

Don't Hold Your Breath: The Creation and Performance of a Theatrical Memoir in Motion

by

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ABSTRACT

Don't Hold Your Breath is an evening-length performance created and performed by Sarah "Saza" Kent and EPIK Dance Company that consisted of street and concert dance combined with hip hop theatre, spoken text and live singing. What began as a one-woman show about the choreographer's life, turned in to an ensemble piece that included the stories of many people, including ten community members who were interviewed on their views of life and death after being affected by a diagnosis. The show follows Kat, a young woman tiptoeing the line between her party girl past and the thought of finally growing up and settling down. Typically confident and self-assured, she is now grappling with the idea of life and death. Kat finds herself in an MRI machine that could ultimately determine her fate. As the machine examines her body, she begins to examine her life, causing her to confront some of life's most existential questions. Has she spent her time wisely? Would she do anything differently if given a second chance? When it comes down to it, and all distractions are stripped away, what is truly important? Her thoughts take her to memories of her past and visions for her future as she faces the reality that life is finite and tomorrow is not promised. This document is an account of the show's process and serves as a place of explanation, analysis, and reflection, while also questioning its significance on a personal level all the way to its place in the field.

DEDICATION

Don't Hold Your Breath is dedicated to my mother, Cynthia Kay VanderHaar, who showed me what it means to be a wife and a mom, how to be strong in the face of adversity, how to be honest, even when it hurts, and how to love unconditionally. Thank you for your unapologetic dedication to God and your family. You have been a shining example of the type of human I strive to be. I miss you, I love you, and I'll see you again.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As creative beings, the power of our work lies in the process, the journey through time that defines the shared creation. Since starting graduate school all the way through the process of creating my thesis show, *Don't Hold Your Breath*, my thoughts on "time" have shifted wildly. I found myself questioning how I was spending it, who I was spending it with, and what defined it as quality. "Time" became a recurring theme in my daily life, which was in turn reflected in my artistic expression. This constant evaluation and reevaluation of time has become habitual and is underscored throughout this document.

History

In December 2011, I decided to go to graduate school. Given where I was professionally at the time, it was not necessary. I had already been teaching at the university level for many years and had no plans to become a full-time professor. I was running my own professional dance company, EPIK Dance Company, with some success. I was also leading another budding, new non-profit that was gaining national steam. I did not NEED to go to graduate school. But I found myself lacking inspiration, and I knew that in an educational, provocative environment around forward-thinking creatives I would find new stimulation to help feed the creative endeavors that I felt so passionately about. I also wanted to be able to articulate what I was doing with my company and why it was important. I felt like I lacked the vocabulary to back up my work. I inherently knew its importance, having studied dance and theory as an undergraduate student, but it had been so long since I had used the language, that I felt the need for a refresher course, as well as the understanding of new research in the field. So, I went back to school. My focus was clear: I wanted to use my voice more.

The desire to use my voice was something that had been starting to grow inside of me for several years. As a teenager, I started emceeing at rave and hip hop events over breakbeats and drum and bass. But a few years later, I gave it up to dance. I felt that to be successful at

one or the other, I needed to pick one to focus on entirely. I knew the odds of being a successful Caucasian female emcee were slim. I had already dealt with kickback just based on what I looked like. I was not passionate enough about it to push through those walls. Plus, I was way more enamored with dancing. So, dance won. I set aside the microphone. It wasn't until almost ten years later that I started to pick it up again. It was through opportunities like hosting the *Civil Disobedience* (now *Urban Sol*) events and leading school assemblies with EPIK and the Be Kind People Project that I began to find my voice again. We (my EPIK co-directors and I) started including more spoken word and text in our EPIK stage shows. I began to notice that these were my favorite parts to perform in the show. My co-artistic director, Luis "Weezy" Egurrola, was equally passionate about vocal performance, whether it be acting or singing. In 2012, we told the company that we wanted to move in that direction. We wanted the dancers to start using their voices more. We encouraged them to write and perform their own poems and sketches, and soon we began to include their work in our shows as well. I knew I wanted to explore this concept more, so I applied for my MFA in Dance, hoping to accomplish just that.

Once accepted into the graduate dance program at Arizona State University, I was not quite sure where these ideas would take me for my thesis project until the Fall semester of my second year in 2013. Rickerby Hinds was at ASU as a visiting professor from UC Riverside. I already had a positive history working with Hinds. EPIK opened his touring show, *Buckworld*, in 2010. A couple of years later, EPIK was awarded the opportunity to work with Hinds and *Phonetic Spit*, a local spoken-word and poetry group, in a four-day intensive on hip hop theatre techniques. I had enjoyed creating in a new way and also loved the chance to use my voice more. I knew when he came to teach in the fall that I wanted to work with him again, so I signed up for his *Hip Hop Writing for the Stage* class, as well as an independent study. It was through this class and independent study that I began to write the script that would become my thesis show, *Don't Hold Your Breath*.

In Hind's class, the students were tasked with daily journaling. We were to pay attention to our surroundings and record in detail what was happening around us, including dialogue. We were to look for "story" in our daily situations. It just so happened that I was scheduled for an MRI that week. A previous x-ray on my back had turned up a strange spot on my liver, and the doctor wanted to get it checked to rule out anything serious. That morning, I showed up for my MRI, and in my mind, recorded everything from the encounter in detail, from the waiting room, the dialogue of the nurses and other patients, to the experience in the machine itself. It was while in the machine that I realized how many creative ideas could come from this experience. In class discussions and bi-weekly meetings with Hinds, I began to develop the framework for *Don't Hold Your Breath*.

My goal was to write and perform *Don't Hold Your Breath* as a one-woman show, based on stories from my own life. I spent much time writing and reflecting on my life experiences and ways that I could incorporate them into the script. Most of the show would take place while the main character, "Kat," was lying in an MRI machine, reflecting on her life. To understand the evolution of this one-woman show to a full ensemble collaborative piece, one must grasp what the next four years of my life looked like. In the semester following my work with Kirby and the script, my focus turned to my work with the Be Kind People Project, the non-profit I was helping to build. I was traveling nationally, using dance and spoken word to teach youth about kindness. I was overwhelmed with not only my class and teaching load, but also my work outside of school. The thought of self-producing a one-woman show seemed extremely overwhelming, if not impossible with my current workload. Plus, I was enormously inspired by the work I was doing, as well as the positive effect I saw it have on youth across the nation. It only made sense to change my thesis to be about kindness.

That summer, everything changed. As I prepared to return for my last year of school, tragedy struck my family. My mother had a severe, grand-mal seizure and her heart stopped. Luckily, my father was home with her and was able to keep her alive until the paramedics

arrived. It was at the hospital that they told us that she had a large tumor in her brain. The next two weeks involved two brain surgeries and the diagnosis of stage 2 brain cancer.

Our lives turned upside-down. Between frequent hospital stays and rehab sessions, my mother needed 24-hour care. Over the next few months, we would almost lose her again and again due to complications. It was a time where I was in a constant state of fight or flight. As I tried to juggle all of this and my last year of graduate school, in the end, I had to drop out mid-semester during the fall of 2014, to take care of my mother full-time.

The next year would continue to be full of changes. My mother's prognosis changed for the worse as she was upgraded to stage 4 and went back in for surgery. As much as we prayed and believed in miracles, we knew we would not have her with us much longer. During this time, I met the man who would become my husband a short eight months later. We knew we were going to get married, so we pushed the process a bit to make sure my mother would be able to be present. Time was running out. Then, in early 2016, I became pregnant with our daughter, just a couple months before my mother eventually passed away on May 5, 2016. I went back to work full-time for the Be Kind People Project until I gave birth to Rylen Kay Kent on November 11, 2016. That's when everything changed again.

Why is all of this personal information important? It was these life events that led me to the questions addressed in what would become my new and revised thesis project. I found that time is an invaluable commodity that we seem to take for granted. So I asked, "What do we waste our time on, and how can it be used more valuably? When all is said and done, and all distractions are stripped away, what is truly important?" My mother's illness forced me to turn the focus from myself, my life and my own career goals to take care of the person who had always cared for me. I remember the conversation with my father vividly when I told him that maybe I shouldn't return to school the semester following her diagnosis. His agreement with that decision confirmed for me that taking care of her was more important than my aspirations at the time. I began to view life differently, and the importance of family began to take precedence

over everything. Family over everything else became even more apparent after the birth of my daughter.

I had plans to return to work after my maternity leave. I had no intentions of returning to school. But after actually having the baby and seeing the struggles she was having as a young infant and how much she needed me, my priorities changed yet again. I decided that I did not want to work full-time while my children were young. These early years were a valuable time that I would never get back, and studies were showing how crucial those formidable years were in a child's development. Giving up my full-time job would also give me more time to shift my focus back to my own company, EPIK, and I could return to graduate school to finish what I started. I decided to resign from the *Be Kind People Project*, a decision that was supported, but not taken lightly by the organization that had been grooming me to fully take its reigns. But again, time took priority. The time I had with my daughter as a young child was more important than my aspirations to run any organization, even if I did have a large part in getting it to where it was at that point.

In February of 2017, during a discussion of what our next EPIK stage show would be about with my assistant director, Jenna Myers, we discussed the idea of "minimalism." We had both recently watched *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* and thought the concept could inspire an entire show. We could focus on the questions, "What do we waste our time and money on as a society?" "How can we make more meaningful connections?" I brought up this "old script I wrote back in graduate school" that I had not thought about in years. Maybe it could have some relevant ideas that we could incorporate into this new show idea. After reading the script and talking it through, we thought, why not use this script as a framework for the entire show?

The Plan in a Nutshell

The basic structure of *Don't Hold Your Breath* had already been outlined in 2013, and we decided to keep many of my own stories. The rest of the main character, Kat's "experiences"

were developed over the next 12 months. I conducted a series of interviews with people of all ages and walks of life who had somehow been touched by a diagnosis, whether they had dealt with it themselves, or had loved ones whom they had cared for and/or lost to a serious diagnosis. I was interested in working with an intergenerational group of people, but especially people over the age of 65, because they would have a much wider perspective, having lived over half of their lives already. The purpose of these interviews was to encourage the participants to reflect on their own lives and experiences, and to share stories that would ultimately generate material for Kat's remaining flashbacks. After compiling the interview material, I led a series of creative meetings with my cast. I worked solely and collaboratively with my cast to create a cohesive storyline that reflected many people's stories through the life of one character, Kat. Through the practice of working with these community members and the dancers themselves, my goal was to create much more richness and significance in the work. I wanted to "frame bigger." In essence, the more perspectives and ideas that could fit into the framework, the more ways people could connect to the work. More conversation could occur. The work would look at multiplicity. There are multiple answers to these big life questions. A person's purpose is whatever they imagine it to be.

My focus for this project was to further my creative practice in two ways – by creating work based on a series of interviews with an intergenerational group of people, and in a sense, making dance from a sociological perspective, and by increasing the use of voice in my work. I collaboratively created the work, but also performed in it as well. The show consisted of many different styles of dance, from street to contemporary, as well as a significant amount of spoken text and live music. I worked closely with ASU faculty member, Liz Lerman, on choreographic methods, and continued consulting with my committee member, Rickerby Hinds, given his extensive expertise in hip hop theatre and the fact that he was such a big part of the project's humble beginnings. The creative process was documented throughout with video recordings of the interviews, creative meetings, and rehearsals.

