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# This is not a thesis : the making of "Oh, a cup"

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This is Not a Thesis: The Making of “Oh, a Cup.”

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Submitted to the Department of Dance  
of Smith College in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Chris Aiken, Faculty Advisor

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Shaina Cantino, Augusta Rodgers, and Joshua Sugiyama

The Faculty and Graduate Students of the Smith Dance Department  
(2011-2013)

The Wagners

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## Introduction

Is it possible to “un-know” the known? Designer and architect Kenya Hara states, “What constantly invigorates the human mind is the unknown; we aren’t animated by what we already know, but we’re eager to make the world known.”<sup>1</sup> I didn’t intend to explore this idea through my thesis process. Yet the piece I designed, a dance theatre work entitled *Oh, a Cup*.<sup>2</sup> eventually centered on this very desire to “invigorate the human mind,”<sup>3</sup> evidenced by Shaina Cantino’s<sup>4</sup> attempt to “un-know” the known. Cantino’s efforts established the piece’s odd but pivotal ideological argument: is this or is this not “a cup?”

*Oh, a Cup* begins with Cantino. She arrives onstage as if stepping into a new world. She dances, improvising movement in response to the environment. As Cantino dances, Augusta Rodgers and Joshua Sugiyama enter with a picnic basket, tablecloth, and tea set in tow. Rodgers is clearly the leader of the duo; Sugiyama carries the basket in a deferential, servile manner. Unaware of Cantino, Rodgers directs Sugiyama to help set up the tea set. Rodgers and Sugiyama make three arrangements: one on the floor, another on Rodgers’ lap, and finally on Rodgers’ stomach. In this last positioning, Rodgers lies with her back on the floor, teacups carefully balanced across her belly. Rodgers is perpetually dissatisfied with each display. In the third and final set-up, Rodgers slides on her back along the floor towards Cantino, paying little heed to the tea set falling from her stomach onto the floor. As Rodgers slithers closer to Cantino, she grabs a falling teacup and exclaims, “This is a cup!”

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<sup>1</sup> Kenya Hara. *Designing Design*. (Switzerland: Lars Muller Verlag, 2007), 370-371.

<sup>2</sup> The title of my thesis piece intentionally has a period at the end.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> I collaborated with three dancers: Shaina Cantino, Augusta Rodgers, and Joshua Sugiyama. For brevity’s sake, I refer to them simply as Cantino, Rodgers, and Sugiyama.

Rodgers and Sugiyama then attempt to lead Cantino through a bastardized version of a common theatre game.<sup>5</sup> Refusing to follow along, Cantino questions Rodgers' previous assertion with, "Are you sure? How do you know it's a cup?" Rodgers, unwavering in her understanding of a teacup, simply replies, "Because it is." She then tries again to entice Cantino into the game. In response, Cantino starts to leave the stage when Sugiyama pounces on her foot, compelling her to stay. This pouncing "dance" eventually transitions into Cantino and Sugiyama's introductory duet.

Cantino and Sugiyama repeatedly dance together in the piece, deepening the complexity of their relationship with each duet despite their ideological differences. (Sugiyama firmly believes a teacup is "a cup.") Simultaneously, Cantino and Rodgers perpetually dispute the teacup "identity crisis." As their arguments become more heated, Cantino realizes the ultimate futility of expressing her beliefs in such a closed environment. She eventually leaves Rodgers and Sugiyama to remain entrenched in their ways and returns to her opening movement material. She solos again, alone in her ability to dream of a cup's potential to be more, or other than, just "a cup."

What follows is a reflection on *Oh, a Cup*. in process, performance, and after. I will first share my aesthetic to contextualize this piece in relationship to my choreographic interests and signatures. I will then return to the research that informed this process: specifically my contact improvisation (CI) studies and my research on choreographers Wim Vandekeybus and Bebe Miller. I will then examine, analyze, and unpack the piece, sharing the integral stepping-stones that ultimately brought my ideas to fruition. I will offer fresh eyes on my unintentional allusions to Surrealism and Absurdist Theatre. Finally, I will gather the lasting, residual components of this piece for future work.

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<sup>5</sup> I explain the theatre game, the "This is a..." game in greater detail on pages 18-19.

## Aesthetic

I am a dance theatre artist. I like a mixture of dance and theatre that I can chew on, a broad spectrum of assimilation and separation. Dance and theatre modalities inevitably change when combined or juxtaposed, yet I entreat my collaborators to attempt to maintain the fullest realization of each form. I value this impossible task because raw, pure effort seeps to the surface when my collaborators attempt to integrate dance and theatre in this way. This quality of physical, mental, and emotional exertion is captivating; I devise performance situations where many variables, some planned and some determined in the moment, vie for dominance. When I watch a performer struggle to juggle these physical, mental, and emotional balls in the air, I gain a small glimpse into that person's interior landscape. I see the performer's vulnerability, and I see successful dance theatre.

