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March 29, 2022

*Morning Has Broken:*

Solo-Devising, Self-Advocacy, and Sharing the Ache

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### *Morning Has Broken:*

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By Abrianna Belvedere

This document describes the process of creating *Morning Has Broken*, a devised piece created and performed by Abrianna Belvedere. The first chapter describes the process of developing supportive and safe approaches to autobiographical solo-devised work, and the second describes the process of sharing that work with collaborators as a practice of self-advocacy and affirmation. The goal of this creative process was to develop and harness the skill of self-advocacy in and out of a theatrical context, as well as create personal and unique rituals to work through grief as an individual and as a community.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PRELIMINARY RESEARCH (SUMMER/FALL 2021)

#### Early Development and Goals

In the summer of 2020, I read Christine Ristaino's memoir "All the Silent Spaces (2019)," which detailed her journey of healing from the cycle of violence, after she was attacked in front of her children outside of a supermarket. As she processes the harm done to her, she begins to recognize the many ways she was exposed to violence at a young age. As I read, I found myself reflecting on the role that violence played in my own life, particularly in my relationship with my mother. I was inspired by Dr. Ristaino's efforts to break the cycle of violence and to heal from her trauma for the sake of her children, and I felt called to create a theatrical piece about my own experience and efforts to heal intergenerational trauma.

I felt that the form should be a devised piece, a theatrical style that depends on collaboration, intuition, and flexibility. At the recommendation of Professor Caitlin Hargraves, I read "*Women, Collective Creation, and Devised Performance: The Rise of Women Theatre Artists in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2016)," a collection of essays written about the role of women in the history of devised theater, edited by Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit. Proudfit's essay "From Neva Boyd to Viola Spolin: How Social Group Work in 1920s' Settlement Houses Defined Collective Creation in 1960s' Theatres" centers the community benefit of devising in social programs for immigrants in settlement homes in the early 20th century, and the intersectionality that arises from devised work. I felt drawn to the social benefits of devised theater programs in settlement houses, and how these programs did not have a leader with a specific vision, but the group worked together to create a piece with a focus on the process of collective creation. I originally proposed a group-devised piece, but, due to the typical time constraints of creating a devised piece in this manner, I was advised by the Theater Studies Academic Procedures Committee to adapt my proposal to a solo piece.



Ultimately, I realized that my main goals with this piece were to create something that resonates and draws from my communities, and to focus on the process, including as many voices as possible (though they may not be in the room developing the piece with me, or can only serve as advisors to the piece). I also recognized the importance of “play” in the process of devised theater as a way to create without self-judgment. I realized that games, dance, and improvisation would allow me to develop material that feels spontaneous and fresh, while also increasing the number and types of sources.

Despite my new understanding of my goals and focus, I was disappointed that I would not be able to pursue a group-devised piece. What drew me to devised work originally was the importance placed on collaboration and teamwork. I did not want to feel alone in the process or isolated, especially considering the themes of isolation I would be working with as it relates to cycles of violence. I found the prospect of doing a solo-devised piece particularly challenging, but I recognized the ability it would give me to focus on my story and to self-advocate. I have learned that a large part of any kind of theatrical work (and any kind of collaborative work in any realm) requires a strong awareness of one’s goals and boundaries, as well as the ability to articulate and prioritize them. I realized that the solo work would allow me to center my own voice, and to learn how to advocate for myself without the outside pressure of a group. However, I realized that I would still need to create a large support system for this process with people I trusted.

I was able to gather a team of advisers who I felt would help me to establish my goals for the piece--Professor Hargraves as my head adviser, as well as Dr. Christine Ristaino and Professor Kimberly Belflower. It was important to me that my advisers were all women, as this piece would center women’s perspectives of violence and community, and that they each had some sort of experience with devised work. Professor Hargraves was my director in the first devised piece I did, entitled *Nochera*, and she assisted me greatly in developing my process. She encouraged me to focus on the process--writing narratives, creating games, giving special

attention to devised movement--rather than focusing on the ultimate product and performance of my piece.

I found this an incredibly helpful insight. It aided me in setting goals, and placed more emphasis on my own learning experience, rather than the presentation of the piece. This advice bolstered my ultimate question of how solo-devising teaches and develops self-advocacy, particularly in the lives of survivors. I learned which of my goals I wanted to prioritize and how to leave plenty of space for unanswered questions in the process. It also allowed me to rely more on feedback from others during the process, rather than waiting for their feedback at the end of the presentation. This helped ease some of my anxieties about creating this piece on my own, as well as increased the number of people I can use as resources (compared to a room of a selected few actors in a group-devised process.) A major resource I gained was using my Playwriting class as a workshop for my preliminary writings. Devised movement with the purpose of conveying story was a comfortable starting place for me to begin working on alone, with the later hope of adding another collaborator; however, I felt less comfortable with the writing process. I felt I needed the skills and feedback from others in order to effectively convey the story through my chosen structure of a funeral mass. I was advised to choose a clear structure to work within, and I knew that the Mass was an important part of my life and a respite I sought out to cope with traumatic events. As I reflected on the themes I wanted to explore in my piece--the breaking and ending of cycles, my feelings of grief, my desire to cope with the presence of a collective-- I realized that the funeral mass was a ritual that dealt with all of these things. It became a helpful starting point and model to work within. In creating drafts and editing my writing with peer feedback, I found that themes, questions, and opportunities to devise movement with my future collaborators continued to open up for me.

