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March 29, 2019

The Intimate Awkward: An Exploration of the Intersection Between Awkwardness and Intimacy
on Stage

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Abstract

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By Serena Geralyn Schmitt

These past two semesters I have researched and explored the intersection between intimacy and awkwardness on stage. My journey began when my contact improvisation class made me realize the physical intimacy that dancers so regularly experience in their practice. From there I used work by previous choreographers, personal anecdotes, and discussions with my cast to develop more concrete ideas about where intimacy and awkwardness meet. Through collaboration with my dancers, I turned this into a 35-minute work existing in 6 sections: Afternoon Delight. Each section served a different purpose and role in presenting a holistic look at where intimacy and awkwardness exist in dance and in life.

Afternoon Delight was a bit provocative at times, using humor to pull the audience in and keep them entertained, but it was far more than just an entertaining show. The layers of choices made by both myself and the cast raised questions about what we expect to see on stage and why; what makes us, as humans uncomfortable; and how our experiences of intimacy and awkwardness differ from person to person. My cast bravely and confidently presented this work, which I know at times was not easy for them and required them to expose a certain level of their lives and selves. I personally revealed this same personal intimacy through my writing. I did not always write things that would typically be thought of as appropriate or academic, I shared personal stories and experiences. I wanted to point out that this, too, can be academic. It takes a great deal of courageousness to share personal stories on a document that will be published, but doing so is extremely important to making the outside reader and viewer understand my project and my journey.

This experience taught me so much about myself. So many people have told me this piece exemplified my personality. This is certainly true. Though I may at times seem overly nonchalant or too casual, I tend to think of this approach differently. I believe our greatest fault as humans, is overthinking. People tend to look too deeply for meaning, follow strict precedents and rules, and take themselves too seriously. We should take what we do and what we care about seriously, but there is absolutely no benefit to taking ourselves seriously, it only distances us from others and puts limits on the boundaries of our work. These beliefs and thoughts are something I have discovered about myself in my time as an undergraduate, and I feel that they came out in this work. I also feel that they, and this project, say something larger about our society as a whole. Why do people feel uncomfortable in these situations, why is one thing thought of as less serious or less academic, why does intimacy feel awkward and awkwardness feel intimate? I don't have any answers to these questions, if anything this project raised more questions for me than it answered, but I do feel I have learned a great deal about myself and the way that people relate to intimacy and awkwardness as it is represented on stage.

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
a. The Inspiration	1
b. Initial Research	2
c. Logistics	6
II. Afternoon Delight: Rehearsals and Performances	9
a. Eye Contact	9
b. The Pina Colada Song	11
c. Awkward Sex	12
d. A Brazilian Wax	14
e. Crying in Public	16
f. Awkwardness and Intimacy in Dance	17
III. Results, Analysis, and Conclusion	19
a. Audience Feedback	19
b. Dancers' Reflections	20
c. Choreographic Reflection	21
d. Conclusion	22
Appendix A: Promotional Flyer	24
Appendix B: Concert Program	25
Appendix C: Performance Photographs (Credit Lori Teague)	27
References	32

I. INTRODUCTION

The Inspiration

First my hip touched her stomach. Bending forward, I soon felt her weight sink into my lower back. The contact rolled through to our now intertwined arms. Maintaining our physical connection, she pulled me down until we were both on the floor. Suddenly I was laying across her lap—rocking back and forth—I became an infant in her arms. It was at this moment I looked up towards the studio's window. Wide-eyed and shocked, a group of students passed through the Woodruff PE Center, and there I was, fetaled into my professor's arms.

My experiences from the Contact Improvisation class led me to consider the physical intimacy dancers regularly share in their practice, from massaging one another to partnering together. As I began thinking about these situations more during the summer, I started to reflect upon intimacy as a larger concept. Where does intimacy lie and in what ways does it take shape? What I soon began to realize was that, at least for me, awkwardness frequently accompanied intimacy. Many situations in my life felt extremely awkward due to their inherent intimacy, or alternatively, felt extremely intimate because they were so awkward. This brought me back to dance and once again my Contact Improvisation class. Our professor encouraged us to embrace the awkward, clunky moments and to push through them rather than pull away. The intersection of awkwardness and intimacy, and how one might live in these moments rather than retreat from them, ignited my research pathway.

Initial Research

Scholars from all different disciplines have explored topics of intimacy and awkwardness, ranging from anthropology,¹ to psychology,² to neuroscience.³ Within the scholarship, the definitions of the terms vary slightly but overall remain relatively consistent. For my research, and in line with Horton and Wohl's definition in their research on mass communication, intimacy is consistent with closeness, either physical or emotional.⁴ Similar to Stankovic's analysis of Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof. Damen und Herren über "65"*, I define awkwardness as anything that makes someone feel uncomfortable, the antithesis of grace, anything unnecessarily difficult.⁵ Though similar themes trace throughout the scholarship, awkwardness and intimacy rarely appear in the same conversation. As I frequently associate the two, I found it important to fill this gap in the literature.