I embrace failure. My former acting professor, Adrienne Krstansky, once said I was unafraid to show my warts. I value an aesthetic in which a person's fallibility can seep to the surface and direct the choreography. I'm not interested in presenting therapy onstage or in adopting Lee Strasberg's Method Acting technique, but I am unafraid to witness the inevitable messiness of effort. I challenge my collaborators to fulfill real tasks onstage, to simultaneously investigate and perform the choreography. When performing research, my collaborators make a metaphorical leap into the unknown. The audience is then privy to a performer's very human problem-solving process.

Like my penchant for "chewable" dance theatre, I'm interested in portraying a wide gamut of effort and fallibility. This vulnerability is subtle and not always evidenced by a performer's "failure." To create this range, I "frame." Like a photographer establishing

the border for an image, I look at our raw material and devise a conceptual structure within each moment. I call this process “world-building.” What is a “world?” A world is the environment, often including a specific topography, logic, and set of limitations unique to the piece. A world can be simple. An audience knows it when they see it because the performance construct evaporates. They are no longer simply seeing dance or theatre performed on a stage. They are able to perceive a different, conceptual place within the geography of the performance space and they witness the ways the performers dwell within that landscape.

I learned world-building from Double Edge Theatre, a Grotowski-influenced physical theatre ensemble now located in Ashfield, Massachusetts. Double Edge’s world-building approach first centers on “training,” transitions into group improvisations, and then is organized through a “structuring” period. Founders Stacey Klein and Carol Durrand adapted this modality from Rena Mirecka, student of Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski was a Polish physical theatre practitioner most known for his manifesto, *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Regarding his process, Grotowski stated:

Ours is not a deductive method of collecting skills. Here everything is concentrated on the “ripening” of the actor which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one’s own intimacy—all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment. The actor makes a total gift of himself.<sup>6</sup>

At Double Edge, this “gift”<sup>7</sup> was manifested through “training.” Outwardly, training probably looked like calisthenics. It varied depending on the day, but it could include running, “object work,” i.e. stilt-walking, silk-climbing, etc., or a strange “follow-the-leader” type game that often meant performing a few grueling actions for what felt like hours. If I had allowed it, training could have remained solely a physical practice, akin to

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<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Grotowski. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. (New York: Simon and Scuster, 1968), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

runner's high. But I soon realized I wasn't only building physical strength and endurance; rather, I was guiding myself through an intense imaginative and physical exploration. As I learned to direct my improvisations, I acknowledged both my autonomy and permeability to the collective mentality.

Training later developed into group improvisations. We added costumes, text, sound, and props, yet the larger principle of leading oneself and maintaining group awareness was still paramount. Though I made discoveries alone or forged connections with one or more individuals, my actions were in relation to or as a result of the specific concoction of people who were simultaneously performing their own research. As I found the courage or wherewithal to decide on and commit to my own investigations, I noticed my self-direction didn't just affect me. Autonomous artists are like dandelion puffs; their seeds spread in all directions and germinate similar independence in others. When each artist within an ensemble develops the skill to lead herself through a personal practice in the midst of a larger group process, a world can bloom. The conceptual landscape grows from both an individual and collective perspective, on a micro and macro scale.

I haven't studied with Double Edge for some time, nor do I use their training practices in my rehearsal processes. But I have based my own world-building process on Double Edge's model. I begin with improvisation, layer character development, and then structure the material. My version of world-building is completely entwined and dependent on the rest of the choreographic process. It's part excavation, part generation; often the search for the seed becomes the seed itself. We dig for buried treasure while simultaneously creating the dirt and gold to search through.

To uncover or define a world, I attune myself to the material we're working on. I ask myself, "What's happening in each moment?" "What kind of associations do I make

with each ‘event?’” After I gather my “associations,” I direct my collaborators to commit to them. It’s akin to Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, in which the actors map out a life-sized “invisible” town. Spaces, ideas, or character tendencies are defined based on the determined logic of the piece.

## Summer Research

Borrowing Twyla Tharp's term from *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it For Life*, the original "spine"<sup>8</sup> for my thesis was partnering. My aesthetic and choreographic interests gravitate toward aspects of dance and theatre that challenge me; my partnering research was a long time coming. I had always been fascinated by kinetically engaging duets, but I wasn't sure how to make them. I also originally thought this research would manifest into separate, specific kinds of partnering sections: a CI-type duet with full-bodied, momentum-based movement; a rhythmic duet; duets in close and far proximity; and solos with remembrance or memory of another duet. The attempts to make these sections propelled my thesis research into new territory. Partnering was an integral stepping-stone, offering a powerful vehicle to establish relationships, even as my research later expanded into the integration of dance and theatre. For example, Cantino and Sugiyama's onstage relationship was a result of and evidenced by their partner-work.

I began my partnering research with movement. I attended the Bates Dance Festival and studied Contact Improvisation (CI) with my thesis advisor Chris Aiken. CI is a folk dance form in which two or more people improvise movement while remaining in physical contact with each other. Beginning a CI practice opened a new world to partner-work. CI is completely dependent on the cooperative efforts between two or more people. By collectively exploring the gradations of touch, dancers are able to develop their sensory and perceptual skills in ways they're unable to do alone. This type of awareness uncovers new movement pathways.