With these foundational goals and practices in mind, I was able to solidify the questions I want to ask within my piece. While my research question asks how I can advocate for myself through devised theater, the question I am using to self-advocate with my audience is "How can

we be more involved in our communities in order to recognize subtle signs of abuse, and truly see victims and survivors of abuse for who they are?” As I hone in more on this question in my writing, I can see the role of others in my process more clearly, and my piece has begun to incorporate more interaction with my audience, and thus more community engagement.

My Playwriting class, then, became pivotal for determining whether or not my piece was doing what I wanted it to do, in terms of how it affected the audience. I received Peer Feedback Letters, which helped me to pinpoint which elements were helping me to emphasize my goal of involving my community as witnesses and advocates, in addition to my own self-advocacy. The most difficult feedback for me to receive was pity—I found that, despite all my efforts to ensure that the memoir elements were not extorting the audience for shallow compassion, there were still elements that made people feel lucky when comparing their life to mine. This shifted my writing extensively because my goal was to have a more active response from the audience (versus pity, which tends to end once audience members leave the performance.) I found that I needed to get the audience more involved in the piece, so I included instances of audience sharing through letters written before the piece, so there was a feeling of equality between myself and the audience. I also included instances of audiences participating, not only as witnesses, but also as people involved in the act of social isolation, gathering, and healing. For example, I included an opportunity for the audience to give one another the Sign of Peace, a prominent ritual of forgiveness and community building in the Mass (from which I, as actor, will be excluded.) I am interested in seeing how this experiment affects different audiences, and whether this will help them to feel that this is not just *my* story, but a far more common one that is shared by survivors.

### Finding the Words

By the fall semester, I had a strong idea of what the movement might look like, and what processes I wanted to use to develop a vocabulary of movement in the piece, but I was still unsure of what the verbal storytelling would be like. I watched *What the Constitution Means to*

*Me* (2020) by Heidi Scheck, which is structured to function as a debate, a memoir, and a political call to action. The method of interweaving these three purposes was effective, and I found that it would be useful to keep in mind as I wove together the funeral mass, the stories of my mother, and the movement. Scheck also plays a lot with verb tense in the piece, and I thought that it would be a useful tool for me to use, especially because the two main characters in my piece are my past self and my present/future self.

I began writing by setting up the structure of the play using the structure of the funeral mass. For each section of the mass, I correlated a memory, and wrote around that memory, utilizing different verb tenses, styles, and quotations of the prayers of the mass. I also incorporated specific rituals and images into the plot, such as an opening prayer, washing of the feet, and the variations on the Consecration (a ritual in the Mass where the host is transubstantiated into the Body of Christ). After I completed my first draft, I was able to go through and edit, as well as ask for feedback. Receiving feedback was useful to my writing, and an integral part of my overall process. Through feedback, I was able to find the images I had lost, or only mentioned once, as well as locate where I clung too tightly to the structure of the mass or had lost it. For example, there were scenes that were reorganized so that I would be able to introduce the structure of the funeral mass, so that the audience becomes familiar with the goals and form at the start of the show, rather than it being revealed towards the middle.

As I wrote and edited, I reflected on *What the Constitution Means to Me*. Scheck discusses how the issues of domestic violence in her family lineage were not just unique, isolated experiences of violence, but one of many in a statistic, exacerbated by the lack of protections for women in the Constitution. I found that I was not only inspired by the style of Scheck's piece but also the content. I realized that instances of violence are not out of the ordinary, but a daily occurrence in the lives of women. Because of my experiences of violence, both physical and emotional, done by mothers to daughters, I realized how similar our stories were—Scheck explores the nature of violence against women, the cycle of violence, and the lack of legal

protections for women. I realized that these stories of domestic violence seem to accumulate without anyone noticing, and, through that, I was able to find my ultimate purpose--to make people notice, see, and prioritize victims and survivors more than they do now. Stories about the government, my communities, and my affiliations came to the forefront. I realized that I needed to emphasize the role that society plays in how we address violence, particularly in the state of Georgia, where I grew up. The element of community continues to grow more essential as I develop the piece.

Though my investigation of solo performance is ultimately questioning the role of self-advocacy within our system of theater-making, I find that I cannot escape the influence of community. My piece seems to be a constant search for understanding my own self and identity, but it is vital that the identity I find is only ever *within* a society or community, and continuously affected and adjusted by society and community. It is, after all, impossible to advocate for oneself without a community to share one's needs—and self-advocacy is most necessary when a community does not already provide or account for that individual's needs. My intention, ultimately, is to emphasize the role of a community that was absent or absent-minded as the violence was occurring, as well as to emphasize the role of the audience as my community in sharing my story.

The structure of my piece is vital to including and evaluating the role of community, as well as creating a space of collective creation and understanding. In “Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community Through Theater and Writing (2007),” Jodi Kanter recognizes that there is no form of collective, community-based grieving within Western culture, where individualism and work ethic is prized above all.<sup>[1]</sup> It is difficult to talk about grief or to show emotional responses to grief in the West, particularly in white communities. Verbalizing grief becomes even more elusive when the subject of grief is not the death of a specific person, but the death of

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<sup>1</sup> Jodi Kanter. *Performing Loss : Rebuilding Community Through Theater and Writing*. (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 2, ProQuest Ebook Central.

an intangible concept. In this piece, I am mourning the death of childhood and the death of dreams---essentially, mourning what could have been if things were different. It is vital to mourn these things, to invent and to engage in a ritual that does not yet exist, at least formally, and certainly not collectively. The grief that comes with violence and abuse is just as pervasive as the grief of the loss of life (though, in many cases, they are often intertwined). When the grief is left unprocessed or unacknowledged--either by the survivor or their community--then it adds to the cycle of violence, and destroys the individual psyche. In utilizing a familiar ritual (the funeral mass) to create a new ritual of mourning violence, I hope to process and acknowledge these events in order to end the cycle of violence within my own family.