In August 2017, I began the interviews with the community members and the creative process for the show with my dance company. EPIK Dance Company is a non-profit, professional dance company that combines street, classical and contemporary dance styles with spoken word, theatre and live music to tell stories and share a message. We rehearse every Thursday evening and Sunday afternoon at Mesa Arts Center. EPIK works very collaboratively on concepts and choreography, and other dancers in the company were empowered to choreograph parts of the show, under my direction. We premiered the show in March 2018. The duration of the show lasted ninety minutes, but the process reflected narratives of multiple lifetimes, full of detours, tragedies and triumphs, and ultimately, the vitality of time.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH

Although my research began while working with Rickerby Hinds in 2013, it wasn't until returning to graduate school in spring of 2017 that I began to investigate other resources for purposes of this project. As part of my literature review, I studied and researched other artists, such as Liz Lerman, Lemon Andersen, and DV8 Physical Theatre. The interviews I held with members of the community were also a large part of my creative research that greatly influenced the project. And lastly, a prime share of my research involved introspection on the stories of my own life, as well as my thoughts on the passage of time, life, and death.

I chose to research artists who represent different areas in the field. Rickerby Hinds is a playwright in the world of hip hop theatre; Liz Lerman is a legendary American choreographer with a unique approach to performance and creating work; Lemon Anderson is a poet and spoken word artist; DV8 Physical Theatre is a physically integrated dance company based in the United Kingdom. These artists are quite distinct, but they share commonalities. I was drawn to each of them for three reasons: their ability to combine text and movement, how they used narrative in unconventional ways, and their focus on current sociopolitical subject matter. Of these, Hinds and Lerman had the most significant influence on me. Even though they work in different genres (hip hop theatre and modern dance respectively), their creative process has some similarities. They emphasize collaboration and use rehearsals as a workshop to generate material and ideas. I was significantly impacted by both of these artists and will be forever changed as an artist because of them.

Rickerby Hinds

In the fall of 2013, shortly after I had my MRI scan, Hinds and I met bi-weekly to discuss my stories and search for common threads and metaphors that fit within the MRI machine framework. These meetings were exhilarating and were characterized by a flurry of concepts and feverish note-taking. Hinds had a way of drawing connections between ideas that would

then spark my thoughts in an entirely new direction. His expertise in storytelling helped me to examine my stories from a theatrical perspective. He prompted me to ask myself the questions:

“What does the character want?”

She wants out of the MRI machine. She wants to be healthy.

“What’s stopping her from coming out well?”

Her own actions. Thirty minutes (test length). What she has done to herself. Her body is rebelling against her.

“Why is she in the machine?”

“Will she come out the same way she went in?”

I used the MRI machine as a metaphor. The machine examines my body as I examine my life. Each “scene” begins and ends with the protagonist, Kat, lying in the MRI machine. Every time the machine tells her to “Breath In... Hold your breath please” she closes her eyes and is taken back to a memory from her past that correlates with her thoughts and emotions about being in the machine at that moment. For instance, while lying in the machine, she reflects on how tight the brace is around her torso, or how scary it would be if the power went out. She fears that she might get stuck in the machine, which then takes her to a memory/scene of her sneaking out her narrow window as a teenager to go to a party (and almost getting stuck). Each memory in the script comes from my own real-life experiences. Jane goes on an emotional and introspective journey which starts with her not taking the test seriously to realizing that she has been running away from her problems and responsibilities. There may be a chance she could be very sick, and she needs to make some changes in her life.

I began to research MRI Machines, searching for metaphors to connect my stories to the experience of getting a scan done. I investigated MRI machine history, its primary uses, and what happens within the machine as it scans a patient. I looked at the physical shape and color of the machine, listened to the sounds that it makes, and observed the way that its parts move.

Through my research and study with Rickerby Hinds, I gained a new perspective on writing the script by questioning my own character's intentions and desires. I was also invigorated by his ability to find and use metaphors. Our meetings and creative sessions helped to give me the confidence to believe that I could actually pull off a project such as this and do it well.

Liz Lerman's Course, "The Atlas of Creative Tools"

I have been influenced by Liz Lerman's work ever since I studied some of her tools and theories as an undergraduate student at ASU almost two decades ago. Throughout my time as a professional, I continuously applied her strategies in my work as an educator and choreographer. When I heard she was coming to ASU as an Institute Professor, I knew I had to work with her. I also thought that her unique experience in working with older people could potentially speak to the work I was planning to do. As an offshoot of my thesis project, I also was interested in writing curriculum for a creative practice class for older folks to help them take their own stories and turn them into creative works. In Fall 2017, my first semester after returning to school following my three-year break, I enrolled in Liz Lerman's course, "The Atlas of Creative Tools," and an independent study with her as well.

"The Atlas of Creative Tools" course explored the creative methods of Liz Lerman and her colleagues that were developed over the course of her life as an artist. My personal definition of a creative tool is "a structure that helps an artist work through an idea by pulling it apart or looking at it from multiple angles; something stable that helps one come to different conclusions every time they use it, based on the subject matter for which it is being used." The course also took a close look at the idea of creativity and why we make the choices that we do ("Syllabus," n.d.).

An example of some of the tools that we explored in class that I was able to apply to my thesis was the "What's the News" and "Postcard" exercises. Lerman asked the class, "What's the news?" We were to create a "headline," as if for a news article, about our day, our life, or

something currently going on. I decided to use the exercise not as myself, but as my main character in *Don't Hold Your Breath*. What was the news for Kat? Afterward, Lerman led us through a process to create movement based on the headline. We wrote three postcards: one to ourselves (in this case, Kat's self) at a different age, one to a person of influence, and one to anyone we wanted. I wrote all three postcards from Kat's perspective, as seen below:

What's the News?

"I've been told I may be very sick. I have to take this test to find out if it is true."

1st postcard to myself (as Kat) at a younger age:

Hey Kat,

Don't freak out or anything, but it's possible you might die young. So, make sure you make the most out of every moment, okay?? Make sure you don't waste your time on things and people that won't matter in the long run, like running away from home, sneaking out all the time, and going to nightclubs every weekend, etc... Take really good care of mom and dad – spend lots of time with them. Stop driving them crazy. They are the ones who love you most, and you never know how much time you will have with them... Oh, and maybe reconsider marrying Daniel (just saying).

Love... Kat

2nd postcard to someone of influence:

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry to do this on a postcard, but I need you to know that I might be very sick. Don't worry, I'm doing whatever I need to do to get to the bottom of this and will give you every detail as soon as I have it. I'm just asking that you pray that whatever this is, that the doctors are mistaken. In fact, I'm sure it's just a fluke, so don't worry, okay Dad? I'll be in touch... Love you.

Kat

3rd postcard to a person of choice (Kat's best friend):

Dear Crystal,

You're not going to believe this. I'm being forced to get testing done because some doctor thinks I could be dying. What a load of crap! I naturally have missed my first 2 MRI appointments, but I promise I'm going this week. Ironic, isn't it? Hopefully it's just a fluke, but if not, we are definitely going to go swim with dolphins, K?

Double dream hands,

Kat

There is more to this exercise, but what stood out for me, personally, was that it assisted me in character development. Writing the postcards helped me develop Kat's personality. I could see how I could use this exercise for different storylines throughout my show. This exercise prompted me in ways I would not usually work, which led me to think differently about how to develop details in Kat's story. I had to use my imagination first to picture what would be on those postcards. It caused me to dive deeper into my "storyline" and think about the details. The storyline for *Don't Hold Your Breath* is not based solely on facts. I drew from some of my own experiences, but I also had to create some parts just out of the imagination. Writing the letters is essentially writing works of fiction. The book *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People*, one of the assigned texts for the *Atlas of Creative Tools* course, refers to fictional writing and art itself as "lies" (Root-Bernstein, 1999). The outcome of this exercise was a creative one, and the results were surprising.

I began to put the tools that we studied into practice almost immediately in my rehearsals. I will elaborate more on how I used the tools later in this document when I dive deeper into the process of creating the show. Taking part in this course had a significant impact on my creative process and practices. Because I now have this toolbox, I feel like I will never be choreographically stumped again. There is always a way out. I

also love how these tools get my dancers so much more invested in the process and product of a piece. The work is not created from a single choreographer's perspective; it's that of the collective. One of the most important discoveries I made while taking this course was to trust myself. I think as artists we tend to be our own most prominent critics. Especially when we are "stuck," we tend to be hard on ourselves, which can, in the end, stump us even more. One of my favorite quotes from Lerman during this course was, "Don't require yourself to be interesting all the time." In applying this concept, I have learned to trust (and enjoy!) the process.

Lemon Andersen & DV8 Physical Theatre

Lemon Andersen is an American poet, spoken word artist, and actor. I was first introduced to his work when he came to ASU to perform his one-man show, *Country of Kings: The Beautiful Struggle*. His work inspired me with its use of multiple strategies to tell a story, his commitment to character, and his ability to captivate the audience for an entire show as a solo performer. Andersen's strategies were broken down in his presentation, "Breaking in the Door to Have Your Voice Heard," which he gave at the "Presidents Distinguished Lecture Series" at Roger Williams University (Roger Williams University, 2016). He used *Country of Kings: The Beautiful Struggle* as an example to demonstrate his strategy of sequence-writing, and how one can connect poems to tell a story. He separated the story into five sections and revealed how he continued to break it apart from there:

1. Born (geography, history, economy) - Rhyme
2. Dance At Himalaya - Prose
3. Mother Passes - Musical
4. Similily (the name Anderson gives to a character who speaks in similes) – Character-driven
5. Poetry Reading – Dismount Rhythm

Andersen says, "The reason why I keep stressing geography, history, and economy is because I was taught that from Reg E. Gaines (playwright and spoken word poet). That's how you really transcend work. That's how you really get an audience to buy into your world..." (Roger Williams University, 2016). He encouraged artists to respond to their audience when telling stories; that it is important to change up the rhythms throughout the show to keep them captivated, hence, starting with a rhyme, moving into prose, a musical number, followed by a character-driven piece, and then ending with a poem. The idea that multiple ways exist to get a story across really connected with me and how I like to create work. It was encouraging to find that an artist that I look up to has a similar philosophy. The artist can take an audience on a journey while keeping them entertained and wondering what's next. It also gave me a clear structure that I could refer back to during my creative process.

While looking for inspiration on combining text and movement, I stumbled upon DV8 Physical Theatre, a physically integrated dance company based in London, England founded and directed by Lloyd Newson. The company tends to focus on pertinent social, psychological and political issues. The subject matter of their work was already very compelling, but what inspired me was how they told a story. They began using the term, "physical theatre," to describe themselves long before it was coined as a term for a specific genre of theatre performance. Newson was interested in taking contemporary dance in a different direction than where he saw the genre heading, so in 1986, he formed his own company to create more conceptual and narrative-based work ("History," n.d.). Newson's philosophy speaks directly to how I feel about my own company, EPIK, in that we use multiple forms of movement and text to tell stories.

