. One performer said that she didn't think there could be any positive in the context of sexual assault and rape and I think that's the thinking that gets victims locked into the role of victims. I don't wish adversity on anyone, but what happens when someone overcomes adversity or goes through the process of dealing/healing around it, it can be a transformational experience. One phrase I read yesterday was posttraumatic growth as a goal instead of PTSD. I think that might be what needs to be staged. PTGrowth. It needs to be focused on critiquing society's reaction to rape and sexual assault., unpacking the intricacies of rape culture, and challenging the reasons why it exists. Otherwise, it is preaching to the choir. So the piece is becoming more of a critique of rape culture on college campuses (unpacking the systemic issue) and a vessel of hope for victims that it will get better. Also, I've had a few members of the group say they don't know anyone who has experience this...and I think they are in for a rude awakening. Some other radical views: I think more people have experienced this than they would like to think, I think more people [have] violated others than they are aware of (both of these because they don't know what it is, if the vocabulary isn't there then how does one talk about it/express it). To quote Amy Schumer (2013) “We've all been a little bit raped.” I think rape (and maybe all violence or a lot of violence) is a symptom of

white privilege or at least male privilege. Other questions and thoughts: how can one stage a collective rise when there always seems to be an oppressed and an oppressor. Men speaking from a point of male privilege that they need to be the bystander that intervenes - but isn't that removing agency and power from females? How can we empower females without males having to do it for us? How does this correlate to race?"

I still very much feel many of these conflicting thoughts. Because, as the joke has come to be, nothing about this topic is simple. I am reaching a point of concluding that there is no solution to sexual violence, which is likely why I am returning to work every few years in search for an answer.

### **The Final Weeks**

Three weeks before we opened, we still did not have a performance space. I was beginning to panic. I channeled the panicking by starting to write a letter to the dean and former director of the school to ask for the original space back when I received an email from a contact in the local downtown campus community saying there was a vacancy in one of the restaurants and I could have – the *whole* restaurant – for free. The funny thing is the day we got kicked off campus, I was in the restaurant with this contact discussing how she would like to put performances in empty downtown venues. I had specifically said to her as soon as my applied project was done I would be interested in pursuing this opportunity. Hours later I had lost my original performance venue for this work and was reaching out to her for one.

The restaurant was an absolutely amazing and oddly perfect gift. I shifted my perspective to 'we've been given the gift of a very well built set without having to pay for this scenic design.' I found the space incredibly daunting because I had no idea how I was going to take a performance created for a little black box theatre and place it in a

restaurant that had a massive bar in the middle of it. The space was a non-traditional venue that created a non-traditional perspective for the audience. Shifting performance venues was a huge challenge to undertake that I did not anticipate, yet it was like this new place was made for this show.

The two weeks leading up to the show were hell in actuality and epic in hindsight. I saw the new space where we would be performing almost exactly two weeks before we opened. One of the biggest challenges was letting go of the frustration associated with needing to find a new venue just weeks before we opened. I called upon two artist friends who I always seek out when challenged with rehearsal conundrums, Julie Rada and Joya Scott. Their wisdom during this horribly infuriating time combined with the talent of the performers was how the show came together so quickly.

**Reimagining The Whole Show.** I went to Julie for advice on how to transition a whole show to a new space in approximately 12 hours of rehearsal. She asked me, “how much do you trust your performers?” I said, “100 ... 98 percent.” From there she suggested the following methods for a semi-seamless transition into the new space: 1.) give the performers time in the new space to explore their bodies, 2.) ask the performers to run the show straight through without any new directions for them to solve problems on their own, 3.) ask each performer how much they can be pushed in the next week leading up to the performance, and 4.) finalize the script after steps one to three are accomplished.

While I believe all four things fed into the smooth transition into the space, the second piece of advice was the most useful. All the invisible work we did early on in the process came forward here; it was as if all those exercises trained the performers to take on a whole new space in a matter of hours. This confirmed my belief in the need for a period

of invisible work within the rehearsal process and allowing the performers to have ownership of the performance.