By including the audience in this ritual, I aim to achieve three main outcomes. First, I hope to validate my grief and experience through community acknowledgment and to process it with community support. Second, I hope to encourage the audience to recognize those mourning invisible or unacknowledged losses. Third, I hope to urge the audience to find the tools to develop their own ritual or mourning process for the intangible losses that audience members carry with them, as well as provide a dialogue of support for that process within their own lives. Through my process, I intend to develop and enhance my own self-advocacy as a survivor, and to share these skills with others through the mechanism of theater.

#### Tools for Safety and Setting Boundaries

One of the most important things for me was to set clear boundaries on how I engaged emotionally with this process, as well as create a sense of safety for audience members. Throughout this process, I found that the area in which I felt the most caution and apprehension was unsafely diving unsafely into traumatic memory. Developing a clear rehearsal process and a trusted group of advisers and peers for feedback were helpful first steps, but I needed a solid understanding of things I could do to help myself in my process, and a metric to help me evaluate my emotional engagement.

During the summer of 2021, I took Erica Craig's course *The Self In Performance*<sup>[2]</sup> and we discussed the importance of aesthetic distance, or the equal balance between cognitive and emotional processing of trauma in the creation of an Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance. Aesthetic distance is a tool for ensuring that I am engaging safely and productively with the material. Through the projects in the course, I was able to practice aesthetic distance and observe my responses. For example, one project required some sort of musical and visual expression of my theme. I edited together videos of my mother as a young girl, and images that felt significant to our relationship, and set it to a song about a mother and daughter relationship that has changed as the daughter ages. Though I approached the project with a logical understanding of the juxtaposition between my mother as a young girl and my own experience as a child, the act of combining music and visuals elicited a strong emotional response in me--anger for what I missed out on, forgiveness for my mother, who was once young and vulnerable too, along with many other complicated, contrasting feelings. I was unprepared for the emotions that this project brought up, but it was an excellent reminder that I needed to be emotionally engaged with my work, rather than only intellectually reflective, in order for my work to reach its full potential and feel that I had success in creating, sharing, and exploring those themes. The practice of acknowledging the emotions that the process brought up, and learning from them, rather than avoiding them, has helped me to bring greater vulnerability and honesty into my work. This stumbling block (of avoiding emotions and intuition) has come up many times in my process, and my increased understanding of aesthetic distance as a way of balancing the two has helped me to recognize why my work may feel like it is falling flat or not achieving what I want it to, and how to fix it.

Another important aid in this process was the Viewpoints method, particularly the chapter on emotion. Emotion is defined by Mary Overlie in her *Viewpoints Theory* book,

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<sup>2</sup> Erica Craig, "Aesthetic Distance," *Theater 385: The Self in Performance* (class lecture, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, July 1, 2021).

*Standing in Space* (2016), as “the active self-awareness of the performer.”<sup>[33]</sup> Overlie calls this self-awareness “presence.” Emotion, with the Viewpoints techniques in mind, becomes a natural connection derived from being *present* in the moment, rather than by using an emotional memory to the story or the character (an acting technique that becomes less relevant in autobiographical performance).

This seems contradictory to the tool of aesthetic distance, but I found that the two were more compatible than it appears. Presence is a method of being aware, involved, and invested in the moment, rather than in the past. Aesthetic distance relies on having a deep awareness of how one approaches the work with the ability to make necessary adjustments to find a balance between intellectual and emotional engagement. I thought of presence as a method to lead me to aesthetic distance: rather than tuning out of the emotional side of things and focusing only on the intellectual, I wanted to use the technique of presence to allow me to gain awareness of my emotional state and bring it into balance instead of plunging into the emotions or running from them.

Overlie explains habits that actors have to hide themselves on stage as they are being watched in order to avoid presence and self-awareness. She describes an activity in which actors must sit and practice presence as they are watched, describing the benefit of this exercise as follows:

[Performers] must occasionally dare to look directly in the eyes of their audience. This act assures that they are not avoiding any aspect of acknowledgement that they are before a witness. If all is going well, the performer will accumulate the ability to be *present* and gain a thrilling experience: the gift of being seen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Overlie. *Standing in Space: the Six Viewpoints Theory Et Practice*. (Billings, MT: Fallon Press, 2016), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Overlie, *Standing in Space*, 32.



So much of what I have written so far has been an investigation into what it feels like to be truly seen, by the people around me, by the government, by myself. The setting for the piece is made up of three flats covered in mirrors, providing a constant reflection of all the people in the room, so we do not forget that we are being seen by one another. The willingness to be seen, to be present in the moment, and to acknowledge every aspect of the body, mind, and soul is a gift, and is one given to the audience. It is one of the fundamental gifts of the theater--the gift of publicly acknowledging that other people exist and have a variety of different lives and experiences. It is also one of the gifts, I believe, that is only rarely given outside of the theater, especially to survivors of abuse. The willingness, then, for a survivor to be seen and vulnerable and to develop that connection with the audience, is a difficult thing to embody, and one of the things that I have found most challenging.