These two themes have appeared more specifically in dance literature ranging from explorations of dance and sexuality⁶ to deep reviews of specific choreographers and pieces.⁷

One scholar inspired me most: Dr. Josephine Machon. Machon is an associate professor of

¹ Juliette Koning and Can-Seng Ooi, "Awkward Encounters and Ethnography," ed. Paul F. Donnelly, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 8, no. 1 (May 3, 2013): 16–32.

² Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (August 1956): 215–29.

³ Jonathan Cole, "Intimacy; Views from Impairment and Neuroscience," *Emotion, Space and Society* 13 (November 2014): 87–94.

⁴ Horton and Wohl, 215-29.

⁵ Biljana Stankovic, Jasmin Bleimling, and Andreas Hamburger, "How to Do (Awkward) Things with Just a Few Words," *Paragrana* 27, no. 1 (August 28, 2018): 368–85.

⁶ Judith Lynne Hanna, "Dance and Sexuality: Many Moves," *Journal of Sex Research* 47, no. 2–3 (March 24, 2010): 212–41.

⁷ Stankovic, Bleimling, and Hamburger, 368-85.

Performing Arts at Middlesex University.⁸ Machon incorporates all performance arts into her research making it easily applicable to my project. She contextualizes her findings to the current setting making her theories relevant and easy to understand.

Josephine Machon's book, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, looks at immersive theater. Machon points out that immersive theater differs from regular performance in that it attracts a different audience, one that seeks bodily engagement and tactility. With the alienating effect of social media, physicality becomes key.⁹ Our lack of real intimacy leads us to crave a more physical experience to counter the virtual world that so much of our lives have moved to exist. People yearn for physical touch and live conversation. What I appreciate about Machon's writing is that she does not simply point out that immersive theater is an intimate experience, something fairly intuitive, but also attempts to illuminate what specifically about immersive theater makes it more intimate. One particular line stuck with me and began to guide me in my choreographic process: "There is a special quality in this work that allows the intimate to be uncovered in the epic and points out where the epic lies within the intimate in human endeavor."¹⁰ Machon defines epic as, "that which is both grand in execution and profound in appreciation."¹¹ The epic, or spectacular, is where true intimacy lies. Something bizarre or absurd makes us uncomfortable through its unexpectedness which in turn creates intimacy. It connects people through this shared feeling of awkwardness.

⁸ "Middlesex University." Middlesex University London.
<http://www.mdx.ac.uk/about-us/our-people/staff-directory/profile/machon-josephine>.

⁹ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013).

¹⁰ Machon, 26.

¹¹ Machon, 26.

As dance scholars have begun to include awkwardness and intimacy into their conversations, choreographers have done the same. A clear example of this is choreographers who use audience participation to add intimacy. Once such choreographer, Boris Charmatz, recently received a great deal of criticism for his piece *10000 Gestures*.¹² Lauren Wingenroth wrote in *Dance Magazine* in October of 2018 citing a piece where barely clothed dancers crawl over, lift, and yell at the audience.¹³ Wingenroth harshly condemns the lack of consent given or received as the dancers failed to ask audience members ahead of time if they felt comfortable with such involvement. She contrasts this to previous immersive theater experiences where viewers were given a choice. What I appreciated most about Wingenroth's article is that although she has enjoyed these tactics in performances in the past, she challenges their necessity and purpose in dance. "What purpose is it serving, and how is it deepening the work? Just like artists might consider whether using violence or nudity is truly necessary and earned, content that puts audiences at physical risk shouldn't be included casually. It especially shouldn't be a gimmick."¹⁴ To strengthen this point Wingenroth places the idea of consent into the current social and political context referring to Brett Kavanaugh's hearings for Supreme Court Justice. Consent should not be taken for granted in any situation.¹⁵ Informed by this article, I decided against any audience participation, despite my awareness that it may add a factor of intimacy. In

¹² Lauren Wingenroth, "We Need to Talk About Non-Consensual Audience Participation," *Dance Magazine*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/we-need-to-talk-about-non-consensual-audience-participation-2611218336.html>.

¹³ Wingenroth.

¹⁴ Wingenroth.

¹⁵ Wingenroth.

place, I aimed to utilize similar tools and ideas, but without fully involving or including the audience.

A choreographer who more appropriately incorporates intimacy and awkwardness without these problems of consent is Gideon Obarzanek and his Australian-based company Chunky Move.¹⁶ Obarzanek's choreography frequently directs the dancers to contort their bodies in unexpected ways and aggressively slam into the floor.¹⁷ It is extremely uncomfortable to watch, yet the awkwardness resonates with me in an intimate way. I see the dancers struggling, uncomfortably contorting their bodies, allows me to empathize with them, building our connection and in turn our intimacy.