The piece that inspired me the most directly for *Don't Hold Your Breath* was "Christian Protestor" from DV8's production, *To Be Straight With You*. The entire script of *To Be Straight With You* is verbatim text from interviews with people directly affected by the issues of religion and homosexuality. In "Christian Protestor," the main character plays a hardline Christian protestor alongside his supporters outside the Houses of Parliament, protesting gay adoption

("To Be Straight With You," n.d.). Although riveting, it's not the subject matter that stimulated me as much as the structure of the piece, and how they combined the text with the movement. The piece begins with dancers bringing chairs on stage and setting them up in a staggered formation of three lines. The main character comes forward to the front center chair as he begins his monologue and takes a seat, proceeding to perform movement in a seated position. The rest of the dancers trickle in and join him in the rest of the chairs. The majority of the piece takes place seated in the chairs. I used a similar structure for my piece, "The Spelling Bee," beginning my monologue while sitting in my chair, and one by one, the other "competitors" joined me on stage. I speak through the majority of the piece, very similar to the "Christian Protestor," but clearly with a very different subject matter and a more comedic, upbeat energy. My choice of movement for the choreography is also different in style and feel, dabbling in house, hip hop and musical theatre.

The more that I research DV8, the more I am inspired by not only their product but the creative process that they use, as well as their commitment to taking risks and breaking down barriers while communicating clearly and unpretentiously. While Lemon Andersen and DV8 Physical Theatre may have had less influence on *Don't Hold Your Breath* than Liz Lerman and Rickerby Hinds, I value their work and process as models for my creative practice. I have a feeling that their work will continue to inspire mine.

Interviews

My original script for *Don't Hold Your Breath* reflected only my own experiences and perspectives. Once the decision was made to perform the script as an ensemble piece as opposed to a one-woman show, we knew we needed to bring in multiple perspectives. Multiplicity is a common thread through all of my work with EPIK, and I did not want this to be any different. It was important to me that the show could touch anyone, regardless of their background or path in life. To accomplish this, I interviewed ten individuals in the community that had somehow been touched by a diagnosis. Some examples include a woman currently

fighting breast cancer, a man who had recently lost his wife to cancer, a man who had just been diagnosed with a degenerative bone disorder, and a woman who had fought a terminal cancer diagnosis and won. I also interviewed a few of my dancers, so that they would get an idea of what the process was like. I chose dancers whom I knew had experienced some personal struggles of their own, related to illness and loss. Each interview was filmed and consisted of the same 20 questions:

1. What object did you bring and why is it important to you? (Subjects were asked to bring one object that is important to them)
2. Has anything ever happened to you that made you look at your life from a completely different perspective? What changed?
3. What habits do you have in your daily life that you could do without? If you could replace them with good habits, what would they be?
4. Tell me about a time when you were gasping for air.
5. What do you wish you would have spent more time doing when you were growing up, or in your life in general?
6. Tell me about a time when you had to keep your eyes shut to avoid seeing what was in front of you.
7. If you could only keep three things to carry through life, what would they be?
8. What is one of your happiest memories?
9. What is something you have run away from or you would like to run away from?
10. Have you ever felt claustrophobic? When?
11. Is there a time in your life that you wish you could go back to so you could change something? What would you change and why?
12. What would you say distracts you from your purpose?
13. Tell me about a time when you felt like you couldn't breathe.
14. Who is the most important person in your life and why?

15. What do you do when you want to escape? What are you escaping from?
16. What is an experience you've had where you felt squeezed, physically or metaphorically?
17. What's the last frustration you recall experiencing?
18. Is there anything that you are afraid in life that holds you back?
19. Tell me about an experience where you got out of something by the skin of your teeth.
20. How would you live your life differently if you knew you were going to die soon?

The goal of these interviews was to create pieces for the show based on the interviewees' personal stories. These stories would become "Kat's" stories. However, I found that many of the subjects tended to speak more generally in their answers as opposed to telling a specific story. Consequently, there were only two pieces in the show that ended up coming directly from the interviews. The "Birthday Party" piece came from one of my subject's fondest childhood memories of her step-father taking her and her friends on a scavenger hunt for her birthday. Also, my monologue about "swinging from the rafters" was pulled almost verbatim (with permission) from one subject's answer to the question about what habits they had that they could do without. What the interview answers most influenced was my inner dialogue while in the machine. Many of my subjects had unique ways of expressing their feelings about life and death that I was able to incorporate into the script. I believe that bringing in the language of others made the script more relatable.

One surprising and unintentional result that came from the interviews was the universal feeling of gratitude that the subjects shared with me following the questioning. While some of the questions were difficult to answer and brought up an emotional response, many of the subjects expressed that the interview was therapeutic in a way. They said that it made them examine their lives and drew their attention to what and who was really important to them. This

result was especially pleasing for me, particularly since I felt almost uncomfortable asking them some of the more difficult, probing questions.

My Personal Experience

After shifting the script from a one-woman show to an ensemble piece and including the perspectives and stories from interviews with community members and the dancers, about seventy percent of the script was still from my own life. This is not to say that I made up most everything in the show. As I elaborate more on the process, it becomes evident that the company brought the script to life in many different ways. Still, the narratives were mostly mine.

When coming back to the script in 2017, I knew I wanted to include stories about my mother. What she and my family went through during the past three years affected me profoundly and were extremely relevant to the subject matter of the show. If anything, it made the subject matter hit even closer to home. I chose to include her in two different ways. I sang a song that she sang to me as a child and shared my feelings of watching her slowly get sick, as I watched my assistant director, Jenna, perform a beautiful solo, choreographed by Angel Castro. I spoke of the irony of now being in the MRI machine myself, after spending countless days in the waiting room while my mother was inside the same machine.



Figure 1. Mother's Song choreographed by Angel Castro. Performed by Jenna Myers (pictured)

The second piece that I drew from the experience I had with my mother was in what we called the "Grief" piece. The "Grief" piece began over a year earlier, the week my mother passed away. One of my dancers, Anna Jones, taught the EPIK company class that week, and choreographed a beautiful piece, dedicating it to my mother. She, too, had experienced the loss of a parent two years prior. I was so incredibly moved...by the dancing and the gesture. I asked if some of them would perform the piece at my mother's celebration of life, which they did, so graciously. When we decided to produce this show, I knew I wanted to include this piece, but it would need to be developed and expanded. I incorporated a monologue where I spoke about the experience of watching

my mother die and the emptiness I felt with her passing. It was an incredibly emotional piece for myself, the dancers, and as we were to soon find out, the audience as well.



Figure 2. The Grief Piece. 1

The act of creating work that was so personal to me caused me to reflect and come to terms with where I was at in my own emotions and grief. It was not easy, by any means, but I believe that my commitment to this process came through in the honesty of the piece.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS

A New Way of Working

I have been producing stage shows with EPIK since 2009. I knew I wanted this show to be different. But what does that mean? My general, overall goal with EPIK can be understood through my most current, but ever-evolving artistic statement:

“My work tells stories, and through these stories, I hope to shed light on the many facets and contradictions of the human condition. Whether working with subjects such as interpersonal relationships, sustainability, climate change, terminal illness, sexuality, substance abuse, infidelity, the pharmaceutical industry, love, death and dying, I use stories to address the multiple perspectives of the people or characters involved. I always try to flip the script to show the humanness, the fragility, and the honesty, no matter how messy it might be. My goal is to move people – make them think and hopefully look at a situation from an angle they’ve never thought of before – to push boundaries, artistically, but also to challenge the audience’s boundaries... far but not over the edge... big nudges, bumps... small shoves.”

Historically, my co-director and I would decide on the subject matter for the show. We would come up with an over-arching theme and through-line. We would often already have many creative ideas in our heads before presenting the theme to our dancers. There were pieces we wanted to direct ourselves, but some ideas we would assign to other choreographers within the company. We would then open up the "creative floor" for the dancers to present their own ideas that they thought might fit within the theme. We would decide who would create what, each choreographer would pick their cast, and rehearsals would be scheduled. From then on, the choreographers were mostly on their own to begin and finish their pieces. We would check in from time to time to make sure everything was on track and to watch the direction of the work so that we could connect the whole show through transitions and storyline.

In working on *Don't Hold Your Breath*, I knew I wanted to approach the creative process differently than in the past. Once I started studying Liz Lerman's *Atlas of Creative Tools*, I knew this was the direction I was going to go. I also knew that this would be a very different process for many of my dancers. Directing a street-fusion company means that I employ dancers from many different backgrounds. The technically-trained dancers from a university program background had some experience in utilizing improvisation and compositional tools to collaborate on a work. But many of my dancers came from no formal training or from a limited studio background, so I knew that this way of working would be utterly foreign to them.

I needed my dancers to come into this experience without a preconceived notion of what or who they were "supposed to be," and to realize that who they are, through and through, is precisely what is needed. All of their personal experiences and ideas were valid. I needed them to be open with themselves and others, willing to share their experiences, thoughts, and views for the creative process. That meant being completely open to the process. To be creative, you have to be vulnerable. You have to be willing to take chances. You have to be present. Sometimes you have to think and feel deeply. You have to listen. It takes a full investment to do so. So, how did the dancers get to this place of openness?

The Cabin Retreat

In August 2017, we had an audition, mainly to look for dancers who were skilled in urban styles. The company's work has always been a reflection of who is in the company at the time, and while we were full of strong contemporary dancers, we were slim on the urban style side. We ended up taking eight dancers which brought us to twenty-six dancers in total. This was the largest group we had ever employed in the company. Adding new dancers to a group always changes the dynamic, especially as everyone starts to get to know each other. It was essential to get the dancers comfortable with one another and to kickstart the creative process.

The following month, we took the dancers on a retreat to Payson, Arizona. We always go on a company retreat and have a creative meeting at the beginning stages of producing a new show. I like taking the dancers out of town because it is quiet, with little distractions from daily life. It also gives the dancers an opportunity to bond naturally, and by participating in some well thought out games and activities. These types of activities set the stage for the company creative meeting/brainstorming session on the last day. Since we were a larger group than usual, I knew that the meeting could pose a challenge. We have a few in our group that tend to dominate the conversations, mostly because they get excited about their ideas. This time, I used Liz Lerman's "Thinking Grid" tool as the framework for the meeting. I wanted to start with some of the big, overall themes for the show, as well as some of the pieces we already knew we were going to choreograph. The horizontal row at the top of the page read the themes: Scan, Can't Breathe/Gasp for Air, Escape, Minimalism, Illness/Sickness, Claustrophobia, Death/Dying, Closed Eyes So Can't See What's In Front Of You. The categories listed vertically on the left side of the page were: Lobby, Walk-In, Audience, Music, Video/Projection, Text, Lighting, Set, Props, Costume, Flier, Program, Dancers/Choreo. The categories were purposely broad since this was the first big conversation about the show theme. I wanted the dancers to invest themselves in the concept. They were instructed to write in each intersecting box whatever came to mind, no matter how "crazy." In our creative meetings, we act under an "umbrella of mercy." There are no bad or unrealistic ideas. You never know what might come out of a "wild" idea!