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<sup>8</sup> Twyla Tharp. *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it for Life*. (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2003), 142.

CI also teaches individuals how to simply exist in close proximity to another person. Touch is a tacit but powerful communicator; CI trains dancers' ability to both read and transmit this information. Based on a person's physical tone, her partner can tell if she's ready to receive or share weight, try something else, etc. CI was very fruitful for this thesis process. I personally expanded my physical awareness and my sense of possibility for other people's explorations. I learned new language and new approaches to direct this type of movement for others. An intimate and highly sensitive practice, CI quickly developed the cooperative, ensemble efforts within this creative process.

In the beginning, my collaborators and I tried a lot of CI exercises with our eyes closed. We are a sight-dominated society, and shutting one's eyes allows touch to adopt a more dominant role in proprioception. Personally, I often over-engage my musculature. With eyes closed, I have a completely different tensile organization. During one of these "eyes-closed" exercises I partnered with Rodgers and assigned Cantino and Sugiyama together. Our score was simply to practice contact improvisation with our eyes closed. After some time, of our own collective, tacit volition, we came together and switched partners. I was now dancing with Sugiyama and Cantino and Rodgers were together. I eventually asked us to track our improvisations, recreate moments that were meaningful or interesting, and connect each moment into a phrase. I then gathered us together, mixed and divided the couples into trios and reorganized the phrase material. A version that Sugiyama, Cantino, and I made led to one of the piece's few "trio" moments, what we later called the "molasses" trio.

In addition to my CI studies, I researched Wim Vandekeybus, a Flemish choreographer, director, filmmaker, dancer, actor, and even photographer. Vandekeybus came on my radar prior to my summer research, and I became increasingly drawn to his

work as I learned about his aesthetic. I continued to study him for a separate project while I conducted my thesis rehearsal process, and eventually my collaborators and I even created a Vandekeybus-inspired trio. The movement paralleled his partnering style with its combative, vertical yet spiraling manner. We called this trio the “Ultima Vez” section, referencing the name of Vandekeybus’ company.

With *Ultima Vez*, Vandekeybus produces a raw assemblage of dance, theatre, and film. The different forms create a unified yet tensile whole. Viewing his work is a powerfully visceral experience because he negotiates provocative material without apology. Aside from appreciating the intensity of his work, I am most drawn to the ways he trains his collaborators’ keen, fierce sense of presence. Within each event, there’s an honest, in-the-moment process for the performers. His collaborators never “go through the motions,” but rather discover each event as if for the first time without reference to the choreographed outcome. When discussing his process, Wim says:

...we never just go and do a movement. Never...But we are always concerned not just with what we are doing, but why we are doing. What is the theatrical foundation? What story can we transpose to another medium? Do we need text? Do we need something else?<sup>9</sup>

My research on Vandekeybus marked an important transition in my thesis rehearsal process. During my summer research, I focused primarily on his partnering style. When I continued to study his work for another class, I delved further into Vandekeybus’ creative process. I realized I was not only attracted to his partnering approach, but more importantly to the ways he integrates partnering within a strong contextual framework. I was interested in the ways partnering can establish onstage relationships, develop a theatrical layer to dance, and act as another ingredient in world-building. This acknowledgement allowed me to shift the focus in my thesis rehearsal process from

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<sup>9</sup> Rober Ayers. “Scratching the Inner Fields: Listening to Wim Vandekeybus,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 18.1 (2002): 8.

perpetually generating different types of partner-work to developing a larger structure for the material.

In addition to researching Vandekeybus, I also studied Bebe Miller, artistic director of the Bebe Miller Company. I've long been interested in her work, specifically the ways she interweaves narration with abstraction; her eclectic post-modern aesthetic; and her use of dramaturgy in dance. Borrowing designer Rowena Reed Kostellow's classification of visual relationships as "dominant, subdominant, and subordinate,"<sup>10</sup> I would qualify the ways Miller presents partner-work as "subdominant."<sup>11</sup>

The *dominant* volume is the largest element, the most interesting and dramatic in character... The *subdominant* complements the dominant in character... The *subordinate* makes the design still more interesting by introducing a third visual element and axis.<sup>12</sup>

As seen in her work, *Landing/Place*, when musician Albert Matthias stands up and lip-syncs to an operatic work, a dancer stands downstage, simply staring at Matthias. They are the main event. Concurrently, two duets weave throughout the upstage area, in and out of the light, in and out of the audience's focus.

Miller's manipulation of partnering as a dominant or subdominant element allows a great range of narrative scope. In *Oh, a Cup*. I attempted this type of integration by contextualizing each partnering moment as character development. While Sugiyama and Cantino performed a lot of exciting, kinetic partnering, the physical complexity was enmeshed within their characters' relationship. I also often arranged the partnering alongside, or in the midst of, other action onstage.