Two other pieces came to mind in my search for intimate-awkward dances: Yasmeen Godder's¹⁸ *See Her Change* and Jirí Kylián's¹⁹ *Petite Mort*. Godder's *See Her Change* uses alarming sounds, such as dramatic gasping, intense facial expressions and physical manipulation, as well as disturbing sexual moments.²⁰ This was inspirational for me in the way it utilized shock. It played off of the audience's reaction to encountering the unexpected. Perhaps this is the epic that Machon referred to as it certainly left me with a feeling of intimacy as well.²¹

¹⁶ Susan Reiter, "Dance; Making the Most Of the Awkward And Threatening," *New York Times*, October 7, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/07/arts/dance-making-the-most-of-the-awkward-and-threatening.html?mtrref=www.google.com>.

¹⁷ Gideon Obarzanek, *Contemporary Dance: Chunky Move* | *GLOW*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AautwIOON8>; Gideon Obarzanek, *Mortal Engine by Chunky Move*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbjOMualLVs>.

¹⁸ Yasmeen Godder. <http://www.yasmeengodder.com/yasmeen-godder>.

¹⁹ Rob Bothof. Jirí Kylián - Existence. Accessed April 05, 2019. <http://www.jirikylian.com/existence/>.

²⁰ Yasmeen Godder, *SEE HER CHANGE Yasmeen Godder; Video: Oren Mansura*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb7bnUlhUiQ>.

²¹ Machon.

Kylián's *Petite Mort*, as a contemporary ballet, addresses the intimate in a slightly more abstract manner. The phrase "petite mort" is a French euphemism for orgasm. The first *pas de deux* shows a male and a female, both dressed in all nude as if naked, moving through sexual positions with grace and elegance.²² It is clearly a sex duet, but with its ballet aesthetic guise, as an audience member it feels less uncomfortable than *See Her Change*. The dancers almost gloss over the fact that they are being so physically intimate with each other, creating a relaxed atmosphere. I still, however, acknowledged the awkwardness in this duet. Due to its subtlety, many of my cast members did not realize the reference. I used this video as inspiration in the way that it subdued the matter at hand. The subtler interpretation could, at times, provide heightened awkwardness.

This search through previous literature, theories, ideas, and choreography as well as reviewing anecdotes and experiences of myself and my cast members allowed me to shape and clarify my main research questions and begin to piece together the more logistical aspects of my project.

Logistics

I developed three primary questions to explore throughout my choreographic process:

1. Where do intimacy and awkwardness intersect?
2. How do intimacy and awkwardness fit into dance?
3. What elements of choreography and performance create intimacy or awkwardness?

²² Jiří Kylián, »*Petite Mort*« - *1st Pas de Deux*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzLYdIDPfgw>.

I selected a cast who I knew would be hard working, creative, collaborative, and technically able to perform my work. I originally wanted an even number of dancers to optimize the opportunity for duets, but one cast member took a semester off leaving me with an odd number. I also knew I wanted a large cast so that each dancer would only have to be in one section, play one role. This ensured that the audience would not carry a narrative throughout the piece and see each part as its own separate vignette. My final cast consisted of nine dancers, all undergraduate students:

- Aryanna Allen
- Leah Behm
- Sasha Dymant
- Allison Gasnick
- Breylan Martin
- Jacob Robbins
- Kelly Vogel
- Carly Wynans
- Jinnie Xie

The full cast participated in the pina colada section and the final section. Breylan performed the eye contact solo. Sasha and Jacob performed the awkward sex duet. Leah, Allison, Kelly, Carly, and Jinnie performed the Brazilian wax quintet. Aryanna performed the crying in public solo.

The costumes were designed to show the form of the dancers' bodies in space. Each costume looked slightly different, but followed the same color scheme as their parts and sections were so unique and individual, but each dancer was part of the same community.

The title *Afternoon Delight* came to me during a discussion with my advisor, George Staib. As so much of this piece referenced physical intimacy sexual in nature, I wanted the title to do so as well, but in a subtle enough way that it did not give away the entire work. I researched tons of euphemisms for sex and tinkered around with the wording, but when I heard *Afternoon Delight*, I felt the more light-hearted and playful tone captured the overall atmosphere of the work perfectly.

II. *AFTERNOON DELIGHT*: REHEARSALS AND PERFORMANCES

When developing the overall structure of the piece, I aimed to introduce more movement as time passed—adding density to the piece. I also condensed my research into six core ideas: the focus of each section. My vision for each section informed me on where it should go in the order and how many dancers should participate. I wanted to provide variety in the number of people on stage while also using a smooth and logical order considering the feel of each section. Even though each part played a specific role, I aimed to leave room for each audience member to insert their own experiences into the framework of the piece. As I began to string the sections together in rehearsals, I realized that even with this careful planning of order, transitions would be necessary for natural flow of the work. The transitions were almost mini sections referencing other full sections in the piece that either came before or were to come later. This ensured that the work felt like a cohesive whole, while each section remained distinct.