We generated a myriad of concepts, and it was much more organized than years past. There were so many ideas produced from the grids that it was almost overwhelming. We couldn't get through all of the categories. After returning home, we continued to use the grid for the following weeks to generate even more ideas.

	SCAN	CANT breathe CNSP FOR AIR	ESCAPE	Minimalism
Lobby				
Walk-In				
Audience				
Music				
Video/ Projection				
Text				
Lighting				
Set				
Props				
Costume				
Filter				
Program				

DANCERS/CHOREO

	ILLNESS/ SICKNESS	Clostridia	Death/ Dying	Closed eyes so CANT see what's in front of you
Lobby				
Walk-In				
Audience				
Music				
Video/ Projection				
Text				
Lighting				
Set				
Props				
Costume				
Filter				
Program				

DANCERS/CHOREO

Figure 3. Thinking Grids (empty)

The image shows several overlapping thinking grids filled with handwritten notes. The grids are organized into columns and rows, with various categories and sub-categories. The notes include:

- Columns:** "SCAN", "CANT breathe CNSP FOR AIR", "ESCAPE", "Minimalism", "ILLNESS/SICKNESS", "Clostridia", "Death/Dying", "Closed eyes so CANT see what's in front of you".
- Rows:** "Lobby", "Walk-In", "Audience", "Music", "Video/Projection", "Text", "Lighting", "Set", "Props", "Costume", "Filter", "Program".
- Handwritten Notes:**
 - SCAN:** "The lobby area", "Music: melodic", "Audience: watching", "Walk-In: medium in the hallway", "Audience: watching from the side", "Text: 'The lobby area'", "Lighting: 'The lobby area'", "Set: 'The lobby area'", "Props: 'The lobby area'", "Costume: 'The lobby area'", "Filter: 'The lobby area'", "Program: 'The lobby area'".
 - ILLNESS/SICKNESS:** "The lobby area", "Walk-In: 'The lobby area'", "Audience: 'The lobby area'", "Music: 'The lobby area'", "Video/Projection: 'The lobby area'", "Text: 'The lobby area'", "Lighting: 'The lobby area'", "Set: 'The lobby area'", "Props: 'The lobby area'", "Costume: 'The lobby area'", "Filter: 'The lobby area'", "Program: 'The lobby area'".
 - Death/Dying:** "The lobby area", "Walk-In: 'The lobby area'", "Audience: 'The lobby area'", "Music: 'The lobby area'", "Video/Projection: 'The lobby area'", "Text: 'The lobby area'", "Lighting: 'The lobby area'", "Set: 'The lobby area'", "Props: 'The lobby area'", "Costume: 'The lobby area'", "Filter: 'The lobby area'", "Program: 'The lobby area'".
 - Minimalism:** "The lobby area", "Walk-In: 'The lobby area'", "Audience: 'The lobby area'", "Music: 'The lobby area'", "Video/Projection: 'The lobby area'", "Text: 'The lobby area'", "Lighting: 'The lobby area'", "Set: 'The lobby area'", "Props: 'The lobby area'", "Costume: 'The lobby area'", "Filter: 'The lobby area'", "Program: 'The lobby area'".

Figure 4. Thinking Grids (filled out by company members)

Another creative tool that I employed over the weekend was the idea of “bodystorming.” Bodystorming is a way of physically experiencing a situation in order to generate ideas. In this case, I wanted to create the physical experience of being in an MRI machine. Although there were a handful of dancers who had been in an MRI machine before, most had no frame of reference for what it was like. Much of the main character's text and experiences were coming from her thoughts and emotions while inside this machine. It was important that the dancers/creators could somewhat relate. I taped together three cardboard boxes to create a long cylinder for them to lie inside. I had recently accompanied my husband to get an MRI of his brain. The nurse graciously allowed me to sit on the outskirts of the room and record the noises of the machine with my phone. Not only was I able to use the sounds for part of the soundtrack of the show, but I was also able to use them for this bodystorming experience. I set up my laptop right next to where their head would be and had the volume turned up. When they entered the “machine,” all they had to do was press play on the computer and lie inside for five minutes, listening to the loud, pounding sounds of an MRI scan. They came to the company meeting to report the feelings, thoughts and creative ideas that were spawned from that experience. They referred to physical sensations of feeling cramped, trapped, vulnerable and unable to breathe. They reflected on the sounds which gave way for musical and movement ideas. They discussed the emotional feelings of anxiety and the weight of the reality of the situation. Some came with entire piece ideas. All in all, it was an effective tool, to say the least.

Use of Liz Lerman’s Tools

Postcards / What’s the News? I started at our first show rehearsal with the Postcard exercise. There are two large group pieces in the show that are entirely character-driven – one is a group of people in a doctor’s office waiting room, and the other is a group of 6th graders at the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D. C. I cast

each of my dancers in one of those two pieces. I had them begin by free writing and brainstorming about who they wanted their character to be. I asked them to answer the following questions:

“Spelling Bee” – What’s your name? Where are you from? What’s your favorite color? What’s your family structure? What did it take for you to get here (to the national spelling bee)?

“Waiting Room” – What’s your name? Where are you from? How old are you? What’s your relationship status? Why are you getting an MRI? How do you feel about it?

I then used the postcard exercise as a way for the dancers to continue to develop their characters by having them write a postcard to themselves at a different age, to a person of authority, and then to anyone they wanted. We went on to embody the postcards, partnered up to share and ended with a group discussion about what they discovered about their characters. Their characters were all unique, and many were absolutely hilarious! I talked with them about gesture and how we each have our own that are unique to us as individuals. I assigned them “homework” to observe people in real life or on television over the weekend and collect three idiosyncratic gestures, as well as create three spontaneous gestures for their character. Idiosyncratic gestures are natural movements that people exhibit as they present themselves to the world, such as how someone tucks hair behind his or her ear. Spontaneous gestures are used for emphasis and as a way to see what’s in a character’s mind’s eye, such as throwing your hands up when you are frustrated. These gestures became the basis of the phrases that they created and used within each piece.

For the “Waiting Room” dancers, I continued with another iteration of the tool. I asked them “What’s the News?” about their character. They each created a headline for their character’s situation and came up with five questions for themselves about their news. Afterward, they generated five gestures based on the questions and linked them

together into a phrase that they performed sitting down in the chairs of the “Waiting Room.” Once they had their phrases, we practiced the choreography with music and played with repetition and order.

Many of the dancers had never worked this way before, and you could tell that there was a level of discomfort and nervousness in the room. Some would giggle and laugh or talk like they were not taking the process seriously. But for the most part, everyone participated fully, even though I could tell that they were wondering where this was going. Little did they know, it was just the beginning.



Figure 5. The Spelling Bee. 1



Figure 6. The Waiting Room

Liz Lerman Workshop. The following weekend was our cabin retreat. The Sunday we returned, Liz Lerman came and led a 3-hour workshop with the dancers, taking them through many different versions of the tools. Her presence and expertise were very affirming after I had just led the dancers through the postcards exercise the week prior. The dancers were exhausted from the trip, but we had just come from three days of fun and bonding, so everyone was feeling very connected. It showed in their commitment and participation in the workshop that day, and I felt very proud of all of them.

Lerman had us start with a partner, improvising about our weekend at the cabin; a sort of download of everything we had just experienced. After sharing with our partners and picking the solos apart, we then taught each other and combined our movement. We

ended up with some exciting duets. I chose two duets to work in the next room. Their task was to switch partners and combine their choreography (which would create two completely different duets with similar movement qualities), while I had one duet teach their material to the rest of the dancers as a large group. Once the group was comfortable with the movement, we played with the order, formations, and canon. It was this group choreography that eventually became the main choreographed phrase of the "Claustrophobia" piece in the show - all from an improvisational structure about our cabin trip! It was such a great example of the tool, "Add/Subtract Meaning," and an excellent example for the company on how these tools can work.



Figure 7. The Claustrophobia Piece

We ended up with two different pieces in the show that started being developed in that workshop. The second piece was the "Grief" piece I referred to earlier in this document. Lerman, knowing some of the themes of the show, asked the dancers to think of a time that they were either out of breath or full of breath. She had the dancers move around the space to find a partner and share the beginning of their story (just verbally). Each person created a movement based on the story they were told. This process was repeated for the middle and end of their stories. Each dancer then put the moves together to create a phrase. At this point, Lerman asked, "What's the News?" They each created a headline based on their own story. We shared the headlines as a large group. It was apparent that many of the dancers' stories were emotional for them. "Creating a headline distances you from trauma," Lerman explained. I picked four headlines that sounded the most interesting to me, and we split the company into four groups to work on those four headlines, specifically. Lerman then led the dancers through an exercise of "Equivalents" to create a movement for each word with directives like, "on the floor... use just one arm... move in a way not typical for you..." Afterward, each group then shared their collage of movements for their assigned headline. One of the headlines I chose was based on a moving, personal story that the dancer was still very sensitive about. Her group's performance was expressive and touching, bringing many, including herself, to tears. I was incredibly moved to see the support that all of the dancers, together with those in her group dancing beside her, gave in that exercise. It was so poignant and heart-rending that the group phrasing ended up in the "Grief" piece. In fact, the entire workshop experience felt emotional to me. The dancers gave so much of themselves, even tears. Lerman explained that emotion was a natural accompaniment to creating art. She shared a rule that they had at Dance Exchange: "You could cry all you want, but you have to keep working." As tired as they were following our cabin trip, they were undistracted and fully present. They invested wholly in the process that day and created

some meaningful work. I left feeling exhausted, but so proud and excited about the dynamic that had come out of this short period of working together.



Figure 8. The Grief Piece. 2

It was crucial to have Lerman come work with EPIK so that they could understand where these methods were coming from and how amazing they can be, especially right at the beginning of our creative process. Even though we only had time to work through a couple of the tools, I believe that it helped lay a foundation of commitment and trust to the process and experimentation that was going to happen over the coming months. Plus, no one explains the tools better than Liz, herself! Despite the dancers' exhaustion, it was

a magical and moving experience for everyone. One dancer described it as “a perfect ending to the weekend,” as she expressed gratitude to Lerman and the other dancers.

Equivalents. We continued in our regular rehearsal the following weekend with an exercise in Equivalents. I split the company in half. One half used the sentence, “I feel like I can’t breathe,” and the other half used, “I can’t catch my breath.” They assigned a movement to each word as I gave them directives like, “For the third word, create a movement that travels,” or “for the fourth word, create a movement that is on a low level.” I then had them pair up and combine their phrase with someone else to create a duet. They showed their duets, first while saying their words that went along with each movement, and then, second, while intentionally using their breath audibly and in different ways (no words). Then, I put different groupings together based on what I thought would look nice aesthetically. We came up with some great content that we were able to revisit later and include in our large group number we call the “Breath” piece.