I'm also inspired by the ways Miller creates specific "containers" for her pieces. A container is the micro-context(s) within the larger world of a piece. Miller's containers

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<sup>10</sup> Gail Greet Hannah. (Elements of Design: Rowena Reed Kostellow and the Structure of Visual Relationships. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

allow her collaborators to perform with autonomy and specificity. Though the dancers compose or improvise the majority of the movement, Miller still manages to insert her voice subtly and clearly. I'm interested in this level of collaboration within my work, where both my and my collaborators' ideas are evidenced onstage. I think my attempts to do this were most realized during Cantino's opening solo. Many people said they could "see" both of us in the dance. Cantino improvised the solo but also used some of my choreography as source material.

To devise a container, I suggest a context and my collaborators investigate it. We decide what can be gleaned, if anything, and then we tweak or change the whole idea entirely. It's a continual, subtle process of fine-tuning. I find that this container-making process becomes especially nuanced during the structuring part of the choreographic and world-building process. At this point, material can become "known" or lose the sense of discovery, excitement, or surprise it had in its making. It is then that I have to ask myself, how do I make the material relevant to where we are now?

To answer this question as it arises within the creative process, I have to maintain a malleable relationship to structure. A loose, perhaps detached focus prevents the structure from becoming too tight. In a rigid structure, there's no room for expansion, no space for the dance to be rediscovered within each moment of performance. When building a world from the ground up, the first sign of "the known" can be very enticing to latch onto, but often this first version has to change. Yet, each new structure has a way of infiltrating and affecting following iterations. I reference these former structures as "back-story," sub plots that still inform the current and subsequent iterations. For example, the final version of the "tea party" section hardly resembled a proper teatime. But in many of our earlier versions, the dancers did sit at a table and followed a strict set

of “etiquette.” My collaborators maintained that similar expectation (or in Cantino’s case, rejection) of propriety during our later tea party drafts. That importance of decorum remained evident even though the tea party itself looked completely different.

## Process

*Oh, a Cup.* developed into a narrative. Though the piece had a circular structure (the ending revisited the beginning), each character had a linear character arc. I was originally interested in a “semi-narrative,” an ultimately abstract piece with deep “storyness.” In my attempts to achieve semi-narration, I first divided the material into a series of “events.” I then created a sequence for these events, using both contrasting and unifying juxtapositions to vary the ways each event transitioned to the next. Eventually I realized these structures were dependent on the overarching plot, so I let go of my desires for semi-narration to the strength of the emerging narrative. I still included several sharp, quirky transitions in an attempt to keep the narrative fresh and new for my collaborators. I will now reflect on the process of making each event, beginning with Cantino’s opening solo.

We changed Cantino’s solo many times. Outwardly the solo appeared movement-based with subtle theatrical leanings. I interpreted it as Cantino’s “formal” introduction to the world of the piece and to the audience. We began with (and somewhat returned to) this notion of introduction, of allowing the dance to bloom. During these earlier iterations, Cantino’s solo was a precursor to Sugiyama’s entrance, to his assimilation into the environment she had discovered. In these versions I didn’t want Cantino to automatically defer to Sugiyama and absorb the new movements and ideas he would inevitably bring, so we worked on ways Sugiyama could join Cantino with subtlety. Eventually Sugiyama “shadowed” Cantino and based his movement material and physical tone upon her. I told Cantino that once Sugiyama was “cooking” with her, they could duet. If Sugiyama didn’t “cook,” Cantino was to continue to solo. I wanted

Cantino to continue her exploration, have Sugiyama reach her level of movement research, and then see where they could go together.

In another iteration, Cantino's solo preceded Sugiyama's pouncing motif. It was then that I was really starting to test Sugiyama's relationship to the other two dancers. I wondered what would happen if he had a strong, even aggressive entrance. This unfortunately portrayed an uncomfortable power dynamic between Sugiyama and Cantino. I had thought about potential gender implications when performing my summer research. I interviewed Stephen Koester, chair of the University of Utah Modern Dance Department and former artistic director of the all-male dance company Creach and Koester. Knowing the inevitable politicism of men partnering each other onstage, I asked Koester how he and Terry Creach approached gender with their work:

I mean we were obviously aware we were two men dancing together...realizing that...first of all that that was not that commonly seen...it was meant as more a physical investigation of partnering, which was ignoring, or we were not interested in going into political commentary or anything. I mean I always thought of our work as post-political or social in that we took dancing together as a given...our intent was not political, but it was imbedded in the work.<sup>13</sup>

I intended to adopt Koester's methods, to treat gender as a "given,"<sup>14</sup> but I couldn't completely disregard the fact that an aggressive Sugiyama suggested domestic violence or a heterosexual relationship gone out of control. Thus, I directed Sugiyama to mitigate his assertion in his partner-work with Cantino.