Eye Contact

I stacked a digital ace on top of a two. Looking up, my eyes connected with the middle-aged woman across the waiting room from me. Her purse carefully balanced on her lap, her blue sweater bunched up around her stomach. We uncomfortably smiled and frantically attempted to politely break the eye contact. A few seconds passed, though it felt like an hour. She reached for Good Housekeeping; relieved, I returned to my game of solitaire.

This exact story is not unique, it is an instance that happens frequently not only in my life, but in other's as well. This eye contact felt so intimate, but with a stranger, was

unbelievably awkward. We look into each other's eyes as a way to connect with people, to demonstrate that we are listening, and that we are interested, so when it happens accidentally, or unexpectedly, we often withdraw and turn it into something awkward.

The first section of the piece was something I had envisioned for some time while thinking about how my work would start. Knowing my overall piece would be long, my opening section would have to start slowly but with intensity to grab the audience, while still giving the movement time and space to develop and unfold as subsequent sections progressed. I chose Breylan Martin for this section as I had seen her perform an extremely sexual phrase in an audition previously and was wildly impressed with her ability to keep a straight face. I knew that she needed to, at some point, make eye contact with every audience member, but I also knew that maintaining contact with one member of the audience for an extended period of time would be far more intimate and intimidating as well as awkward. I chose to have her browse through the audience while upstage to make it more of a personal experience for her, as if she was just casually glancing through a crowd. Once she had chosen her person however, I had her come as far down stage as possible to intensify the connection. I almost wanted the audience to feel like they were participating in the work, even if not in an obvious way. Having only Breylan on stage gave this audience member no choice but to look back at her. At the same time, this created an awkward situation for the rest of the audience as they had to watch this uncomfortable interaction.

My goal for this section was to have Breylan do overtly sexual movements in a slightly pulled back way, almost keeping the audience guessing on what they were supposed to be feeling. I wanted this sense of uncertainty to add to the uncomfortableness that the audience

members would feel. I used exercises in the beginning so that her heavy breathing would act as the sound score of the section, something reintroduced later on at the end of Sasha and Jacob's duet. The movement following, while overtly sexual, was simple and slow as to ease the audience members into movement.

The Pina Colada Song

I was a few too many drinks in, dancing my way around the bar, socializing. Suddenly, my song came on. MY song. Partition.²³ Naturally, I went wild. I attempted to hip hop seduce the bouncer who had no option to leave his station at the door. I was almost certain that I looked super sexy, but the videos I saw the next day told a much different story as I thrashed about awkwardly.

One audience member described the second section of my piece as “feeling as though a drunk person at a party was trying to seduce them, but badly.” This was exactly what I aimed for when choreographing this part. The song “Escape (The Pina Colada Song)” has always been a favorite of mine.²⁴ More recently, I listened closely to the lyrics of the entire song, not just the infamous line about a tropical drink. The song tells a short story about a man who sees a personal ad in the paper, decides to meet up with this woman despite being married, only to realize that the woman was his wife when they finally meet. I thought to myself, “well that’s awkward” and then immediately knew this piece had to be a part of my thesis and that it would be the perfect song for a terrible attempt at seduction.

²³ An excellent song with an epic beat drop by Beyoncé Knowles from the album “Beyoncé”.

²⁴ I mean who doesn't love pina coladas and getting caught in the rain?

This was my first time choreographing *to* music. In previous experiences, I have always used music to generate movement but never used that same song in the performance. This proved to be a new challenge. When first choreographing this section, I created a traditional jazz number. There was still repetition and awkward movements, but it was far more over the top. However, after watching it many times and receiving some feedback, I knew I had to strip it down. I simplified it to its bare minimum so that every single hip roll or head tilt was either completely unexpected, or ridiculously predictable. The result, though physically less intricate, was far more interesting and sophisticated, and I knew that I had landed on the correct version. As a final polishing, I asked my dancers to perform the segment with a facial expression that suggested something mischievous, but not quite overtly sexual. Like the movement, I wanted the facial expression to be pulled back in a way that made the audience know something was happening, but did not explicitly say what it was.

Awkward Sex

“Oh wait... let me get a condom.” I climbed off, and reached across the bed to the night stand. My torso hanging over the side of the mattress I opened the drawer and began desperately searching for a small blue square. Nothing. I leaned further as if it would somehow make a condom magically appear. Still nothing. I tried to sit back up to deliver the bad news, losing my balance my arms flailed. I fell off the edge, landing on my head with a thud and flopping to the floor. Ouch. We called it a night.

As previously noted, nothing came up more often in my discussions with my cast than awkward sexual encounters. From incorrect names, to unplanned interruptions, to eccentric

injuries, we discussed it all. Creating Jacob and Sasha's duet was more than just generating the movement, but rather involved refining and practicing how the movement was done, how it changed, what lines were said and when, and how they were delivered. I chose Jacob and Sasha not only because of their technical abilities, but also their absurd height difference. To begin, we created about 7 different "sex" positions with the intent that they be as bizarre and awkward as possible. We strung them together into a phrase and then saw just how fast it could be done. The result was an extremely fumbled and shifty attempt at moving through the positions that slowly but surely turned into what was almost contact improvisation.