Throughout this investigation of emotion, I have begun to question exactly what I owe the audience. It is reckless to share stories without a clear structure and release from the tension, but it is also pointless to deflect or ignore the truth of the situation that led me to this inquiry. I have already noticed that the combination of aesthetic distance and presence as practices vital to my process have been helpful in developing text and movement that sets clear boundaries and patterns that allows me to feel as if the subject matter is not exploitative of either myself or the audience, creating a sense of comfort and safety. I believe that the Viewpoints exercises, specifically those centered around presence, will help me to give my full possible energy and devotion to the audience during performances, without requiring me to use emotional memory or other similar tactics that may cause me to dive into traumatic memory in an unsafe way.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of this preliminary research was to develop a text to work off of in rehearsals and to find techniques that would allow me to be prepared to engage with the material safely. By the end of the semester, I felt confident that I had a secure support system,

techniques I felt practiced in, and theatrical models I could explore. I looked forward to the more collaborative nature of rehearsals that began in January. I had already enjoyed workshopping my piece in class and sharing it with others, and I was excited to work on it with a small group of people for an extended amount of time. I felt secure in my approach and in monitoring my own relationship with the work, especially once the rehearsal process began.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REHEARSAL PROCESS

When I began my research, I expected that I would find ways to advocate for myself in my life outside of theater more so than my life in the theater as an artist. I knew that this process would lead me to stand by my work and express my needs to collaborators—I anticipated these things to come up in the themes of the text, the conversations and working through the piece, and in my presentation of the piece to an audience. I also had a deep fear of working through this material in isolation, especially because so much of the story was about isolation. Early decisions in the process about having a secondary actor and developing a support system were helpful, but I had to wait until our rehearsal process to start in January in order to fully feel and take in those effects. Ultimately, I found that I discovered opportunities for self-advocacy mostly through my understanding of the solo-devising process and my approach, communication, and flexibility with my collaborators.

#### Defining Solo-Devising

The process of solo-devising was a challenging one, particularly at the beginning. I worked through the majority of my piece in a playwriting class, but still felt that there was a distinction between my work versus the work of a playwright. Misri Dei's thesis "Devising Solo Performance: A Practitioner's Enquiry" was helpful to me in articulating this distinction. Through Dei's interviews, I was able to identify parts of solo-devising that resonated with me, which generally included ideas of self-reflection, analysis, and the need to refrain from 'self-indulgence.' This reminded me of the concept of aesthetic distance, though aesthetic distance is often used in therapeutic environments. Regardless, the core of my solo-devising work was rooted in respecting the intuitions I had about my work, freeing myself to explore new ideas, and then reflecting and questioning how these impulses connected into the piece. I found that, more often than not, when I trusted my impulses, the choices I made were aligned with my

goals for the piece, and this aided my confidence throughout the process. I found I had more ability to stand by my work when it came from my instinct and survived my analysis of it.

I found that the major distinction for myself was that though I was solo-devising my piece, I did not feel that I had ownership of it in the same way that playwrights have ownership over their plays. I felt in the devising process, even when I was writing alone, many things were able to find their voice in this piece—the devisers in Dei's interviews reference a similar feeling of constant observance of the world, allowing whatever they stumble upon to influence the piece they are working on.

I also found that every element of the piece happened at the same time, from the very origin of the piece—I developed preliminary movement to specific songs before I wrote anything and I considered the exact look of the set, costumes, and lighting as I wrote. These things influenced the writing, rather than vice versa. With playwriting, there is a sense that the playwright works on their play and hands it off to the director who hands specific parts to anyone who writes or sources the music, potential choreographers, set designers, and collaborators that use the play as a guide. This is in direct contradiction with the sense of not having ownership over my piece—how can I feel this way if I have a hand in every other part of the production? After reflecting on the process, I realized that I earnestly wanted my collaborators to have equal sway over the text, movement, and technical elements. Ultimately, in my opinion, devising is not done until everyone has a hand on it—even the audience. I think that the answer to this contradiction is to supply a different word: responsibility. I had a feeling of responsibility to this piece, to the authenticity of my story, and to the input of the people who are in the room with me.

This contradiction becomes muddier in doing an autobiographical piece; it was important to me that I explore this contradiction in the text of the piece. I reference the fear of isolation and the desire to leave behind my story and step into the collective. The final lines of the show stick out to me as a pivotal moment of this exploration, “I am the caretaker of my ache;

I do not own it. I am the protector of my ache; no one can reach it unless I let them. You all have held my ache; it is time to let it go.”<sup>5</sup> I think this ending encapsulates some of the feelings I had about this solo-devising process, in that I was a caretaker for creating it but not the owner and I wanted to share it with people.

### Collaboration and Rehearsal Processes

The part of the process that I was most excited for was the opportunity to bring in collaborators. The main collaborators for this piece were the actress playing The Figure, a ghostly character that expresses itself only in movement, the stage manager, and the assistant stage manager. In our first rehearsal, we developed a set of guidelines that we wished to follow in order to create the best possible experience in the room. These guidelines helped us to work through difficult topics and moments in the room, but also provided the flexibility and compassion necessary to juggle our different schedules and avoid adding undue stress to any of the collaborators. Our Assistant Stage Manager joined us in the following weeks, and we went through the guidelines with her, and she was also able to understand and approve of them.

The primary reason for creating these guidelines was to ensure the safety of each collaborator, but many other uses for these guidelines quickly unfolded. The guidelines assisted in preventing a power dynamic between myself as the ‘creator’ of the piece. (This term, even, feels wrong, as each collaborator had a hand in creating the piece. I often have refused any title, such as leader or director, not only because they do not encompass the whole of my experience with this piece, but also because they come with the understanding of power or control.) Because each collaborator had equal respect in deciding what we worked on and how, and I also noted my own refusal of hierarchy, we proceeded without a sense that any person was more or less important, and we were willing to explore any thought or idea that someone brought into the room. It also gave us the opportunity to disagree with each other or have different ideas for how to proceed. We tended to be in agreement, but having the space to disagree allowed us to be

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<sup>5</sup> Abrianna Belvedere. “Morning Has Broken.” 2022. Theatrical script, p. 20

more inventive and harness our individual creativity, and then share that with the rest of the collective. We generally avoided taking ownership over ideas, but we did show appreciation for each collaborator and their suggestions. The place where we tended to have the most disagreement was in the text of the piece, and the most cohesiveness was in the movement.