Figure 9. The Breath Piece. 1

The Escape Piece. One piece idea that I kept from the original script of *Don't Hold Your Breath* was what I called the "Escape" piece. It started with Kat in the machine reflecting on how she wished she could escape her situation and then led into a memory of herself using drinking and going out as a way to escape her problems. Through an independent study with my committee member, Melissa Britt, I began to develop the idea to include more perspectives than my own. I asked, what are some of the many reasons people are drawn to escape? Grounded in this idea, I created house-style choreography, as well used many tools and methods to create this piece as outlined below.

1 to 10. I used this tool as a warm-up. One dancer would start in a shape and say, "One." Each dancer would add on to this shape, adding a number until the group reached ten. I instructed the dancers to be motivated by either constricting someone or trying to get away. This exercise ended up helping us creating the amoeba-like effect at the beginning of the piece.

Journaling. The dancers were to journal about what they, themselves, were trying to avoid or escape from. Also, what did they often do to escape?

What's the News? / Equivalents. The dancers created a headline based on their journal entry and were led in an exercise in Equivalents to choreograph a movement for each word. We then experimented with moving their phrases through space, playing with groupings and speed.

Tableau. The dancers created a tableau or "snap-shot" based on their headline. These snapshots were either an abstract or literal representation of what it was that they were trying to escape from. We ended up using four of these tableaus in the piece. We based the tableaus on the following headlines:

"Man Claims to Hear Voices"

"Man Dives Into His Work to Avoid Death by His Problems"

"I Wish I Could Help Him to Stop Using, But I Always Shut Him Out"



Figure 10. The Escape Piece, "Man Claims to Hear Voices" tableau

The dancers had to work on getting into and staying in character throughout the entirety of the piece. It ranged from silly to dark as they had to transition from having inebriated fun at the bar to shifting into their character's psyche and reasons for numbing their pain. "Escape" became one of my favorite pieces in the show, and possibly that I have ever choreographed. The combination of telling a story and collaborating with the dancers, as well as the moments of unison movement, really satisfied the different aspects of choreography that I enjoy viewing and creating.



Figure 11. The Escape Piece. 1

I did employ a couple more of Liz Lerman's tools in the creative process of the show, and I have included some brief explanations below. In all, we used the tools to create a total of eight pieces in the show, in one way or another.

Movement Metaphor. I created 20 movements for the word, claustrophobia, that I pieced together to create my solo within the "Claustrophobia" piece. I focused on the concepts of anxiety, feeling trapped, not being able to breathe, and wanting to escape. I concentrated on movements like tapping, pressing, contracting, pulling and shaking.

Scripting. I was able to help my assistant director, Jenna, in the approach to her piece, "The Overwhelm," by explaining how to use "Scripting." She did not want to create

cliché movement of the dancers looking "overwhelmed." So, we talked through what an overwhelmed shape looks like and how to use the description of the shape as a choreographic tool.



Figure 12. The Overwhelm. 1

Rickerby Hinds Workshop

Shortly after making the decision to go back to school and to bring back my script, I sent an email to Rickerby Hinds. It had been years since we had spoken, but I had high hopes that he would jump back on board to be a part of my committee again, even though he was no longer at ASU and was back home at the University of California Riverside. In the email, I quickly updated him on what had been going on in my personal life, as well as the plans I had for my

thesis project. I also asked if he could be available to come out to Arizona to work with EPIK for a weekend in the Fall. I knew that if I put him in a room with my dancers for a couple days that magic would happen! There are many creative minds within EPIK, and Hinds has a knack for cultivating that creativity in a space. I had witnessed this when he worked with us in 2012. I also knew that my dancers would connect with his personality instantly. We caught up via telephone, and it was like no time had passed at all. Not only did he agree to continue to serve on my committee, but he was also available to come to town the exact dates I requested! Our conversation took place on my drive to the EPIK cabin retreat, so I was able to share the exciting news with the dancers at a very opportune time to get them even more energized about the process ahead of them. It felt serendipitous.

Come November, Hinds, EPIK, and I stood in a circle in a large studio at ASU. Although a handful of us remained in the company that had worked with him years prior, for most of the dancers, this was their first introduction. They showed up present, pumped, and ready to work.

Hinds began by explaining how to use the four main elements of hip hop (djing, emceeing, graffiti and breakdancing) as creative tools. He led the dancers through improvisational exercises where they used their bodies and voices, not only with words but with sounds and song, to express an emotion or idea. We played with beatboxing and sampling concepts, two methods strongly represented in hip hop culture as well. I appreciated how Hinds weaved the history of hip hop throughout these activities. It was valuable professional development for some of my dancers who do not come from the hip hop/urban dance background. These hip hop theatre exercises set the groundwork for the rest of the weekend where we would focus specifically on the content of the show.

The primary strategy for the rest of the weekend was to split the company into small groups of 7-8 dancers with a page from my script. Because the original script was for a one-woman show, it was extremely text-heavy. I did not want the script to be expressed through a series of monologues between each dance number. So, before the workshop, I picked out a few

pages that I thought could use a different interpretation. The group's task was to take the words from the page and extract the story. Hinds continually emphasized the importance of finding the "beats" of the story or scene. He described a "beat" as "a significant moment in the story that moves the plot forward in a clearly defined way." How could they show the backstory while using less text, or by using it poetically? Using this approach would give focus to the essential components of the piece.

The first time that we split the dancers into groups for this purpose, they took the scene where I was sneaking out of my window to go to a rave. It was a scene full of colorful imagery that they could pull from. Hinds directed them to take the text and create the scene. What came out of this exercise were three very creative and funny scenes. Each group had a unique way to interpret the text that used theatrical dialogue, movement, sampling, and minimal props and costumes. In fact, I ended up using something from each of the group sections to create the "Sneaking Out the Window" and "Rave" scenes in the show, including the way I used a folding chair as my "window."



Figure 13. Rave Piece – The car scene.

The second time we split up the dancers, we gave each group a different page of the script. This time, Hinds asked them to interpret their scene poetically. Again, the groups came back with some exciting and imaginative choices. The standout scene for me was the group that interpreted the text I wrote about past relationships into a sort of "Love AA Meeting." Each person in the "meeting" represented a different part of Kat's psyche. It was so profound that not only did we use it in the show, we barely changed a thing about it! One of the dancers commented that it was interesting that we only heard from half of the "Kats" in the meeting scene, but we decided that sometimes not knowing forces you to write your own narrative. Completion makes you feel like it has all been said, but not having everyone speak left some of the story open. The material from the other two groups helped to shape two other scenes in the show where I am preparing to get into the MRI machine. In both scenes, the groups supplemented my script with some poetic text of their own, which I ended up keeping in the show as well.



Figure 14. Love AA Meeting. 1

Two other important aspects of the show came out of the weekend. First, we knew we wanted my co-artistic director, Weezy, to play a character that acted as a narrator or musical through-line throughout the show. We did this for a couple of reasons. Weezy's rehearsal schedule was limited. We wanted to find a way to include him in the story that wouldn't require him to be at every rehearsal. Also, he is a very talented actor and singer. We thought this would be a good use of his talents while still giving him a feature role that he would enjoy. At the workshop, Hinds tasked him with coming up with five song samples he could sing about the concept of "time," and to write 3-4 lines to go with each one. This exercise set the groundwork for Weezy's monologues that happen throughout the show. His character represents "time," and he speaks directly to the audience, tying the story together while causing them to reflect on their own lives.



Figure 15. Opening scene. Introduction of "Time"

Lastly, it was during the second day of the workshop that we experimented with creating the “human MRI machine.” We had many previous discussions on how we might depict the MRI machine on stage, and Hinds kept commenting on how interesting it would be to make one out of our bodies. We decided to take a stab at it that Sunday morning. We made multiple attempts to show the movement of the machine. I laid down on the dancers in many different ways as they moved under and around me. What we landed upon ended up becoming the opening scene of the show and proved to be a powerful image.



Figure 16. Human MRI Machine

All of the methods that we explored throughout the workshop taught me how to show a back story with less text and the importance of succinctly placing dialogue. I also saw some great examples on how to tell the story from multiple points of view, like using the other characters in a scene to tell Kat's story instead of it always coming from her. The workshop helped build a foundation for me to go back and reshape the script. In all, five different scenes from *Don't Hold Your Breath* had their start in the workshop, as well as most of Weezy's parts as "Time." It was a perfect way to bring more voices into the work. The dancers came up with things together that none of us would have thought of on our own. "That's the beauty of it... We may be thinking as a writer one thing, but then multiple minds come up with brilliance," remarked Hinds.

The way that Hinds facilitated the workshop gave progression to the process, but also freedom. There were just enough tools and parameters for us to grow. We gained theatre techniques that we could also apply to creating choreography. The dancers enjoyed and appreciated the experience, and it showed through their presence and dedication to the process. At the end of the weekend, they shared their gratitude for being able to express themselves through other mediums beyond movement. I had been saying for years that I wanted EPIK dancers to start using their voices more. This workshop gave everyone a voice, not just the dancers who already practiced spoken word or rhyming.

In reflection, I was very pleased with how everyone worked so well together throughout the weekend, even though there were a myriad of ideas being thrown around at any given time. It spoke so much to the dancers and the respect they had for each other. I shared with them that it is an extraordinary thing to have a group that large, that diverse, and with that many talented people. Each of them could have been leaders during that process. Knowing when to give and when to pull back is a dance in itself. This result was a commonality I found between Liz Lerman's workshop and Hind's. Both processes provided a great exercise in collaboration for the company members. The dancers accomplished creating for the betterment of the work and

not just for their own personal gain. It was a practice in being comfortable with either taking the lead or a supportive role.

As the company and Hinds sat at the end of the workshop to reflect on the weekend, Hinds commented to the dancers about working with EPIK five years earlier compared to now. “The spirit of the company remains the same even when the bodies are different, so you should be really proud and hype about the fact that your part of this.” I left the weekend with a full heart and a head full of ideas that I immediately wanted to take back to the drawing board.

Writing Challenges

By the time the January 2018 rolled around, we were almost four months into rehearsals and only two months from performance time, but I still hadn’t written the ending of the show. There were also some monologues that I felt were too wordy, and I knew needed editing. I was having difficulty finding the time that I needed to immerse myself into the script for a number of reasons. I was home with my 1-year-old daughter full-time, so the only time I was able to work on the show (outside of rehearsal) was during naps or if I had a sitter. My mother-in-law started the fall semester coming to help twice a week so that I could go to class and get some work done, but she broke her foot in November and had been out of commission since. And let’s just say that my daughter is not much of a sleeper. The amount of work left to do was causing me a lot of anxiety as the show premiere date crept closer and closer. For shows past, I was able to hole myself away for days at a time or stay up all night to work on writing, cutting music, choreographing and marketing. Now, my nights were typically spent nursing and trying to get as much shut-eye as possible, so I could hopefully function the next day. Thankfully, I had the help of my assistant director, Jenna, for many aspects of the show, including acting as a soundboard for many of my ideas. I have discovered over time that part of the reason I enjoy collaboration is that I need someone to share and bounce ideas off of.