In rehearsals, Jacob complained of the phrase hurting his knees and so I brought him my knee pads to help. This gave me the idea of Jacob's knee pads being his "protection." We so frequently talked in my rehearsals about that awkward moment in a sexual encounter where a brief pause is taken to get and put on a condom, so I knew this was an opportunity to highlight that moment with a modern dance twist. Throughout this scene, another dancer from the cast sat in the corner and subtly watched. I did not want her presence to be obvious, but I wanted some audience members to, by chance, look over, see her, and think, "hm... well that's awkward."

In December of 2018, I watched a new TV show on Netflix called "Sex Education." Though the show includes a great number of awkward sex scenes, one in particular stood out to me as being unbearably awkward. The protagonist of the show attempts to lose his virginity with a wide-eyed, quirky girl dying to have sex with any willing body. At one point in the scene she turns on the song "Push It" by Salt n Peppa in an attempt to set the mood.²⁵ I showed this

²⁵ *Sex Education*, season 1, episode 6, "Sex Education Episode 6," Laurie Nunn, aired 2018 on Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80224545?trackId=14170287&tctx=0%2C0%2C53ce0a9f-f681->

scene to Jacob and Sasha when creating their duet, and we had the idea of using the same song. I kept the volume of the music low to create an atmosphere without the music being the star of the section.

A Brazilian Wax

“So what are you studying in school?” Lorena spread hot wax all over my genital region. I layed there, legs butterflyed, everything off from the waist down. She ripped off a strip of wax, bringing with it a nice collection of my pubic hair. She excitedly showed me the wax. “Wow look how we got the whole hairs out, down to the roots.” I flipped over onto my stomach and held my ass cheeks apart while she continued. “Are you watching anything new on Netflix?”²⁶

Receiving a Brazilian wax is physical intimacy at an extreme. You are not only completely naked from the waist down, but your feet are together and knees apart in a way that exposes just about everything there is to be exposed. To ease awkwardness, the technician makes small talk about anything slightly relevant. This experience is reminiscent of a gynecology appointment. As the piece progressed, I wanted to increase the amount of movement, so I thought of an abstract way to recreate this scene using dance. The five dancers in this section and I each created gestures that, in some way, related to a Brazilian wax, whether it was actually butterflying, or some sort of nervous tick. We strung these together to make a phrase entirely different from the movement we had generated previously. We looped the phrase

475a-9b24-2457141bc5f4-71286455%2Cafc24bdc-eedd-4565-bb40-00f67afadac3_5054966X3X
X1553628101220%2Cafc24bdc-eedd-4565-bb40-00f67afadac3_ROOT.

²⁶ What a time to be alive!

and made it travel slowly across stage to naturally dissolve their formation. I used “My Little Brown Book” by Duke Ellington here as I wanted something with a background music feel, something you might hear on low volume in an elevator. As in the last section, it set the atmosphere, but did not steal the show. The primary sound score was the text the dancers were saying: “What’s the occasion?” “Have you seen the latest episode of the bachelor?” “Do you have a boyfriend?” “Is the wax too hot?” “Okay, you can butterfly now.” Every one of these lines was something that I or members of my cast had heard when at a Brazilian wax.

The purpose of this section was to emphasize our inherent need to diffuse awkward situations with small talk. Some people who had never experienced a Brazilian wax connected to this section because they recognized this need. In this process, however, we accomplished much more. The innate fact that only a portion of the audience had experienced a Brazilian wax allowed this section to be extremely relatable, uncomfortable, and funny for some, while simply confusing to others, making them uncomfortable in a different way. Many of these viewers felt that they were watching a section focused around small talk, first dates, strip clubs, or even coffee house meet ups. Although this certainly references those situations as well, these folks were confused when they heard the lines specifically about the wax or butterfly and did not understand the reaction of the rest of the audience. Rather than attempt to make this more obvious so that everyone would understand, I opted to maintain a certain level of ambiguity to heighten both the intimacy and awkwardness of the section.

Crying in Public

I stood there, in the parking lot, balling my eyes out. As strangers passed by, I attempted to naturally turn my face so they would not notice. They noticed. Each time I tried to pull it together, I only cried more. I was not even sure at this point why I cried in the first place, but the embarrassment of the situation perpetuated the tears. When I finally composed myself I walked into work, puffy eyed and told my coworker that I had really bad allergies this time of year. I have never had allergies.