Our typical rehearsal structure consisted of a check-in, goal setting, warm-up, work, and debrief. The check-in ranged from asking how everyone was, to sharing a percentage of energy we were bringing to the room today, to sharing *found movements* (motions we saw in the natural gesture and locomotion of people or ourselves in our everyday world). Sometimes these check-ins were met with a bit of reluctance, when we had a particularly stressful day. On these days, we shifted the question or moved on with the understanding that we were having a stressful day. Beginning rehearsal with a general understanding of what we were bringing into the room was effective in helping us sense what we could ask of each other and what we could expect from one another. These check-ins also served as a way to discuss our schedule, any scheduling conflicts we anticipated for the week, and the themes of what we were working with that day. This blended into our goal setting, where we discussed what we wanted to work on for the day. I tended to lead this section, with my ideas for what scene or section I wanted to work on. We would discuss these goals as a group, sometimes deciding that we would rather work on the text more than the movement, or that we wanted to work on a different scene entirely. This also offered an opportunity for me to discuss the content of the scene and any concerns I had about approaching it.

This was particularly necessary for Scene 4, the first of the scenes I considered particularly intense for me to work on, in terms of the memories included. Scene 4 discusses the weaponization of the police as a method of punishment, and the abuse I experienced. I was nervous about this scene, and wanted to approach it gently. Being upfront about my concerns with this scene allowed for me to advocate for my needs and boundaries, leave space for anyone else in the room to share their needs working through this material, and feel that my team was

adequately prepared for the content of the scene and the potential of strong feelings. Once sharing my concerns, the rehearsal and staging process went smoothly, and I was able to find a helpful aesthetic distance—I was emotionally engaged with the material to the extent that I felt comfortable, rather than being swept over by my emotions, and I was intellectually engaged in the staging of the piece.

The check-ins also allowed us to share external concerns as they related to the piece. For example, there was a rehearsal where we heard of an external event that touched a place of grief and collective mourning for our group. I decided I needed more time to deal with this on my own before rehearsal started and we agreed to meet later. When rehearsal began, we discussed our concerns about dealing with the material while in grief (particularly because this piece is so focused on grief). We discussed our original plan for the scenes we wanted to work on, and then came up with a list of things to revisit or work on if we found the original scene was too difficult to work through that day. We set a reminder about the ‘pause button’ and agreed that we would stop rehearsal at any time if any of us did not want to continue working. We emphasized gentle movement, the breath, and allowed space for humor and check-ins during the rehearsal. We were able to stage the scene we originally wanted to work on, and I found that I felt better after working through this material with peers. I came into rehearsal concerned with how much I would be able to accomplish and give to the rehearsal space. I discovered that the anxieties I felt around being productive or completing a certain amount of work per rehearsal arose from internalized ideas about ‘productive’ rehearsals, rather than the goals of the collaborators. I realized that this was one of our most successful rehearsals, in terms of the tasks we wanted to complete and the efficiency of completing those tasks, as well as the level of satisfaction we felt afterward in completing the tasks.

The check-ins and goal-setting conversations influenced what warm-ups we did. Our warmups included anything from stretching, meditation, breathwork, movement improvisation, and exercises from *Standing in Space* by Mary Overlie. The first exercise we did was in the

chapter “Movement Practices” called Practice 2: Lower Brain Movement. In the exercise, we laid on the floor, with “the instruction of moving from the body’s impulse, not on command.”<sup>6</sup> The goal of this exercise was to settle the mind and move instinctually. This became the foundation of our development of movement within the piece; we used instinct and intuition more than any other movement tool. In this first exploration of instinctual movement, we noted two different sensations as we allowed the movement to arrive in our bodies. I found that, generally, my mind felt open to movement, whereas Cecily felt that she was accepting the movement that arrived. We returned to this exercise several times in the process, and we found that the exercise affected us differently. Some days we noted our movements feeling small and twitch-like. Other days, they were broad sweeps. The instinctual movements originated from different parts of the body, ranging anywhere from the elbows, shoulders, between the shoulders, to the arms and neck. Noticing our instinctual movement became vital to the process of developing the movement, and eventually clarifying the text.

The practice of noticing felt similar to Overlie’s ideas about presence—the awareness of ourselves, our bodies, and our instincts. We learned to trust our gut feelings and trust that our intuition would guide us to revealing new aspects of the work. We stumbled upon countless synchronicities as we created the movement, as well as during the rest of our process with every other element. As we noticed our own natural inclinations, we realized we developed a clear movement vocabulary; however, this movement vocabulary sometimes felt stagnated. In order to reinvigorate the movement, we used found movement. These movements allowed us to approach the movement from a different perspective, especially as our approach to movement synced and we fell into a constant flow. The found movement tended to be locomotive in nature, found by watching people walk across campus. The most interesting found movements arose when we saw interactivity between two different styles of movement. We took the raw gesture

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<sup>6</sup>Mary Overlie. *Standing in Space: the Six Viewpoints Theory Et Practice*. (Billings, MT: Fallon Press, 2016), 178



and distilled it into the movement vocabulary we created—not imitating it directly, but altering it while keeping the same impulse as the found movement.