In the final version of the solo, Cantino's score entailed interacting with the architecture of the space, finding a moment of stillness, and approaching the diagonal. In the diagonal pool of light, she was to "rock out," or treat the improvisation like a musician's jamming session, and then return to the architecture score with an awareness of the audience. I think the most important aspect of the solo was that Cantino physically

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Koester. (Modern Dance Department Chair, University of Utah), in discussion with the author, July 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

walked onto the onstage environment as if she had discovered it. During other parts of the piece, Cantino's patience was severely "tested." As we amplified the absurdity of these situations, we often asked ourselves, "Why hasn't Cantino left yet? Why would she stay?" It became important that this world had to be vibrant, interesting, and compelling enough for her to remain despite Rodgers and Sugiyama's behavior, despite their insistence that cups were "cups." Cantino had to have fun and the audience had to see her "rock out."

Cantino would sometimes express insecurity about this solo, wanting more information about the certain aesthetic I was looking for, fearing it didn't relate to the rest of the piece, or worrying that she was generating the same material again and again. I was often surprised when she'd ask for clarification, because, as I said earlier, I value raw, pure effort. I love seeing the search, the exertion of finding out the emergent idea within an improvisation. I sensed there were often moments for Cantino when the improvisation maybe didn't feel "good," or "clear," but I found those moments compelling. That level and specificity in focus also often reinvigorate the subsequent moments with a heightened awareness or newness.

Towards the end of Cantino's solo, Rodgers and Sugiyama came onstage, picnic basket, tablecloth, and tea set in hand. Since Rodgers and Sugiyama's opening choreography was so drastically different than Cantino's, I knew they needed to be physically demarcated onstage by a separate pool of light. Rodgers and Sugiyama began with "theatre-heavy" material. They devised three teacup arrangements: first on the stage floor, then on Rodgers' lap, then on her stomach. I directed them to approach the positioning with as much care and attention as a surgeon (Rodgers) and her nurse (Sugiyama) would perform a triple bypass. Sugiyama also made his own associations

with servant characters from the TV series, “Downton Abbey,” and adopted a “butler/lackey” persona to his character.

This character development happened relatively late in the process. It took me a long time to develop the alliance between Rodgers and Sugiyama and to single Cantino out. Before I realized and developed this opposition, I attempted to create partnering material that included all three of the dancers. We worked with many ways for the dancers to move through space, share weight, and forge physical relationships in trios. After a few weeks, it became evident that Cantino and Sugiyama shared similar physical research interests, a highly physical, momentum-based CI-type of partner-work. It was also useful for them to interweave their focused research with play; many moments when they were simply fooling around became set material. During this time, I created a lot of situations for them to work together and turned my attention towards Rodgers’ relationship to their research.

Cantino and Sugiyama’s first major partner-work occurred during what we called the “box” duet. To make this dance, I used a score from my thesis advisor Chris Aiken. I asked Cantino and Sugiyama to think of one body part on their own bodies and a body part on their partner’s. On the count of three, they had to physically bring these predetermined body parts into contact. One person’s imagination doesn’t necessarily coordinate with another’s, so the score has inherent conflict and creates unique movement pathways.

The final version of the “box” duet was a melding and reshaping of two attempts. In one approach, I directed Cantino and Sugiyama to perform the movement combatively. I then guided them to find moments in which they could share weight, still keeping this aggressive, conflicting tone. In another version, I asked them to explore different scales,

a smaller, “muppet-baby” as we termed it, version where they had to perform their pathways as if they lived in a small box (hence the name, “box” duet). We tested their range of contact in this version. I asked them to dance both in close proximity and beyond each other’s reach. The final version of the “box” duet alluded to the “muppet-baby” scale; Cantino and Sugiyama reached to their full kinespheres within the confines of their conceptual boxes. They also first performed the movement with the softer physical tone of the “muppet-baby” iteration. Eventually they graduated into a more kinetic duet reminiscent of the aggressive, combative edition.

As Cantino and Sugiyama’s material came to life, I sought to define the larger context that held the trio together. Where were they? What were they doing? What did they want? One of Rodgers’ physical research interests included a delightful obsession with organization and order. I wanted to ground her material in something I knew she would find compelling and want to take authorship of. So in late October, I brought in a set of four teacups and saucers to rehearsal. In an attempt to give Rodgers something concrete to work with and to negotiate the inconsistency of research interests among the dancers, I assigned Rodgers as the “keeper” of the cups.

The teacups also supported the “This is a...” game.<sup>15</sup> I originally brought this exercise to the rehearsal process because I wanted to train my collaborators’ abilities to operate on different levels of consciousness. I learned this game via oral tradition, from my acting professor Adrienne Krstansky during an undergraduate acting class at Brandeis University. The game requires two or more people to deliver the following lines in a consistent rhythmic pattern. Any object can be used; for the purposes of this paper, I will use a cup:

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<sup>15</sup> This is the “common theatre game” I referenced in the introduction.