We keep our emotions extremely private in general. Though times are changing with people sharing their intimate stories on social media, our bodily expression of these emotions remains much more individual and private, for example: crying. We think of crying in public as an embarrassing situation. We unwillingly share an intimate moment with strangers. It was important for me to include this in my work as it was one of the situations that I found to be intimate solely on an emotional level, not physical. I wanted to emphasize that the bodily nature of the previous situations was not what made them awkward, but rather the intimacy itself.

Aryanna and I practiced this exercise together, staring into each other's eyes, laughing and crying. We used the emotion from one another to add to our own until Ary was able to do so without me. I worked with Aryanna pulling from a similar movement quality used in the last section. I knew that this section would be immediately prior to the last section and wanted a smooth transition. The bodily movement was intended to be exhausting and physical to allow for added drama and difficulty working through it while also sobbing.

Many audience members cackled their way through this section, but many also shared with me, after the performance, that they felt extremely sad and emotional rather than finding it

funny. Oftentimes seeing or hearing someone laugh makes us laugh and oftentimes seeing or hearing someone cry makes us cry. I asked Aryanna to intentionally laugh in a fake way but cry as realistically as possible; perhaps some audience members picked up on this genuine sobbing. In the end, this section not only transitioned into the more dense movement of the last section, but offered a new type of intimacy to consider.

Awkwardness and Intimacy in Dance

Downstage left, we stood facing one another, our matching green costumes draped over our bodies. Staring deeply into the other's eyes, attempting to connect on a level that would sync up our dancing, our timing. I waited for some sort of indication that we were about to move. It happened. We both dropped to the floor and began our rolling sequence that would bring us back to standing. Our intimate connection was not only evident to us, but also those who watched.

The final section of the work approached awkwardness and intimacy in a more nuanced way. The dancers moved through the space, no longer in unison, with dynamic movements. It aimed to tie together each previous section while also showing the way that awkwardness and intimacy exist in dance. This project was largely inspired by my experience in contact improvisation, and I wanted to ensure that I included dance as an awkward and intimate situation in and of itself. My cast and I created the many movement phrases performed in this section during our first few rehearsals. I entered the studio alone and, using ideas and anecdotes from my previous research, created movement that felt awkward and intimate for me, but in a subtle way. Upon teaching this movement to my cast, I asked them to manipulate the phrase work into

new strings of movement. I also asked them to develop their own phrases that felt intimate or awkward. All of these pieces made an appearance in this final section. I inserted moments in this section where the dancers simply stopped what they were doing and stared directly at each other, as if acknowledging how bizarre what they were doing was.

I chose to reuse the song “Push It” but full volume. I opted for an instrumental version as I wanted the sound, but not the lyrics, to inform the audience. I asked the dancers not to use the music to inform the dancing but let it exist alongside what they were doing as a separate entity. This allowed the movement to pull back from the sound and keep it from being too colloquial. The ending resolved the built up energy on stage without losing the effect of the previous 35 minutes. It referenced the phrase used in the Brazilian wax quintet as well as the crawls from the pina colada section. The audience and the cast stared at the final dancer on stage until the scene suddenly went dark.

III. RESULTS, ANALYSIS, AND CONCLUSION

In order to evaluate my work and help to answer my research questions, I had a brief talk back with the audience following the performance. Additionally, I asked each of my dancers to send me about a paragraph reflecting on their experience in the rehearsal process as well as performances for this piece. These two methods of feedback have been extremely useful in helping me understand where intimacy and awkwardness fit together, where they exist in dance or on stage, and what factors about a dance create intimacy or awkwardness.

Audience Feedback

“The silence in the beginning is oppressively awkward”

“The small talk questions asked in the Brazilian wax quintet were the most awkward”

“The eye contact in the beginning was extremely intimate”

“The moment the pina colada song came on, I felt very uncomfortable.”

“Hearing the laughter of the audience was awkward for me”

The overall feedback I received on this piece was not only interesting, but wildly overwhelming for me in a positive way. I was overjoyed to hear that so many people connected with the work and were intrigued by its meaning. I felt so happy and empowered to be able to share my thought process with so many people. In our talk back session, I asked the audience members which section was the most awkward or the most intimate for them to watch, and why?

Numerous quotes from the audience (above) enlightened which parts of the piece captured these themes of intimacy and awkwardness. What I took away from this was that there was no one consistent answer. Every audience member had a different experience, a different connection to the work. Each person related in a different way and therefore experienced intimacy and awkwardness in their own ways. I felt that this spoke to the holistic nature of the piece as it attempted to convey these themes in as many forms as possible.

The final theme I noticed from these feedback sessions was responses on the second day, from those who had seen the work twice. Some felt that seeing it for a second time made it even more awkward and uncomfortable as they already knew what was coming and could anticipate those moments that they knew would be awkward. Others who saw it twice pointed out to me that they were able to notice and take in more of the small details the second time and better appreciate the many layers of the piece that explored intimacy and awkwardness.