The second round of advice came from Joya Scott. We were in the last rehearsal before tech week and an additional showing. The piece was solid but it wasn't "popping" yet in the new space. Joya suggested doing a run of the show where the performers make new choices that are opposite of everything that they had done so far (this ultimately became known as the 'fun run'). That night in rehearsal, the performers warmed-up and ran the show for the final showing. Afterward, I re-warmed them up and shifted the conversation to how they were approaching the work. I asked them to make a few choices about how they would move through the space and vocalize their movement. I asked them to do so again making the opposite choices as the first round and then a third round that was the opposite of rounds one and two. I then asked them to complete a run of the show with this mentality. There was a long pause following this request. The ensemble expressed confusion and concern over making opposite choices when it came to characters sharing their personal stories. This stemmed from worries of possibly disrespecting those who had experienced sexual violence. However, the performers all knew rehearsal was a safe space to explore the topic. So they did. And it was absolutely incredible – almost surreal - to watch. I was able to see the performers go from making goofy decisions to taking calculated risks, and it blew me away. They found a groove that a few called "spiritual" after experiencing it. I was brought to tears with how they chose to end the work. Many of the discoveries the performers unlocked in that run stayed in the show. We refined the performance one more time after some notes, and that's what opened the next night. I cannot begin to put into words how grateful I am for the



performers. I cannot imagine going through this process with any other group. *It's Not That Simple* (2016) would not have been what it was if it wasn't for them.

### **Performance and Talk Back**

I was blown away by the sold-out, standing room only turnout each evening of the performance. I was worried that there wouldn't be any audience after this long process, but that was luckily not the case. The performers impressed me each evening taking on new energies with the show. I was proud of how they handled audience interactions and feedback after the show.

As with every iteration of *It's Not That Simple*, I am always floored by how powerful the conversation after the show is. As I reflect on the three versions of this performance, I am particularly struck with how forthcoming men were in the most recent edition. The males in the cast seem to be greatly impacted and inspired to continue this work. In the talk-backs with the audience, it was mostly men who spoke after the performances. This could, of course, be due to gender dynamics, but it's the attention to the male perspective in the role of sexual violence prevention in the work that allowed a safe space for men to share their own stories, reservations, and revelations around the topic. Throughout the rehearsal process, we stayed conscientious of the male role in preventing sexual violence. Several of men in the audience noted how they appreciated the male being acknowledged as something other than an oppressor. One man shared how he had been a victim of sexual violence; the performers noted his courage to share this with a room full of strangers. Sometimes I wonder if the whole purpose of a performance like this is to get a group of people in a room to talk about things after the fact. I question how powerful the performance needs to be for this to happen.

While I was pleased with the overall composition and performance of the work, I was left with a feeling that the show didn't end where it needed it; it felt unfinished because there is so much more to say. I feel that there needs to be one more collective call to action vignette at the end. I wanted to write a vignette call 'imagine a world without sexual violence,' and I struggled with it. I brought it into rehearsal and performers had a hard time imagining what a world without sexual violence looks like. I am hoping to be struck by the elusive creative genius soon to find a way to write that final moment in the show before our next staging of the show in April.

## **BEYOND THE APPLIED PROJECT**

*It's Not That Simple* (2016) turned into something much larger than any prior version, which was somewhat the purpose of restaging the performance in graduate school after taking several years off. I had not anticipated it becoming quite so multifaceted, but it did with great successes and a few great failures, too. Next, I will discuss how these aspects have acted as a springboard in taking the project further and the evolution of my creative practice.

### **Grey Box Collective**

It has always been a dream of mine to create a dance theatre company that tours to colleges and universities around the country offering an alternative approach to education that aspires to help students develop into the best version of themselves. And, I am happy to report, that journey has begun.

My company, Grey Box Collective, was selected to be part of an arts venture incubator called Pave Arts Entrepreneurship Program at ASU. This program has provided seed money to get the company on its feet. We have a presence on social media, a website, and additional marketing materials are in place. Additionally, we are a finalist in the Changemaker Challenge on campus, which has given us a chance to win \$10,000. If we are awarded the full amount, we will have enough money to fully produce the other four performances in development. We have also secured a residency with Nue[BOX] in downtown Phoenix to create our next performance. The ultimate goal is to have a repertoire of about five performances that could go to campuses across the country. Arizona State University has booked us for two additional performances of *It's Not That*

*Simple* during Consent Week on the Tempe campus, which confirms the success of this performance and how impactful it is for the campus community.

### **Research**

Given the nature of this performance and the feedback I have received over its nine year evolution, I plan to embark on a mixed methods research project to investigate the impact creation and performance of *It's Not That Simple* has on the performers. The study will fill knowledge gaps on the effects of performance and the impact these performances have on the general college campus population. Additionally, with several public universities under Title IX investigation regarding how sexual assaults are handled on campus, there is a great urgency and relevance to this research. The research study will build off of my previous research around this show.