The final scene that I had the most difficulty writing was Kat’s encounter with God. The idea came from a real-life experience I had one day years prior while praying about a

relationship I was in at the time. I was at the point of almost walking away. While praying, out of nowhere I had a clear vision from God. I stood in darkness as a semi-truck drove straight towards me with its lights on full blast. It stopped right in front of me, engine blaring. I immediately knew that it was God. I stood before Him, and in a clear, deep voice He said, "STAY." I clamored, "Whoa, okay, I mean, what are you trying to say, God? I mean... this is a little dramatic with the truck and everything. You want me to stay? But why?" The truck made a left-hand turn, and I caught the license plate, which said, "NEEDED."

God had spoken to me through dreams in the past, but I had never had a vision so clearly while wide awake. In fact, God gave me the idea of EPIK's first show, *Common Ground*, in a dream. I never thought that I would be using this vision for an EPIK show, but I believe that He knew all along. Now I just needed to build upon it. I did not want the final scene to be "preachy" in any way, but I wanted it to provide hope and show God's mercy. It was important to me that the script would speak to people of any background, whether they believed in God or not. I wrote and rewrote. Jenna gave me her ideas, and I also consulted with a mentor of mine, Joani Castillo. Joani is a former pastor with extensive experience in theatre, playwriting, and dance. She has been an integral part of every EPIK show, acting as a sort of dramaturge, giving us critiques to get our show stage-ready. It wasn't until I took myself away from all distractions that I was finally able to write the last scene.

Trip to Riverside

Since starting the process of this show, I knew I wanted to travel to UC Riverside to work with Rickerby Hinds a month or two before getting into the theater. Although I had some acting experience under my belt, this was the most significant role I had ever attempted. Over the past two decades, I had trained myself to go for things I wanted to do and to trust that I would figure it out. I was excited, but also nervous. I wanted to go work with Hinds on my solo sections in the show.

Once the time came to fly to Riverside, however, the trip was less about my acting than it was about the script. We were one month out from the theater. I had not solidified the ending, and I still needed to refine a few other scenes. Hinds and I met in a beautiful downtown studio on a Friday evening and got to work. We poured through the script, page by page, line by line, refining and removing unnecessary text. We physically worked through some of the transitions I was nervous about and talked through staging and props. Over three hours later, we had gone through the entire script, and I was excited to wake up the next morning after a full night's rest (no midnight feedings) to get back to work in the quiet of my hotel room.

That next morning, I woke rested and ready to write. Within one hour I had finished writing the ending. Could I have Skyped with Hinds and stayed in town? Sure. But I think I needed that time away to truly focus on the story without any of life's everyday distractions. Plus, Hinds and I both work better "in-person." Being in the same room together gave more space for ideas, and we were able to experiment with concepts physically. This trip gave me the confidence boost I needed to go back to the company and finish the show. I left Riverside energized and excited. I am truly blessed and grateful to have such an invigorating and nurturing mentorship.

The MRI Machine

Since the moment I decided to rebirth my script, the question I asked myself (and others) over and over again was, "How will we depict the MRI machine on stage?" My co-directors, mentors and I threw around a ton of ideas. We did agree that showing the MRI machine concept in multiple ways throughout the show would be intriguing. I liked the thought of the entire stage representing the machine. All of the flashbacks or scenes took place while she was inside the machine, so it made sense. We talked about "framing" the stage with white fabric to look like the outside of an MRI machine. Another idea that interested me was using a laser beam of light to sweep across the stage as if to represent a scan taking place. As mentioned previously, we also created the machine with our bodies. Additionally, I purchased an

inversion table so that I would have something to lay down on at some point. However, by January, none of the ideas had fully come to fruition.

A story had come up in one of the interviews that I held that had a significant impact on how I finally decided to depict the machine. When asked the question, "What habits do you have in your daily life that you could do without?" the interviewee responded with a hilarious story about swinging from the rafters at a local bar. When I heard this story, I knew I had to include it in the show. I thought, how great would it be to perform this monologue while swinging from something? I had also recently seen the one-man show, *Spiritrials*, by Dahlak Brathwaite. In the show, Brathwaite uses ladders on wheels as a moving prop that he utilized for multiple purposes. His creative use of a simple utility ladder gave me the idea to search for painter scaffolding and props of that nature. I liked the idea of having something on wheels that I could move around as I was speaking and could also be used to shape or frame the space. Not only could I use it for the "swinging from the rafters" scene, but I could use it throughout the entire show in different ways.

I began to search the internet for "minimalist props." I came upon a picture of a metal box frame with a small stage and single folding chair inside of it. I was drawn to the image immediately. Even the stage lighting in the photo gave the feeling I was looking for – stark, cold, and a little ominous. I had found my machine! I just needed someone to construct it, adding wheels in the process. Luckily, Jenna knew a man who welded props for her in the past, and we were able to share our idea and give him the dimensions. I was very nervous. I had never designed something that large, and we were spending a significant amount of money on it (\$1600) to be sure that it was collapsible and strong enough to hold weight, but light and agile enough that I could easily spin and push it around. Another catch was that we were not going to get it until two weeks before stepping into the theater. A lot was riding on the success of this prop. Thankfully, beyond it taking four people and thirty minutes to put it together every time we used it and some hiccups with locking and unlocking the wheels, it worked well! The "frame,"

as we called it, never left the stage during the show. Besides an MRI machine, it served as a hallway, a sign holder, an abstract prop, and of course, as rafters. We did not have very much time to play with the frame in rehearsal before my final committee showing, and it came up in the notes that we should explore more ways to incorporate it into the choreography. With some great tips from my committee, I rechoreographed the frame into a few of the pieces, which in turn made them much more dynamic. The frame became an integral part of the entire show.



Figure 17. Swinging from the Rafters

Performance

Don't Hold Your Breath premiered on Friday, March 9, 2018, at the Black Theatre Troupe Theater in Phoenix, Arizona. We gave seven public showings over two weekends (March 9-11 and 16-17), as well as three student matinees. The student matinees were performed as lecture/demonstrations for local high school and middle school students who were bussed in from all over the Phoenix Metropolitan area. We held two Q & A talkbacks with the company following two of our public matinee showings. In total, over eleven hundred people came to see our show. Some even came twice. The final performance ran about ninety minutes in length with no intermission. Following are some additional images from one of the showings, ordered chronologically.



Figure 18. Let me take a selfie (Kat is not taking the situation seriously)



Figure 19. MRI Instructions. 1



Figure 20. MRI Instructions. 2



Figure 21. MRI Instructions. 3



Figure 22. MRI Krump Piece



Figure 23. The Spelling Bee. 2



Figure 24. The Rave Piece. 1



Figure 25. The Rave Piece. 2



Figure 26. "Time" singing about back in the day



Figure 27. Birthday Party. 1



Figure 28. Birthday Party. 2



Figure 29. Birthday Party. 3



Figure 30. The Overwhelm. 2



Figure 31. Love AA Meeting. 2



Figure 32. The Escape. 2



Figure 33. The Breath Piece. 2

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Don't Hold Your Breath was a vast project that spanned five years of thinking, making and executing. When asked to analyze such an undertaking, it is almost overwhelming. There was some familiarity in creating the show since I utilized my own company of dancers and we had experience creating and presenting shows together in the past. However, even before starting this process, I talked to them about how "different" this show and the process to create it would be. For this analysis, I will focus on how this show was different, and the challenges that arose throughout the process. I have narrowed the differences to the three categories of "Dance and Theatre Equality," "Creative Process," and "Technical Aspects." I will also address the audience response to the show, as well as the questions that were raised as a result of the entire process.

Dance and Theatre Equality

First and foremost, the most apparent difference in *Don't Hold Your Breath* in comparison to other EPIK shows was the amount of text that was used to tell the story. EPIK performances have always included some aspects of spoken word, whether it be spoken word poetry between dance pieces, recorded text in a video or musical track, comedic skits, or text with movement, but never had we attempted to bring the spoken word to the forefront and on the same level of importance as the movement. For years, I had wanted to move the company in this direction, and we had tried new things in each show leading up to this point. However, this was a leap in that direction. I felt like I was taking a trust fall, hoping that the dancers would be on board to not only catch me but to fall with me also. When I first told them about the idea, I could see the uncertainty in some of their faces. I was going to be asking more from them as far as using their voices than ever before. They were excited to do something new, but I could tell that they were a little uncertain about the whole thing. Even I, myself, was a bit nervous about the undertaking, especially since much of the acting and speaking landed on me, but I would not let

them see my hesitation. It was vital that I seemed confident in the idea so that they could rest easy.

In reality, this was the first time I had taken a lead role of this nature. I had never attempted performing this much text (at least as an adult). I was taking many risks, but this was the shift I was seeking in doing the solo work, so I was excited for the challenge. I had to trust myself. One of the challenging parts of performing this role was that I had to take myself to an emotional place every time I reached the scenes about my mother. I wanted every scene to come from an authentic place. Backstage before the "Grief" piece, I had to remove myself from everyone and go to a quiet place, even if for only a minute or two, to get my head and emotions into the memory of when my mother passed. It was difficult. Some nights were harder than others because my adrenaline was pumping from the performance, but once I was about to walk on stage through the corridor of dancers, I was ready each time. During tech rehearsals, the dancers were being silly and joked around backstage before that scene, and it was distracting. I had to remind them of what I needed to do to be ready for that piece and requested that they be quiet and focused before we walked on stage together. They understood and respected that wish from then on, which I appreciated.

Stepping into the role of "Kat" and out of the role of "director" was something I had to wrestle with throughout the process. I was not able to let go of my director role until the full tech run of the show. Up until that point, I was still focused on making sure the dancers were doing what they needed to do, that the technical aspects of the show were running smoothly, and even small details like making sure that our VIP "swag bags" were getting put together. Not only did I feel like my direction was necessary for most of these things, but they are also tasks that I truly enjoy doing. I love all aspects of putting on a production. However, this show, again, was different. I needed to be able to immerse myself into becoming Kat. It was at this point that I had to let go and trust my co-directors and my dancers to do what they needed to do. It was the only way the show could be successful. I barely left the stage the entire show (which was a

challenge all in itself). I could not be directing from on stage. Besides, I had to be “all in” with my character and be believable to the audience. If the audience did not buy into my character, the entire show would suffer. It was an incredible practice of letting go of control. Honestly, it felt great to focus on my craft instead of worrying about everyone else constantly. In past shows, this was a struggle. For this show, I was given permission (and directed) to give the reins to someone else and focus on myself. I had forgotten how enjoyable that was to employ that amount of focus to my own performance. After watching the footage from the show, there are definitely some things that I would like to improve about my execution. Most of them had to do with the sound and rhythm of my voice, like changing my voice more dramatically when I am playing my younger self and taking more pauses or “beats” between lines. There are many ways that I can continue to grow as a performer, but in all, I am pleased with how I did, considering all of the factors surrounding this production. I look forward to improving my skills even more in the future.