The final part of the rehearsal was a moment of debriefing. This was helpful for discussing the work we had done, any struggle points, any successes, and anything we wanted to work on or look for in the next rehearsal. These debriefs helped us to move out of the generative part of the work, and step into a more reflective mode. For scenes that were difficult to work through, it allowed us to seriously analyze what we had done and share our thoughts before moving to whatever we had to do after rehearsal. I noticed that I tended to share the most doubts about how much we accomplished during rehearsal, and I started to recognize how much I was attached to the idea of productivity and accomplishing everything at once. These debriefs allowed me to see how others perceived the work done during rehearsals (which was almost always positive) and reconnect to my ultimate goal of focusing on process over product.

The real challenge was identifying that my idea of productivity in the space was not aligned with the goals we set as a group in our check-in. I was somehow convinced I would, could, and should complete more than we agreed upon. Once I released the undefined overambitious goals of supposed productivity, I was able to recognize my own ability to complete enough tasks to keep us on track and to focus on completing the tasks we decided for rehearsals. One of our guidelines was to reject any inclination for perfectionism, and this was a vital practice for me. I started to recognize accomplishments more than lacking, which ultimately made the process not only more effective but also more enjoyable. Through releasing arbitrary goals, we also were more open to exploration. We were more willing to spend time on discovering the movement, understanding the text, and making adjustments. I found that this helped us to more deeply understand the piece, and connect to the movement and language we created.

The check-ins, debriefs, and goal-setting allowed all collaborators to have a strong understanding of where we were at in the development of the piece, and we worked against

undue urgency. Though, ultimately, we were working with a deadline, we allowed ourselves to have as much flexibility as possible in the rehearsal process. We also scheduled our rehearsals with the knowledge that each person had their own deadlines, projects, and needs. We agreed on rehearsals each week, and noted certain deadlines and conflicts people had within those rehearsals. This worked well for when our stage manager or assistant stage manager was unable to make it—we usually only needed one person for our rehearsals until later in the process when the technical elements were added. When The Figure could not make it to rehearsal, we happened to have an open rehearsal with three playwrights, so we were able to use the rehearsal to work through the text and ask any questions we had about the piece, and allow our guests to ask any questions they had. It was beneficial, productive, and allowed the actor to take the time she needed. This is generally how we worked through absences, and the adjustments always led us to successful avenues of exploration. Without the additional pressure of having to attend every rehearsal, we were able to bring our full attention to rehearsal and protect ourselves from feelings of burnout and overwhelm. As a group, we prioritized each collaborator's overall health and wellness and allowed them to explain their needs and set boundaries as they saw fit. These became crystallized moments of self-advocacy for each collaborator—the process of knowing what needed to be accomplished and when, as well as knowing one's own energy levels and needs, and the freedom and power to share those things as they saw fit.

### Exploring the Text

The script started to take shape during my fall semester playwriting class, but it only reached its final iteration (for this project, at least) once I was able to workshop it with my collaborators and advisers, and spend a long time on each scene individually as well as the arc of the play as a whole. When we worked on a scene, we spent some time doing close reading and editing the text. Typically, I would read the scene out loud, and then ask if anyone had questions or share my own questions about the text. Often, my collaborators would ask what I meant or what I was trying to convey in the passages where there was confusion. Sometimes, we would

spend up to ten minutes trying to pinpoint the idea and find the best word or phrase for it. Often, we would use movement or gesture to convey the sensation or image that we wanted the word to encapsulate. For example, a gesture similar to pressing feet into sand turned into the word ‘den.’ Generally, these revisions resulted in language that conveyed a more immediate and desperate need. Earlier drafts of *Morning Has Broken* were more wandering and focused on storytelling, without a clear journey for the character Self (myself). During the rehearsal process, I developed ‘the ache,’ a device to track the healing process. First, I acknowledged the cyclical nature of intergenerational trauma (or the ache), then the need to let it go, the frustration of holding onto it, and eventually letting it go. The idea of the ache originated from my personal questioning of the role of trauma in storytelling and some of the feelings of frustration during this extended process of reckoning with my trauma and sharing it with others. In Scene 6, I wrote “everyone wants to see my ache/ everyone wants to reach down into my ache. My ache is sacred/ my ache is my own.”<sup>7</sup> This was the first mention of the ache, and as I weaved it through the script with the help of my collaborators, it became the throughline for Self’s journey. This was the last addition to the piece, and something that came from a passing thought that was later distilled throughout the play in workshop with people who understood the life of the story without it feeling fully formed yet.

When the piece was completely written, and we were almost done with the staging, we had a rehearsal where we wrote down what we could remember about the piece and how it connected to other scenes. At this point, there were eight or so drafts that it was hard to identify what was still in the piece and what changed shape over time. As we would move on to later scenes, we were reminded of movements or language from other scenes and we eventually created a full picture. The final text workshop was during an open rehearsal in late February. Three of my friends and playwrights attended the rehearsal and we read through the text. I asked questions about the major parts of the text—the journey of Self, the role of the funeral

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<sup>7</sup> A. Belvedere. “Morning Has Broken.” 2022. Theatrical script. p. 12

mass in the structure, the audience interactions, to name a few. This workshop helped me to feel more confident about the text moving forward into the final stretches of rehearsal, allowing us to focus more on the movement and technical elements of the piece. There were some changes to the text after that point. Some minor changes even happened in tech week (our final three days of rehearsal to practice with our technical elements, lighting, sound, set), when I would notice a feeling about a certain phrase, that usually was remedied by our usual question: “what are you trying to say?” and comparing it to what is said. Though, in a typical process, the idea of making edits during tech week would be incredibly stressful, I found that there was a sense of ease to these edits and excitement about finding the exact words for what I wanted to say. I think if it were anything other than a solo-devised piece in which I was the only one speaking the words, or if there were more difficult technical elements and lighting cues, there would not be the same comfort with making adjustments.