Dancers' Reflections

Many of my dancers' reflections talked about how difficult it was to keep a straight face and when this was hardest. Many of them compared doing the work in rehearsal to performing it on stage and found that even though as dancers we are often far more comfortable with intimacy and awkwardness than others, it was far easier to keep a straight face on stage. One dancer attributed this to a sense of control over the audience that empowered her on stage. Rather than feeling uncomfortable, she felt powerful having the ability to make the audience uncomfortable. When asking Aryanna about her experience laughing and crying on stage, she realized how different it was performing this moment to a full audience rather than an empty house. She

laughed and cried more easily and more fully with an audience present and found this exercise to be emotionally exhausting when no one received it. The dancers also talked about our rehearsal discussions. While they cited these discussions as clarifying the topic and intent, they also considered how they had created a comfortable rehearsal space where they were willing to take risks.

Choreographic Reflection

Having choreographed for the Emory Dance Company in the past, I already knew that I enjoyed choreographing. What I was uncertain about was whether I would enjoy movement research. The piece that I made last spring, though it pulled from imagery, did not have any clear meaning. Having a clear direction and purpose from the beginning was new to me, and I worried how I would accomplish this goal. Around mid process I realized I was holding back. I was not taking risks. I was simply using the choreographic tools and processes that I knew would make good and interesting work, but was not necessarily exploring the extent of intimacy and awkwardness nor was I doing anything original. It was at this point that I dove in. I went over the top in every way and on every section. Once I put the movement out there, I could strip down the excessive elements and keep what I needed to. This taught me about working through a process with research and purpose behind my choreography. I never would have assumed much of a difference, but it was important for me to come to this realization, a process of maturation.

My cast acted as my most substantial support system. Without such an amazing group of dancers my work would not have been what it was. Their eager attitudes, enthusiastic spirits,

willingness to contribute, and preparedness to try anything I asked was incredible. It was a collaborative process. Seeing the piece performed was one of the most empowering and joyful moments for me. I felt incredible sharing this work into which I had put so much time and energy. I am truly proud of what I created. I was also empowered knowing that I had accomplished what I had set out to do: that the audience was uncomfortable when I wanted, that the audience laughed when I wanted. I learned so much about dance, intimacy, awkwardness, and myself.

Conclusion

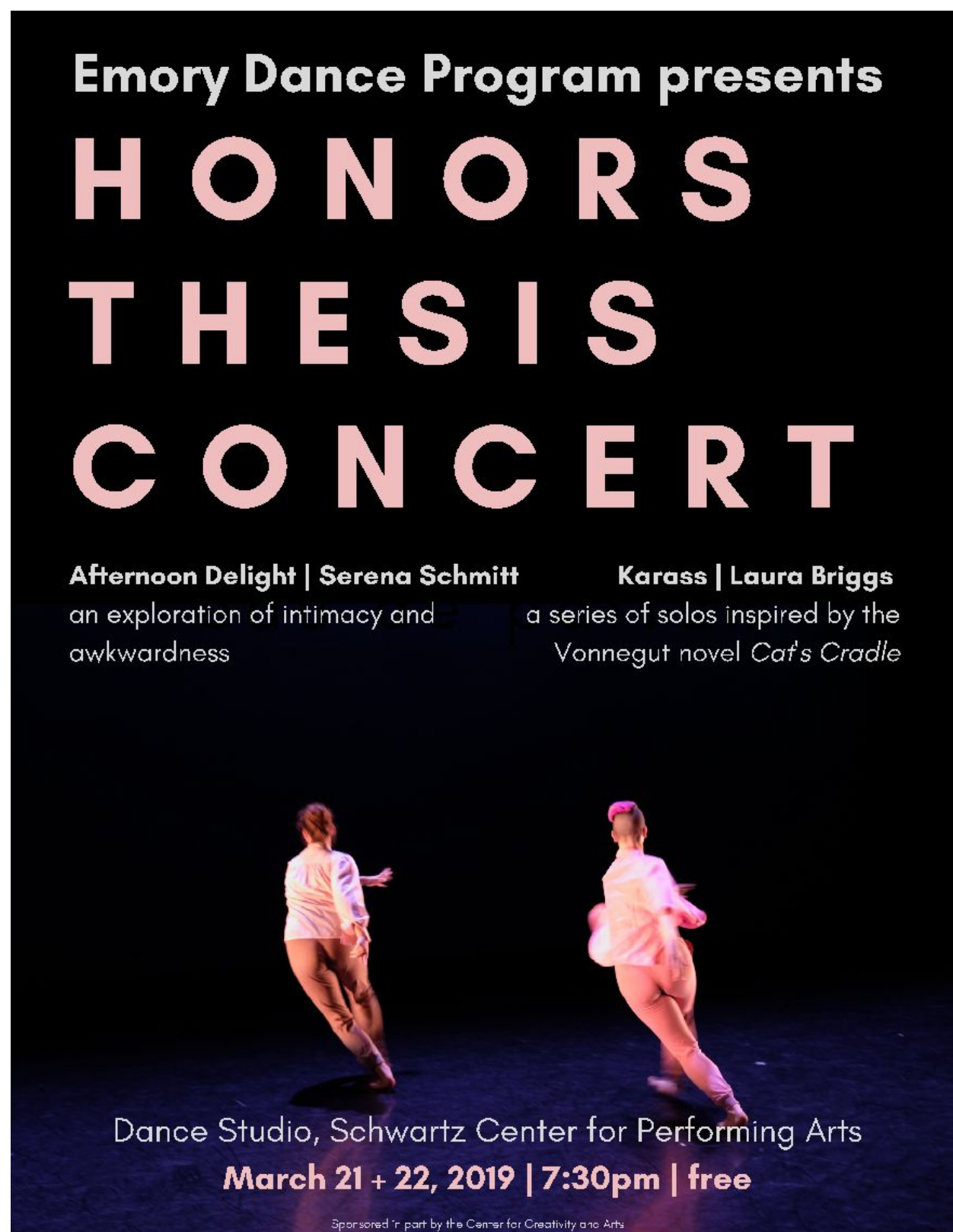
Though it is difficult to make any definitive claims considering the many aspects of this topic that I have yet to explore, I feel that I have taken a comprehensive look at intimacy and awkwardness in dance. Intimacy and awkwardness coexist on stage. They accompany each other, strengthen each other, and affect one another. An added element of awkwardness or intimacy only accentuates the other. Additionally, the type of intimacy used changes the feeling of awkwardness and changes how uncomfortable an audience member feels. There is, however, no set correlation as this feeling of uncomfortableness differs for every audience member.