PERSON ONE: This is a cup.  
PERSON TWO: A what?  
PERSON ONE: A cup.  
PERSON TWO: A what?  
PERSON ONE: A cup.  
PERSON TWO: Oh, a cup.

In addition to delivering the lines within the meter, each person has to look directly at the person she's speaking to. This becomes more complicated when two or more sets of these conversations happen simultaneously. The person in the "middle" has to act as both Person One and Two for two different dialogues. The given object is physically passed from one person to the next just before the final line, "Oh, a cup." To add an additional challenge, Person One can rename the object, so Person Two has to listen carefully and negotiate the disconnect between the object she sees and the name she hears.

With this game, I was interested in developing my collaborators' ability to both fully invest in the choreography and to remain available to the ever-changing circumstances of the present. I wanted to tune the ways they perceived each other, to include literal listening in addition to the physical "listening" they had already been inherently forming by dancing with each other. Ironically, our first attempt at the game was unsuccessful. My collaborators were quickly disoriented with trying to maintain the exercise's vocal and physical patterns and were easily thrown when I renamed a cup or saucer. Though they eventually became quite adept at the game, I largely included it in the final project because of its difficulty. Again, I appreciate seeing effort behind movement. When performing a challenging or "impossible" task like the "This is a..." game, my collaborators remained in discovery mode.

The "This is a..." game developed into what we called a "chorus" section. In this part my collaborators broke up the rhythm of the game's monotonous meter and inserted

quirky, humorous phrases. Its placement within the piece varied but always followed a sharp transition. This quick changeover created a respite from the narrative structure by halting the rhythm and action of the piece for an almost entirely oral practice. But when the piece became more narrative, the “This is a…” chorus was too outwardly contrived to fit into the storyline. I appreciated the suspension of the story the chorus had originally provided, but I was unable to justify it. Why would Cantino’s character join in? Instead, I decided to meld the “This is a…” chorus with the tea party. I retained two aspects from the chorus, Cantino’s improvisational insertion of animal names or other nouns for “cups,” (“Obama” was a favorite) and Rodgers’ insistence that “This is a cup!”

Originally, the tea party was relatively traditional, with a table and chairs and even “tea” in the cups. In attempt to subvert normative tea party structure, I created a situation where my collaborators “couldn’t” consume the tea. In this version Sugiyama used a “trick” cup, a teacup with a small hole drilled in the bottom. When Rodgers poured Sugiyama tea, the liquid flowed through the cup onto Sugiyama’s lap. Seeing that her guest was soaking wet, Rodgers poured her cup’s contents onto her own lap. Cantino, wanting nothing to do with the event, dropped her cup and ran offstage.

For the faculty showing, we literally put the tea party on its “feet.” We attempted to morph a tea party passing game with Chris Aiken’s “school of fish” score. In this score, the ensemble walks or runs about the space in a pack, or “school,” following the “leader,” or whoever walks in front of the group. In our version, my collaborators also passed around three teacups. Eventually, Cantino collected all three cups and ran offstage with them.

When trying to incorporate Lester Tomé’s feedback to think like Wim Vandekeybus and heighten the riskiness of the tea party, we created a baseball-like tea party game

(many cup casualties). In this version, Cantino's character reluctantly joined a strange "tea party" in which Rodgers and Sugiyama threw the cups, slid them across the floor, and caught them. Like the school of fish version, Cantino also gathered the cups and ran away with them.

In the final version, I asked Rodgers to reprise her belly "table." Lying on her back, she assembled the teacups onto her stomach. (This was one of the few unison moments of the piece; Cantino and Sugiyama were also lying down at the end of their "box" duet.) I then asked my collaborators to perform the "This is a..." passing game in its original format. At first we couldn't figure out why Cantino would fall into the game's rhythm so willingly, so I asked her to join the game's first round reluctantly, to speak softly and out of time. This allowed Rodgers to chide her and start the game over, Cantino grudgingly on meter. I then directed Cantino to rebel again and insert her own names for the cups, as we had during the former "This is a..." chorus. She still ended up running away with a cup that she used for the following "This is not a cup..." sequence with Sugiyama.

I first intended the "This is not a cup..." section as purely transitional, but it became an integral moment within Cantino and Sugiyama's relationship. Cantino's escape from the tea party represented her rejection of Rodgers and Sugiyama's teacup "classification." Yet Sugiyama ran after her, suggesting a willingness to engage with Cantino despite their ideological discrepancies. This "following" quickly became one of the piece's more humorous moments because after Sugiyama chased Cantino across the stage, Cantino pursued Sugiyama. When Cantino stopped Sugiyama in their final "pass" across the stage, She reconfigured the "This is a cup..." refrain:

CANTINO: This is *not* a cup.  
 SUGIYAMA: A What?  
 CANTINO: This is *not* a cup.  
 SUGIYAMA: A What?  
 CANTINO: This is *not* a cup.  
 SUGIYAMA: Oh.

Cantino's re-wording dismantled both the rhythm and the meaning of the "This is a..." game. It also triggered Rodgers to launch into a disturbing solo of arranging and rearranging the teacups.