Though our team worked to reject perfectionism, through this experience, I learned that we valued specificity and truth. The challenge of finding the most accurate word became a game for us to play, and while I ultimately was the person to approve any edits or suggestions, the revision process was one of the most exciting moments of collaboration.

### Developing Movement

Movement was the starting point for this piece; the first thing I came up with was a movement score between myself and The Figure, summarizing the journey of healing. This piece ended up being Scene 11. I found that my own capacity and identity as an artist leaned towards a desire to express my ideas through movement. I did, however, want to work with language as well, but I discovered my own preference for movement. As I wrote, I imagined the shape, locomotion, and energy of the movement. When the text was finished and I began working with my collaborators, particularly the actress playing The Figure, the embodiment of the text became paramount. At the start of working on a scene, or even a particular section of the text, we selected words that seemed important or interesting. We had a stage manager read the words

to us out of order, so we would not anticipate what word or develop a plan for what that movement might look like. When the word was read, we would embody the word based on our instinct—we found that we often created similar gestures and shapes. From those gestures, we would refine them and put them into a sequence. The embodied text opened up more space for me to articulate my ideas without needing to rely solely on the text, as well as offering The Figure (and our other collaborators) the chance to share their perspectives on the text. The movement when shared between us became a ritual that conveyed more than my own voice, but also our group's ideas, wishes, and hopes that were not directly verbalized in the text.

We found that movement was the area where we experienced the most use of the pause button and leaving behind ideas that did not come with ease. We felt this most when we were working on developing a movement piece for Scene 8. There is a bit of poetry, with a similar rhythm to the text in Scene 6, so we approached it in the same way. We took out words and used our first impulse to create a movement, then put them together in a sequence. As we practiced the sequence we created, we found that it did not feel right. We talked through this feeling and decided that it was a part of the piece that felt better with stillness. We also weighed it practically— this would offer a bit of a rest after the larger swaths of movement in Scene 6 and Scene 7. This decision was largely made through our willingness to follow what felt good, to trust our instinct, and to place intuition as the guiding factor for the movement. As we worked the piece of poetry with stillness, we discovered that the words needed a special focus and that the poetry follows a deep sense of isolation and inability to change circumstances. Therefore, it needed to be matched with isolation and stillness. Most of the discussions around and development of the movement required this intuitive approach, and we found that whatever resulted was deeply connected to the text and the themes of the piece we were working.

The Scene 8 movement was easy to leave behind, but we did have instances of setting down movement that we wished we could include. In developing the movement for Scene 6, we wanted to work with a movement we named 'the hook' in which one person wrapped their leg

around the hip of the other, and leaned back, using one arm to support them on the ground, and the other to reach up to the partner. We struggled with articulating exactly how we wanted to get in and out of this movement, and knowing where we wanted it. We spent around twenty to thirty minutes fully invested in making this movement work, and wanted to continue the exploration. At some point, we lost steam and decided that we would set this down and pick it up at another point in the piece. As we went through the rest of the script, it always came up as a movement option but never seemed to fit in the other sections. This was one of the harder things for us to release from the score, and I still have the desire to work through it and figure out how to put it in some piece of choreography, whether or not it lives in *Morning Has Broken*. Though technically there was a feeling of failure in leaving behind this movement, I found that we were able to develop a dialogue of intuition, trust, and exploration. This is a moment in the process where we released the pressure of completing a task, and instead followed the joy of exploration and struggling through an idea collectively.

This joy of exploration and collective problem-solving became particularly vital in tech week when The Figure's veil continued to fall off during the intense movement in Scene 6, or what we called the nightmare scene. During the nightmare scene, there is a sequence of movements in which we move to the floor and back to standing; this was not compatible with the veil, even after several attempts to troubleshoot the way it was secured. We decided it would be best to change the movement, because the veil was working for every other scene and movement. Our change was to record the text with my voice to add to several voiceovers, along with violin screeches and a drone note sound. Then, we had the Figure remove the crown she wore over her veil and changed the nightmare scene into a haunting. We developed a quick score for movement: I would do the original movement sequence twice, then we would improvise within three parameters. The parameters were that I needed to knock on the door, there would be at least one chasing scene, and there would be a moment of contact. This actually allowed us to bring back the hook movement idea, finally finding a spot for it in the movement. The change

was frustrating, but it became incredibly exciting to us. During each night of the performance, we were able to explore new ideas that came up from the night before, and it was a reminder of the early parts of the process where we did more extended movement improvisation. The restrictions allowed us to continue our exploration during production and became one of my personal favorite sections of the piece.

### The Question of the Audience

The other explorations that continued during performances were the elements involving audience interaction. There were three main elements of audience participation— a call and response prayer after the nightmare scene and at the very end of the piece, a sign of peace that involved acknowledging all the people around you, and a section of kneeling or bowing of the heads during the burial.

These interactions varied depending on the night. One night an audience was more reserved and did not know very much about the piece and was hesitant to participate in a call and response prayer. They were aided by the Stage Manager who led the response section loudly from her seat. On the night of the invited dress rehearsal, where the audience consisted mostly of my friends and people who knew a lot about the piece, this call and response prayer was met excitedly. It became a promise we were making to each other. The Sign of Peace was my favorite section to watch— I was purposefully excluded from the audience and I moved closer as they greeted one another. I wrote this scene to create a distinctive exclusion and isolation of myself from the audience, later rectified by the refrain of the call and response prayer. This still existed in the piece, but there was a sense of joy in watching the audience greet one another. These two elements were meant to focus in on collectivity as opposed to my experience of isolation as a result of abuse. Audience feedback noted the feelings of discomfort in participating in these elements because it is not often asked of audiences, but there was a shift to an appreciation for the chance to greet one another and share in the ideas of the prayer.