### **Pilot Study**

The overarching results from the pilot study including the audience, cast, and crew showed a self-realization of past actions or involvement in sexual assault, increased empathy towards those effected by sexual assault, increased knowledge of sexual assault and bystander intervention, and increased motivation to intervene and take preventative measures.

This show empowered individuals to take steps towards dealing with the impact of sexual assault, which is something that is hard to show in data. The initial findings of the pilot study seemed to indicate that peer theater is an effective educational approach. It appeared that after viewing this performance, participants were less likely to be bystanders, and were very willing - almost desired - to intervene. Because of these initial

findings in the pilot study, I am continuing my research surrounding this topic by delving deeper into the impact on the performers.

### **Literature Review**

There were two studies of performances that shaped my initial research direction. The first was the Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program and the second study was a rape prevention program that distributed a video that was designed to reduce sexual violence. The Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program uses social norms theory in peer theater to convey alcohol abuse prevention messages to undergraduate students (Cimini, Page, & Trujillo, 2002). Some research has explored the effectiveness of educational programs designed to reduce the incidence of sexual violence. For example, Andris Ziemelis, Ronald B. Bucknam, and Abdulaziz M. Elfessi (2002) used a form of peer theater as a binge drinking prevention program for college students. These researchers found binge drinking decreased as a result of this educational approach and recommended other prevention programs combine their models with other interactive theater methods to further evaluate the validity of their research and effectiveness of this approach. Along the same lines, one study used a video version of a rape prevention program and evaluated fraternity men's empathy, attitudes, and behavioral intent to commit rape or sexual assault (Foubert, Newberry, & Tatum, 2008). The participants reported an increase in empathy towards rape victim/survivors, and declines in rape myth acceptance, the likelihood of raping, and the likelihood of committing sexual assault (Foubert, Newberry, & Tatum, 2008). To date, I have yet to find any studies that investigate the performers experience in a show about bystander intervention for sexual assault among the general college campus student population.

## **Methodology**

In the forthcoming research project, I will address the following research question: How are performers impacted by the creative process and final product of socially conscious work? The primary technique I will use to collect data is a semi-structured journaling method to gather information from the performers throughout the rehearsal process. The journaling will be based on the thought-listing technique (as cited in Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and will ask the performers to list thoughts on the rehearsal, general thoughts on the topic, and thoughts that occurred to them while participating or anticipating participating each week in rehearsals. The information gathered from this study will possibly be used in public reports, further research, and/or presentations.

## **Overlapping Interests**

The research component of this project is a place where all my interests are able to coexist. As an artist and educator, I am able to combine my interests in performance with my interest in furthering personal development in students. In my role as a student services professional, my motivation has been helping students reach their full potential. This research allows me to take the body of knowledge known as student development theory and apply it to the creative process in developing dance theatre work. Research addressing the performers' experience fills a gap in the field regarding how education looks outside a classroom setting.

## ENDING AND NEW BEGINNINGS

When I decided to call this performance ‘It’s Not That Simple’ back in 2007, I never thought it would become such a self-fulfilling prophecy for the next nine years. Nothing about this process has been simple – and, yes, it is an on-going joke in the creative team that I do not always find funny. This process has been the most complicated process I have ever had to go through in creating an evening length work.

Since beginning my journey towards the completion of an MFA in Dance, I have clarified my artistic voice through the development of an approach that allows for flexibility, refined the artistic vehicle that was always present in my work just unclear, and found a way to combine all my interests (performing arts, higher education, and social justice) through arts entrepreneurship. Now with Grey Box Collective, I have an artistic vehicle that is filled with tools, practices, and an excellent network that will carry this journey beyond the final day of classes. The dream is to take the artistic vehicle – in all of its forms – around the state and the country. I plan to continue to research the impact of the performance and share this information with others in arts, education, and social justice.

The cycle of the creative process is about to begin again since Grey Box Collective has a summer residency with nue[BOX] in Phoenix. We are developing a new work using the same tools and practices refined in the most recent rehearsal process. We are starting with the research – on shame culture this time – and starting to work immediately with the content. We know our forms as a collective and do not need to spend time revisiting the forms separate of content. This allows us to dive deep into the content to produce a thought-provoking performance.

## **My Artistic Manifesto**

Throughout the complex journey towards an MFA in dance, I found myself returning to little sayings and thoughts as a way to continually move forward. I would come back to them whenever I was stuck, frustrated, or in the midst of an existential crisis. The passage I share below is something that has stayed with me for most of the journey and is the only suitable way to end it.