Even though I held down the majority of the speaking lines in the show, there were a handful of scenes where the dancers got to take on characters and lines as well. Two of those scenes were developed during the Rickerby Hinds workshop, so they happened organically, but because of the order of the pieces in the show, not all of the original cast members were able to stay in the scenes. Also, there were the two “nurse” parts that I needed to fill. I sent out the scripts and told the dancers that we would be auditioning for the parts at one of the rehearsals. When the time came for the audition, I was shocked that I did not even have enough people who wanted to audition to fill the parts! I could not believe that even after our workshop with Hinds that many of them were still not confident enough in their voice and acting skills to give it a shot. When I ended up just assigning a few roles to people, they were okay with it. It was almost like they did not want to put themselves in that position voluntarily, but if they were told to do it, they would. This made me realize that we have more work to do as far as their training goes

over the coming years if we want to continue in this direction. Moreover, we will also need to emphasize the importance of acting and speaking when bringing on new dancers.

The necessity of cross-training the dancers did not only come up in reference to acting. EPIK calls itself a "street-fusion" company. We expect all dancers to cross-train in all styles so that when it comes time to create for a show, we can focus on the message we are trying to get across and can move in and out of multiple styles without having to focus on the rules associated with each style. The disparity in ability became apparent in a few of the dance pieces that tended to have more "fusion-like" choreography. It would have been easy to remove the dancers from the pieces that were unable to perform it at a high level, but then we would not have been faithful to our identity as a fusion company. These revelations led to some deep questioning about who we are and who we want to be, which I will address at the end of the analysis section of this document.

Creative Process

As stated previously, for past shows, my co-director and I would choose the subject matter that we wanted to address. We would share the overall concept as well as the pieces we had in mind with our dancers. We would open the floor to their ideas, hand out choreography assignments, schedule rehearsals, and then everyone was off to create. The development of those shows was more about the product than the process. *Don't Hold Your Breath* was about the process just as much as it was about the final product. Working with Liz Lerman and Rickerby Hinds had a significant influence on how I chose to approach creating this work. Their emphasis on workshopping and collaborating in rehearsals to generate material was how I had always dreamt of EPIK functioning more consistently. Working closely with Lerman and Hinds gave me creative tools that I will continue to use moving forward. The opportunity to have them both come work with the company not only put the tools in the hands of the dancers but also cultivated "buy-in" from them to this new way of working. Their leadership and facilitation made

it easier for me to continue to use these tools in rehearsals more so than if I had just presented the ideas to the dancers myself.

I found working this way (using Lerman and Hinds' strategies of collaboration) to be extremely gratifying. The process called for the dancers to be vulnerable, and rehearsals were often emotional, and sometimes frustrating when we would experiment with things over and over again. It was a struggle for some of the dancers because there was so much effort put forth into the process, and it took a long time to see the final product. They were not used to having to ride the wave of uncertainty, not knowing what the outcome would be. This was reflected through some negative attitudes at some of the rehearsals from a handful of the dancers. A few out twenty-four is not that many, but unfortunately, all it can take is one bad attitude to bring an entire group down. Luckily, we were able to squash most of the negativity through open and honest communication, as well as some mediation between dancers. Their dedication and maturity were tested through the experience. Fortunately, many of them reflected after the show that they had to learn that good things take time, and looking back, they appreciated the process, mainly since they were happy with the final product and response from the audience.

Not only were the dancers pleased with the final result of the show, many of them expressed that they were appreciative of how its content caused some self-reflection. In and out of rehearsal, I often had my dancers journal about the show's subject matter. Every few days, I would post one of the questions from the interviews in our WhatsApp group for them to reflect upon. Many were personally affected by the issues addressed in the show. They reflected on how it caused them to examine their own lives and contemplate the choices that they were making about how they spent their time. An attitude of gratitude was heightened during the run of the show because of the reactions we were receiving from the audience.

Another part of the creative process that differed from past productions was the use of interviews to generate material for the show. I originally wanted to focus most of my interviews on people over the age of sixty-five, since they had already lived over half of their life. I thought

that they would have a broader perspective to share than someone younger. In the end, only two of the interviewees were with subjects over sixty-five years old. What I discovered was that it was not the age of the subject that correlated with a broad perspective, but it was what they had gone through, and their ability to reflect and share with honesty that led to the most intriguing dialogue. It makes me wonder what other assumptions are made based on an "ageist" attitude in our society. I might have characterized one of my younger interviewees that I felt had this broad perspective as an "old soul." That, again, portrays her perspective as something that usually comes with age. Perhaps it is based more accurately on the experiences she has gone through, or possibly, it's just a personality trait. I pulled the most material from three of the interviewees who's ages spanned a thirty-one year range – a 65-year-old man who lost his wife to cancer, a 40-year-old man who was recently diagnosed with a degenerative disc disease and spinal stenosis, and a 34-year-old woman who is a cancer survivor. As mentioned previously, it was more difficult than expected to draw specific stories out of most of the subjects. They spoke in generalities about a particular subject and would only go into more detail if I probed them to do so. What I think I was hoping to get were stories with more specificity so that I could fashion them into pieces of Kat's life. I have to believe this had to do with the type of questions I asked and the language that I used. For instance, the questions that were more specific tended to produce more detailed responses, like, "What habits do you have in your life that you could do without?", as opposed to a more general question, like, "Who is the most important person in your life, and why?". When I first wrote the questions, we had not started working on the show yet. Once we began to craft the show, I had a better idea of what I was looking for and could have easily left out one-third of the questions that I asked in order to focus on the more relevant topics. Regardless of this, I am pleased with the interview process in that not only did I get to know my subjects on an intimate level, but they also seemed to have benefited from the process as well. If I go this route to generate material in the future, which I hope to do, I will be more explicit on what I want to get out of the interview much earlier in the development of the

performance. I would also consider partnering with a sociologist for this part of the project for their expertise on conducting interviews of this nature.

Technical Aspects

There were many technical aspects about *Don't Hold Your Breath* that were different from shows past. First, we presented the show at the Black Theatre Troupe (BTT) Theater in Phoenix, an intimate theater with only one hundred forty seats in a raked audience. Up until this point, EPIK productions had always taken place on a large proscenium stage that sat 500-600 patrons in any given show. The stage itself was smaller than we were used to with only two wings on either side that ran right up to a wall. There was no side stage. The only backstage area was behind the back wall, and even that was extremely limited. Given the intimate nature of the script, I felt that it called for an intimate space. The design also fit the minimalist feel that we were trying to attain for this show. The intimacy of the script also called for the omission of our traditional fifteen-minute intermission. The story was continuous with virtually no black-outs, and it took you on such an emotional journey that an intermission would have interrupted the flow of the tale.

In addition, *Don't Hold Your Breath* ran for two weekends as opposed to one in shows past. A two-week run made sense to me for a few reasons. The audience held fewer patrons than the theaters we had sold out in previous years. If we were to expect a similar number of attendees, we would need to offer additional showings. It had also been a dream of mine to do a more extended run. The dancers work for months on a project for it only to be over in a couple of days. It goes by too fast. A two-week run would allow us to enjoy the show for a more extended period. One benefit of using the BTT Theater was that it was a week-long rental period so that we could use the theater any time during those two weeks. That gave us greater flexibility for rehearsals, setting light and sound cues, and offering student-matinees during the school day for local high and middle schools. Lastly, it gave a chance for the word to get out about the show, and for the excitement and anticipation to build for the second weekend.

One of the more challenging technical aspects of the show was the microphone situation. EPIK has never had a performance with this many speaking roles. After talking with our stage manager, Daniel Davisson, I had to lower my expectation for how many mics we would use. Not only would it be costly, but with almost every piece having a quick costume change in between, it would be impossible to take the mics on and off fast enough. Luckily, we were in an intimate theater with adequate acoustics. Microphones were not necessary for many of the roles. We landed on four microphones – one for myself, Weezy, and the two nurses. One of the nurses would share her mic with Kunta, our “scavenger hunt guide” for the birthday party piece.

The number of microphones was only our first challenge. I had to quickly figure out how to keep my mic on and functioning while I danced, sang, swung from the frame, and changed clothing. Also, moving in and out between dancing and speaking, musical cues and silence, led to a very complicated cue sheet for our stage manager. This show was incredibly complex. Our first couple of tech rehearsals were full of missing mic and music cues. I was extremely stressed about this. If the cues did not happen, the show would be a disaster. I realized at that moment how crucial Daniel’s part was to the success of the show and that much weight was directly on his shoulders to pull off these cues. What I did not take into consideration was that he was still learning the order and pace of the show, and thankfully, due to his skill and professionalism, by the time the dress rehearsal came, he had it down. The showings were not always perfect, but most shows rarely are. I am happy to report that there were never any major technical disasters that took place during the ten public showings.

Audience Response

Opening night was an interesting experience. I remember being on stage and thinking to myself how quiet the audience was. This was not something any of us were used to. Our audiences are usually very vocal and interactive. I found myself wondering if they were not enjoying the show, and I know the dancers felt it as well. I tried not to stress about it and gave the best performance I could. We received a great round of applause and even a standing

ovation, but it was not until we stepped into the lobby that we started to understand what had happened. The response was very emotional, and there were many people still in tears, sharing how the story affected them and how much they loved it. I expected an emotional response from my family members and those who knew the backstory of my mother's illness. In fact, I tried to prepare them before they came (which they informed me was still not enough preparation). What was unexpected was how it affected people who had no connection to my mother or me. It seemed like the audience really connected to the story. Their quietness was not only due to the fact that they were taking it all in but also because there weren't any blackouts. They did not know whether they should applaud or not.

The next night and every performance after, the dancers gathered in a circle on the stage to pray before the show. During this time, we would share stories and comments from the previous performance. The response was universal. This story was touching people in ways that we never could have foreseen. Each audience member we talked to seemed to connect to it in a different way. While we performed, we could audibly hear people sniffing in the crowd. During one showing there was even someone uncontrollably sobbing. We all agreed after opening night that this show was beyond us as performers; that God had His hand in this story and we were being used as vessels to reach people where they were at. It caused me to have more peace going into each show because I just asked God to do what he was going to do and gave it to Him. We prayed that he would prepare the hearts of those who were going to be in the audience to receive the message in the way that they needed to hear it at that moment. It was nice to give it over to God and trust that He was going to orchestrate the whole thing. We just needed to show up and give Him the authority to take us on this journey. I was humbled by the many people who thanked me for sharing my story. Some went even so far to say that it was life-changing, helping them come to some important realizations.

Beyond affecting the audience emotionally, I was intrigued by the comments that it was so much more than "just a dance show." Many people said that it was the most creative show

they had seen in a long time. This type of feedback was especially poignant when coming from people who are active in the arts that I have much respect for. Another interesting response came from multiple parents who brought their adolescent children to the performance. I had been concerned about the age appropriateness of the show because of the subject matter, so I struggled to label it as only appropriate for a certain age. The parents I talked to commented how grateful they were to have taken their kids because it gave them the chance to have important conversations following the show that would have been difficult to bring up otherwise.

Because of the positive feedback that we received from the patrons, our audiences continued to grow. The word was spreading. Some people even came back to see it more than once. By the time the second weekend came, we had sold out our two evening shows, even adding chairs for our closing night. Selling out our closing show to a very enthusiastic audience was the perfect way to end the experience. Our hearts were full of gratitude.