People tend to laugh in awkward situations. Awkward moments can be uncomfortable and funny. Oftentimes a performance is a serious and intellectual experience making it difficult to bring an audience to a humorous place. Though I still found my piece to be intellectual, it was also humorous as was verified by the laughter from the audience members. I used the awkwardness to reach this point, knowing that people often respond with laughter when they feel uncomfortable. I allowed room for laughter and humor in the work to protect the audience from

feeling too comfortable in the moment. It allowed them to enjoy the piece in the moment and then connect to its meanings later on. With this, I feel that I was not only able to explore this intersection between intimacy and awkwardness, but also share one role that humor may have in contemporary modern dance.

Finally, it is notable that certain situations or interactions on stage roused a chuckle from practically every audience member. It seems there may be some things that are universally recognized as awkward in our society. I have thought deeply about this since the performance and will continue to do so. What exactly makes something awkward, and what exactly makes something intimate? Why does awkwardness make people uncomfortable? Where do our individual experiences come into play and what things are universal? My time researching through this piece has helped me to much better understand both awkwardness and intimacy and more specifically where they meet.

Appendix A: Promotional Flyer



Emory Dance Program presents

HONORS THESIS CONCERT

Afternoon Delight | Serena Schmitt
an exploration of intimacy and awkwardness

Karass | Laura Briggs
a series of solos inspired by the
Vonnegut novel *Cat's Cradle*

Dance Studio, Schwartz Center for Performing Arts
March 21 + 22, 2019 | 7:30pm | free

Sponsored in part by the Center for Creativity and Arts

Appendix B: Concert Program

Emory Dance Program presents

HONORS THESIS CONCERT 2019

Afternoon Delight

Choreographer | Serena Schmitt

Dancers | Aryanna Allen, Leah Behm, Sasha Dymant,
Allison Gasnick, Breylan Martin, Jacob Robbins,
Kelly Vogel, Carly Wynans, Jinnie Xie

Sound | "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)" by Rupert
Holmes, "Push It" by Salt-n-Pepa, "My Little Brown Book"
by Duke Ellington & John Coltrane, "Push It
(instrumental)" by Salt-n-Pepa



March 21 & 22, 2019
Schwartz Center for Performing Arts
Dance Studio

Sponsored in part by the Center for Creativity and Arts

Karass

karass (n.) a team that does God's will without ever discovering what they are doing.

Choreographer | Laura Briggs

Dancers | Kiran Bhutada, Emily Fan, Merryn McKeough, Maria McNiece, Ahaue Orusa, Elise Stumpf

Sound | "Home on the Range" by Bing Crosby, original music by Kendall Simpson

This work is an investigation of major themes in the novel *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut.



Emory Production Staff

Technical Director | Greg Catellier

Stage Manager | Angelina Pellini

Light & Sound Technician | Brian Jones

Costume Coordinator | Cynthia Church

Dance Program Director | Lori Teague

Dance Program Coordinator | Anne Walker

Music Coordinator | Kendall Simpson

Promotional Assistance | Nick Surbey
& Emma Yarborough

House Manager | Nina Vestal

Videographer | Hal Jacobs

Appendix C: Performance Photographs (Credit Lori Teague)











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Yasmeen Godder. <http://www.yasmeengodder.com/yasmeen-godder>.