It all starts with a box. “Before you think out of the box you have to start with a box” (Tharp, 2008). It is held together with plain old scotch tape. The box has boxes and bubbles and words and incomplete thoughts and has a bottom that sometimes falls out. The content makes the work or the work makes the contents. The contents mean nothing and everything. The box is intuition materialized ... it creates grooves. Thinking is overrated and asking 'how' is a very paralyzing thought ... it creates ruts. Have a strong beginning and a strong finish and the middle will take care of itself. Success and failure are relative. The only constant in life is change. Whatever sensation you are feeling, acknowledge it, and know that it will pass (and let it go). Have 20-minute pity parties on a semi-regular basis to reduce external sympathy seeking episodes. Embrace panicking for extremely short periods of time, then MOVE ON and be like Nike, JUST DO IT. Remember that anger is an energizing emotion, make the best of it. You don't have to know where you're going to be on the right path. Be authentic OR fake it til you make it OR fake it til you become it (Brown, 2010). Be comfortable in uncertainty i.e.



have a lil' faith and trust. Practice mental reservations. Practice gratitude.  
Practice productive procrastination. Practice daily self-care. Practice blind faith.  
Do it for yourself and no one else (yes, all of it). Always ask, the worst answer  
you will hear is "no." Always try to take advantages of opportunities or you never  
have the option. The ultimate challenge (or ultimate to-do list, I can't decide) is:  
Process the past while living in the present and preparing for the future. Art is  
what you can get away with (Warhol, 2014). Make the audience uncomfortable,  
heck, make yourself uncomfortable. Break down walls. Gather information. Stay  
curious. Take it all in. It's an adventure. Everything in moderation. Eat chocolate  
daily. Be patient, maybe too patient with yourself and others. Relax your  
shoulders. Stop clenching your jaw. Write. Create. Move. Find flow (both  
psychological and physical). Play (a lot). Breathe (consciously and often). Speak  
(when necessary). Find balance. Lose balance. And then gain it again.

At this time, I have lost my balance and I'm searching to gain it again. I keep returning to  
this manifesto seeking ways to gain my balance back.

### **Final Thoughts**

The next step on this journey for me is allowing collaboration to take over more  
of the process. As Grey Box Collective is preparing to create new work this summer,  
more performers have asked to be involved in the writing process instead of the  
performance side of the show. This will be a new collaboration for me. I'm far less  
comfortable in collaborative writing than in collaborative theatre-making. I plan to  
approach the collaboration the same way I would approach a dance collaboration with a  
higher level of verbal communication. I started to do this with one performer. We sat

down, and I walked her through my writing creative process. We started with research, then brainstorming, which lead to an outline for a monologue. She expressed some difficulty with going so deeply into the heavy material that I decided to ask her permission to take on polishing the monologue. She agreed to this. I felt like this was a brief collaboration that will eventually lead to longer ones.

My relationship with text is much richer than it once was. I find myself more frequently in workshops where I talk about text and movement. I have discovered there are three ways I approach text and movement: 1.) movement is developed from the text, 2.) text is developed from the movement, and 3.) movement and text are developed separately then smashed together with hopes that it works out. In a teaching scenario where both text and movement are elements in a lesson plan, I share the three approaches listed above. I plan to investigate how the above approaches relate to building resiliency in humans, performers, and ensembles. There is a connection to the work the group did with text and movement that led them to become the most resilient group of performers I have ever worked with while developing a piece. I can see a difference in the ensembles I work with compared to others, and my guess is it has something to do with this approach. I will take these inquiries into the next project we take on.

Throughout this journey, I have faced more unanticipated challenges than I expected. Ultimately, my sole purpose with returning to graduate school was to create *It's Not That Simple* again and to make it bigger than it ever was. I achieved that goal. And for that I am eternally grateful. Regarding if this journey towards an MFA was worth the employee discounted price, I don't know. I have faith that time will tell and that if I really did not think it was worth it, I would have left the program. Looking back on the

experiences, it is the people I have met along the way that made it enjoyable. The connections I made – both professional and personal – will be with me for the foreseeable future. I did however pick up three other valuable letters: LLC. These letters do not go after my name, but they are important to me and a part of a new identity as an artist entrepreneur. Grey Box Collective, LLC is a venture I never anticipated as part of the journey towards an MFA. The courage I gained over the past few months to pour my energy into a company will be what propels me into the future.

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