When first making Rodgers' cup solo, I asked her to position the teacups methodically but with great pleasure. I encouraged her to notice any contentment or sense of accomplishment from completing the task. I also asked her to work with conflict, to act as if one cup wouldn't "behave," no matter where or how she arranged it. I gave her the impossible task of trying to find satisfaction or resolution with a cup that would never satiate her character's extreme need for order.

We also worked with a few ideas from Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's "Composition #3: Loss/Reunion" from *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Rodgers had to include 15 seconds of stillness, 15 seconds of continuous action, and 15 seconds of repetitive action.<sup>16</sup> After watching her improvisations, we chose the most "logical" material and set it. The solo remained largely in its original iteration in the final performance. We also originally thought the cups would have tea in them at some point, and had made a "trick" cup by drilling a hole into the bottom of one. Even in performance, Rodgers still stared deeply into the bottom of what was formerly the trick cup.

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005) 150-151.

Alongside Rodgers' solo, Cantino and Sugiyama held a nonsensical "conversation" upstage left. This was another section in which we wondered, "Why hasn't Cantino left the stage yet?" Cantino and Sugiyama's dialogue had to be compelling enough that she would stay, so I asked them to argue. Sugiyama was to be adamant that the objects were indeed cups, and Cantino was to continue her protest. After a few tries in rehearsal, Cantino rightfully expressed that she didn't have a lot of valid reasons to say that the object wasn't a cup. If the cups weren't cups, what were they? Not wanting to define a specific existential or absurdist argument, I asked Cantino and Sugiyama to only use the text from these two lines:

CANTINO: It's not a cup.

SUGIYAMA: This is a cup.

They were allowed to repeat the words in any order and to change the volume, tone, and meter of their language. This gave birth to another humorous moment. In the gaps between Rodgers' cup clinking, the audience heard Cantino and Sugiyama spouting "sentences" like, "Cup, cup, not it's a," emphatically. We tried many different volume levels for this section because Cantino and Sugiyama quickly became impassioned with the task of the argument. I wanted them to be subdominant to Rodgers' solo; they were only able to reach their full volume once Rodgers started to really crash the cups about. They also had to acknowledge that Rodgers' raucous cup shuffle lasted too long to be "normal" by pausing their conversation and looking at her.

As Rodgers' solo subsided, Cantino and Sugiyama's conversation shifted from absurdist babble into a more traditional dialogue. Simultaneously, Sugiyama redirected Cantino downstage left, and began his "cup" solo. Sugiyama and I made this solo together. His movement quality is very sinuous, and I wanted him to maintain this physical tone but also add sharper, more staccato moments. To do this, I asked Sugiyama

to direct his movements away from his center of gravity. As he danced, I randomly threw objects for him to catch. We tracked the pathways into each “catch,” and stitched them together into a phrase.

To make these “catch” moments perpetually surprising, I added more challenges to the choreography, including extreme off-centered weight shifts and fast transitions between high and low levels. I also thought either Cantino or Rodgers would literally throw teacups at Sugiyama for him to block during this solo, adding another challenge, but once the tea party morphed with the “This is a…” chorus, there was little to warrant throwing the cups. In the final iteration, Sugiyama performed his solo while in dialogue with Cantino. As Sugiyama danced, Cantino struggled to keep a face-to-face orientation with him, highlighting their ideological disconnect.

At the end of Sugiyama’s solo, Rodgers abruptly shifted the piece by placing her hand on Sugiyama’s chest. In response, Sugiyama grabbed her hand and placed it on another part of his chest. They repeated this action until Cantino crept underneath Sugiyama’s arm and inserted herself in between Rodgers and Sugiyama. I referred to this section as the “molasses” trio because when I originally improvised Rodgers’ movement with Sugiyama, I performed the “hand placing” as if passing through thick, viscous air. This slow, deliberate quality of the touch became increasingly important because this moment marked the first time Rodgers and Sugiyama consciously touched onstage. Rodgers’ hand needed to pass through a molasses-like substance in order to portray the magnitude of such a transition. The movement quality portrayed uncertainty, investigation, and ultimately discovery. By perpetually redirecting Rodgers’ curious touch, Sugiyama also conveyed a new sense of agency in his relationship with Rodgers. The choreography also referenced Rodgers’ recurring cup rearranging tendencies.

After the “molasses” trio came Cantino and Rodgers’ “faceoff.” In this section Cantino performed a full-bodied, seizure-like shake while Rodgers remained in dynamic stillness. They spoke the following lines:

CANTINO: What’s your name?

RODGERS: What?

CANTINO: Okay.

RODGERS: I don’t think you know what a cup is.

CANTINO: How can you prove it’s a cup?

RODGERS: You just want to make things complicated.

CANTINO: You just look at it how it is.

RODGERS: But no one’s looking.