The third element of bowing or kneeling during a scene where I bury the fiddle case did not end up happening, despite prepping audience plants each night and mentioning it in the pre-show speech and program. Audience members noted that they were swept up in the action and forgot when they needed to kneel in the piece. If I were to restage this scene, I would add a voiceover in the piece to guide the audience.

The rest of the piece, though it did not contain audience participation, was direct address to the audience. In my exploration of self-advocacy, I used the text to acknowledge that I was sharing this story with the audience, and set particular boundaries around it. In Scene 2, I tell the audience that I will not share every part of my story, and I ask for the audience's trust and belief in spite of this. Before the first call and response prayer, I tell the audience that I need it to "choose [the clay],"<sup>8</sup> or, rather, to choose to share in the grief, to value people in poverty (particularly in the South), and to make a promise to alleviate suffering and encourage collective support, kindness, and love. One of the things I am reckoning with is that in expressing this need for the audience to make a promise to me, there is not a real chance for them to reject this. Oftentimes audiences will participate in something like this because everyone else is. We provided the prayer and information about the audience participation with the caveat that audience members could participate within their comfort level, but it is incredibly hard to abstain from something that a crowd is doing. I would have liked to explore this idea of audience boundaries and consent more in this piece, and I wish I received more feedback on this topic—only four audience members submitted an anonymous feedback form that specifically collected responses about their comfort levels in abstaining from audience participation. Two audience members selected "2" for a question that asked for how comfortable they felt not participating, on a scale of one to five ranging from "not at all comfortable" to "very comfortable." The other two did not fill out this question, indicating that it was not applicable to their experience. This is not enough data to gauge how the audience generally felt, and I wish I

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<sup>8</sup> A. Belvedere. "Morning Has Broken." 2022. Theatrical script. p. 12



was able to collect more responses. I would like to continue to question the role of audience consent in participation, and the right for the audience to refuse to participate.

### Findings

As I reflect on who I was and how I viewed my art a year ago, at the start of this project's formal life as an honors thesis, I can see that I have grown in my confidence, ease, and trust in every aspect of my life, but particularly in the theater. This process has allowed me to acknowledge my own values of openness, flexibility, boundaries, and collectivity. The guidelines synthesized these core tenets of our work and how we would treat one another—these guidelines were the foundation of this process and led to the level of success and fondness I feel for this piece. We agreed that each person had equal value in the room, that each person was capable of noticing a new perspective of the story, of offering new challenges for us to explore, and of supplying a new way through challenges. The guidelines allowed us to explore without undue consequences. When I had doubts outside of the rehearsal room about the piece, I was able to walk into rehearsal and feel that I was doing exactly what needed to be done that day. The standard we worked within was not one of undefined perfectionism, but of pure excitement about being able to create something new.

I felt that my collaborators were open to the many contradictions within myself that I needed to convey externally; this flooded into our process. We were working with topics that were difficult, but we were able to find laughter and excitement in spite of the content. Safety, in our rehearsal room, was not a rigid, protective shell—it was a freedom to go beyond convention and explore, while also having deep sensitivity and care for the needs of our collaborators. Because we worked against hierarchy and power dynamics, I did not feel that the entire piece was a burden that rested on my shoulders—instead, this was a gift we could share. I came to exist in a space where I trusted people enough and respected them enough to know that they had our collective best, as well as their individual best in mind.

I have tried to find things that I would change about the process or the production, and I am struggling to find anything beyond the small technical element. I felt excitement for each rehearsal and each new thing we would discover as a group; in more conventional rehearsal processes, I experienced burnout far sooner and the pressure to perform is a much greater force. In those rehearsal processes, I now realize that I was deeply affected by the top-down hierarchy, the constant demands and inflexibility of rehearsal schedules, and the false sense of urgency that can exist in any space—especially one where everyone is passionate and views the work as vital for our communities.

I know now that it is possible to create a piece of art that is crucial, important, and necessary, without needing to overextend or burden oneself in the process. This was incredibly surprising to me—I anticipated emotional burnout, difficulties in communicating my needs as an individual and as an artist, and the burden of being the only one to fully understand this project. Instead, I was met with people who were willing to notice, observe, analyze, and appreciate every part of this process as much as I was. I believe that the way forward for my work as an artist is to advocate for guidelines by which we can share our energy safely—when these guidelines are in place, it is wonderfully simple to say what we need from one another. These guidelines are sourced in the natural progression and requirements of devised theater—and the many devisers who came before me. I believe that similar practices and guidelines are possible in other, more standard theatrical processes as well in order to create an environment that cultivates safety and trust, empowering any theater-maker to advocate for themselves as needed.

## Guidelines for Our Creative Process

### *Openness*

A spirit of curiosity and possibility. Openness to sharing ideas and asking questions. Openness to trying new ideas. Openness to playfulness. Openness to change.

### *Communication*

Communicate bandwidth and capability to do/carry tasks and feelings. Communicate the energy you're entering the room with. Communicate what feels freeing and what feels trapping.

### *Boundaries*

Set boundaries and allow space for discovering new boundaries. Respect the time of the people in the room (come on time, leave on time, use time wisely.) Use “the pause button” when things feel stuck and sticky. When the guidelines don't work, create new guidelines.

### *Other maxims*

1. Know and acknowledge when we are holding on too tight.
2. Be able to leave something if it needs to be left. It can always be picked back up again
3. Discomfort isn't good unless it is freeing; know when to leave something painful—move towards ease... ease when working hard, ease in challenges, ease in struggle.
4. Perfectionism is not allowed. Perfectionism is the death of creativity.

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