Questions Raised

In creating *Don't Hold Your Breath*, there was a significant emphasis placed on everything being process-oriented. For EPIK, focusing so much on the process allowed for more collaboration, as well as artist investment and ownership in the outcome. The fusion of creative practices enriched the delivery of the performance, as well as each dancer's experience. This way of working thrust the company to a new level artistically and caused us to contemplate who we want to be in the field. Who are we and where do we fit?

We have always defined EPIK Dance Company as "street-fusion." After producing *Don't Hold Your Breath*, we are asking ourselves what that really means. Originally, we defined "street-fusion" as fusing street styles and concert dance to tell stories. However, when reflecting on the content of the show, there were only a couple of pieces that you could even label as fusion. A more appropriate way to describe what we did would be a "layering" of different dance forms rather than "fusing." These thoughts brought to mind the challenge of the dancers performing all of the pieces at a professional level. If we were truly fusing the styles with

dancers from different backgrounds, not everyone would be at a professional level in every style. This caused some pieces in the show to not be performed as “clean” as they could have been had we cast them with the dancers we knew would pick it up and perform it easily. We were trying to stick to challenging our dancers to perform all styles. But could “street-fusion” start to mean something else? Perhaps with our new direction of utilizing more theatrical aspects like spoken word and hip hop theatre, “street-fusion” could begin to mean a fusion of dance with forms of theatrical text. Or, maybe “street” could speak to the subject matter that we gravitate towards. Subjects relevant to current events and culture be looked at as things important to the “every man/woman on the street.” Alternatively, maybe we need to drop that label altogether and come up with a new description of ourselves.

We had a similar challenge even labeling the show itself. Was it just a dance show? Many audience members had commented that it was much more. Was it a play? Musical theatre? Physical theatre? Hip Hop Theatre? All of these questions are crucial to answer as we move forward as a company. So far, the discussion continues. Luckily, over the next year, we will be participating in a mentorship that we hope to glean some guidance from in these areas.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Time” is defined as “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future as a whole” (“Time,” n.d.). Since starting graduate school, through the process of creating and performing *Don't Hold Your Breath*, the concept and importance of “time” were continually emphasized and evaluated. I reflected on my past, plucking stories from my life to share with the audience. I assessed my present use of time, having to negotiate space to create while also navigating the importance of being a full-time mother. And finally, I weighed how I wanted to use the time I had left in my future. I came to find that the process of creating the show did not only cause much self-reflection, but it had an introspective effect on everyone involved, from the dancers to the audience members. The process also raised questions on the identity and future direction of EPIK Dance Company.

On a personal level, I feel that *Don't Hold Your Breath* has been the most important work that I have done in my artistic life thus far for many reasons. First, this show pushed me creatively as well as performatively. I exceeded my own perceived limitations of my abilities to write, choreograph, act and direct. The way I worked collaboratively with the company was exhilarating and fulfilling and finally took us down the path that I have been yearning to go creatively. Lastly, the story was very personal to me. The majority of the story came from my life. Not only was it therapeutic for me as I worked through the grieving process of losing my mother, but I came to find that it was helping some of the other dancers grieve as well. There was a sweet moment before one of the shows where Weezy expressed in our company circle that this show was also a kind of closure for him and some of the other company members as it related to my mother's passing. Through tears, he shared that he and the dancers had shared in this grief with me and this show was helping us all work through it together. I was touched and felt so genuinely grateful and connected with him and the dancers at that moment. It was an honor that my personal experiences could be used to affect the lives of others. This was the most

gratifying part of the entire experience. I witnessed the effect that the process and performance had on my dancers as well as the audience. In my opinion, you cannot ask for much more as an artist than to know that your work profoundly touches someone, let alone many. Lastly, it was a way for me to honor my mother's legacy while also leaving a legacy for my own daughter through a tangible story that she can always refer back to. I hope that it will cause her to reflect on her own life when she is old enough.

Future Direction

Ever since my co-director and I started EPIK Dance Company, we have had the desire to tour. We have produced six original stage shows since 2009, and each was well-received, many selling out large theaters. We have flirted with the idea of touring, attending the Western Arts Alliance booking conference in 2013, and also applying for grants, but nothing ever panned out. Life always somehow got in the way. I believe that *Don't Hold Your Breath* is our most mature work yet. That belief, coupled with the positive feedback we received, makes me think that it may finally be the right time to tour.

During the run of the show, we were nominated by Mesa Arts Center for the Western Arts Alliance Launchpad Program. The Launchpad Program is WAA's "start-up program for emerging artists. Launchpad participants receive a three-year bundle of technical assistance, professional development, mentoring, promotional benefits, and membership" ("Launchpad," n.d.). The goal is to "make it possible for artists to become visible to, and to connect with, the managers and presenters who will book them" ("Launchpad," n.d.). Our nomination was accepted, and we were invited to apply. The application was tedious. We had to write about who we were, our history and our goals for the future, as well as figure out what our costs and technical requirements would be to tour the show. It also pushed us to create a digital press kit. In the end, we did not get awarded the program, but they still offered us a year-long mentorship with two former WAA board members. Two of my co-directors and I will be attending the WAA

conference in Las Vegas in August 2018 and will get to meet with our mentors as well as research the conference and juried performances so that we can apply to showcase in 2019.

We have also received interest from a non-profit in presenting *Don't Hold Your Breath* as part of their yearly fundraising event in November 2018. We are currently waiting for their decision at the end of July. Regardless of whether this happens, we plan on presenting the show again sometime in 2019. Our focus will be to get the show ready for touring, as well as recasting specific pieces and choreographing others. As with any production, hindsight is 20/20. We will go back to the drawing board to make the show tighter and cleaner. This is just the beginning for *Don't Hold Your Breath!*

"Time" is a precious commodity that we often take for granted. The time I spent laboring over *Don't Hold Your Breath* was emotional, exhausting, and exhilarating. Creating the work stretched me as a writer, choreographer, director and performer, and far exceeded my initial goal in 2012 to use my voice. It thrust EPIK Dance Company forward into a new dimension of crafting and performing. I will always look back on the time of creating *Don't Hold Your Breath* as precious. I could not be more grateful to those who came alongside me on this journey, and I cannot imagine a more meaningful way to culminate my MFA experience.

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APPENDIX A
PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

POSTER



EPIK Dance Company presents "Don't Hold Your Breath," a dynamic new evening-length work. Through street-fusion dance, live music and visually striking choreography, as well as comical and thought-provoking text, EPIK will take you on an emotional journey that confronts some of life's most existential questions.

***Are you making the most
of your time on this earth?***

***When it comes down to it,
what is truly important?***

TICKETS ON SALE NOW

Pre-sale \$22.50 // At the door \$25

WWW.EPIKDANCECO.ORG

SHOW TIMES

March 9th // 7:30pm

March 10th // 2pm & 7:30pm

March 11th // 2pm

March 16th // 7:30pm

March 17th // 2pm & 7:30pm



HELEN K MASON PERFORMING ARTS CENTER 1333 E Washington St. Phoenix, AZ 85034

POSTCARD

EPIK Dance Company Presents...

DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH

March 9-11 & 16-17, 2018
Helen K. Mason Performing Arts Center
PURCHASE TICKETS AT EPIKDANCECO.ORG

*"Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the day.
Sometimes you wake up in the middle of your life." -Yarrow Kraner*



DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH

SHOW TIMES

March 9th // 7:30pm
March 10th // 2pm & 7:30pm
March 11th // 2pm
March 16th // 7:30pm
March 17th // 2pm & 7:30pm

TICKETS ON SALE NOW

Pre-sale \$22.50 // At the door \$25
WWW.EPIKDANCECO.ORG

EPIK Dance Company presents, "Don't Hold Your Breath," a dynamic new evening length work. Through street-fusion dance, live music and visually striking choreography, as well as comical and thought-provoking text, EPIK will take you on an emotional journey that confronts some of life's most existential questions.

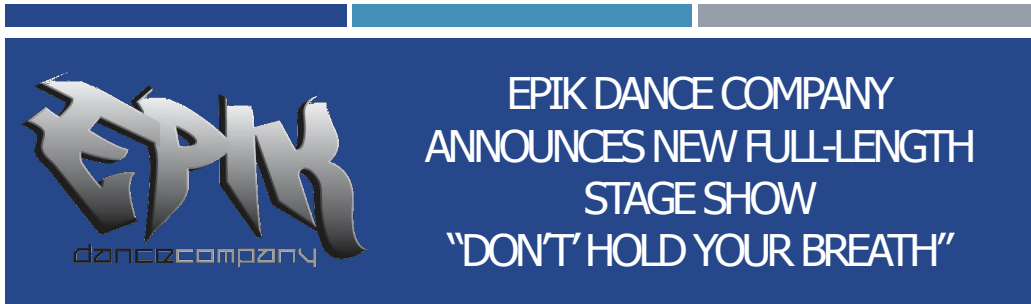
Are you making the most of your time on this earth?

When it comes down to it, what is truly important?



HELEN K MASON PERFORMING ARTS CENTER 1333 E Washington St. Phoenix, AZ 85034

For Immediate Release



EPIK Dance Company is excited to announce a new full length stage show, "Don't Hold Your Breath".

"Don't Hold Your Breath," an EPIK Dance Company presentation, follows Kat, a woman tiptoeing the line between her party girl past and the thought of finally growing up and settling down. Typically confident and self-assured, she's now grappling with the idea of life and death. Kat finds herself in an MRI machine that could ultimately determine her fate. As the machine examines her body, she begins to examine her life, causing her to confront some of life's most existential questions. Has she spent her time wisely? Would she do anything differently if given a second chance? When it comes down to it, and all distractions are stripped away, what is truly important? Her thoughts take her to memories of her past and visions for her future as she faces the reality that life is finite and tomorrow is not promised.

EPIK is known for fusing street and classical dance forms with performance art to tell stories. A *Mayor's Arts Award* winner and three-time *Governor's Arts Award* nominee, EPIK continues to make bold statements with their performances and work in education and art for social change. EPIK has sold out theaters with their critically acclaimed shows, "Common Ground," "EPIK Effect," and "Simply EPIK." And now we bring you "Don't Hold Your Breath"!

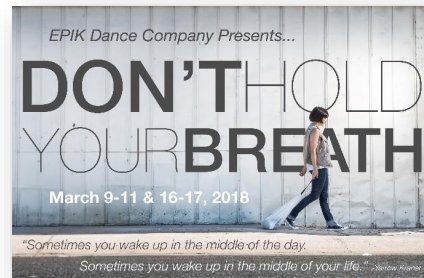
Performance Dates:

Friday, March 9, 2018	7:30PM
Saturday, March 10 2018	2:00PM & 7:30PM
Sunday, March 11, 2018	2:00PM

Friday, March 16, 2018	7:30PM
Saturday, March 17, 2018	2:00PM & 7:30PM

Location:

Helen K. Mason Performing Arts Center
1333 E. Washington St. Phoenix, AZ. 85034



Tickets on sale NOW! www.epikdanceco.org



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