When rehearsing this section Cantino and Rodgers would often dissolve into laughter because Cantino’s physicality was so extreme. Their laughter contrasted the severity and argumentative nature of the conversation. I appreciated the cognitive dissonance but also felt the laughter added unwanted triviality. So I asked them to do the entire conversation while laughing. Making oneself laugh is a strange, unfunny task, and it had a sobering result while simultaneously making the language malleable.

Layering text on top of physically demanding movement also helps to strip away the burden of inherent narrative or emotional connotation. The task of articulation while trying to stay present and remember choreography is often arduous enough, as seen during this “faceoff” section. Cantino’s efforts to spit out the language during her convulsions were visually and aurally compelling; she was also unattached to the words’ value.

After the “faceoff,” Sugiyama reintroduced his pouncing motif to transition into the “pouncing,” or “hand and foot” duet. To make this CI-like duet, we used a score a classmate, Sara Coffin, made for our Music for Dance class with Mike Vargas. Sara had created a score where the specific point of contact was determined and maintained by

wrapping a scarf around the two people's body parts. We worked with Cantino's foot tied to Sugiyama's hand and then switched.

In performance, Cantino and Sugiyama had "real" tasks during this duet. Their partnering was highly kinetic and therefore highly changeable. In addition to this variability, the pouncing motif was contingent on their ability to physically "catch" each other. They weren't always successful. During Friday's performance, Cantino left the stage because Josh failed to pounce on her effectively and on time. We also added more text to this section. First, Sugiyama taunted Cantino with a "This is a..." rant (he mocked Cantino by referring to his foot as a cup). Then Sugiyama entreated Cantino one final time: "I still can't understand why you can't accept it's a cup!" Rodgers eventually joined the dialogue, and the trio transitioned into the final event.

I changed the ending many times, until the last possible moment. One of my original ideas, that I later returned to, was to have the piece end in medias res with the lights fading out to darkness. Another early version included Cantino dancing along the diagonal with Rodgers and Sugiyama thumping the cups against their chests in the upstage left corner (the cups made a satisfying, hollow, and deep sound). We also tried iterations where Rodgers and Sugiyama would resume the "baseball game tea party," sometimes actually throwing cups, other times pantomiming. I even tried to reinsert the "This is a..." chorus by directing Rodgers and Sugiyama to sing it as they walked offstage, leaving Cantino alone to state, "This is not a cup."

Eventually we began the final section with the "Ultima Vez" trio. In this trio, my collaborators rotated through a series of duets and solos, following Vandekeybus' combative, spiraling partnering style. When it was Rodgers and Sugiyama's turn to partner each other, Cantino left the dance and returned to her opening diagonal. Rodgers

and Sugiyama, completely entrenched in their way of thought, didn't acknowledge Cantino's absence and repeated their duet until their light faded to black.

Once Cantino was alone onstage she returned to her opening score, adding the following text: "This is not a cup. What? This is not a cup. What? This is not a cup. Oh." I directed Cantino to deliver these lines in a variety of ways. I originally sensed despair for her character because she was literally and figuratively left alone. But by directing Cantino to dwell on the hopelessness of the situation, I inadvertently negated the authority and agency she had exhibited throughout the piece. In the final version, I asked her to allow her physicality to direct the movement. This way, the text both reaffirmed her "politicism" and also referenced the "This is not a cup..." scene with Sugiyama.

## Feedback

Early in the process, Chris Aiken mentioned that Cantino was deferring to Sugiyama during their duets. I had always suspected Cantino was going to solo in the piece, and I didn't think her character could stand alone without high status. Status, based on Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, refers not to a specific "caste" system, but to the ways individuals act in social situations, i.e. as dominant or submissive. Working with status suggests inherent conflict, asymmetry, and imbalance in social dynamics onstage. Status doesn't necessarily reflect socioeconomics (a common theatrical trope is the high status servant), and a character's internal status can parallel or contrast with her perceived status.<sup>17</sup>

We worked with status exercises and transposed them to the dancing. Cantino and Rodgers always worked with high status; their power struggle became the main narrative of the piece. Sugiyama created a vital counterpoint with his low status. The pull of his low status character acted as an integral equalizer because, in some ways, Rodgers had the most challenging role. With little movement, she had to draw focus away from Cantino and Sugiyama's highly physical, complex partnering. Sugiyama's ability to work with low status allowed Rodgers the space to be on more equal footing with Cantino.

In addition to status, I incorporated feedback regarding the tempo of various sections. In the version we presented at the faculty showing, the piece had a lot of pauses in which the dancers would sustain a tableau-like stance. I had inserted these "rests" in order to stretch out the tension of these moments, but Angie Hauser gave me the note that the

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<sup>17</sup> Keith Johnstone. (*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1981), 33-74.

energy dropped during the pauses. In an attempt to incorporate this feedback I turned to the opposite extreme and challenged my collaborators to speed up their material.

The hyper-speed didn't work for Cantino and Sugiyama's first duet, the "box" duet, because we were working in such a strong dance theatre context. The movement couldn't be as readily accepted as an actor's burst into song in a musical comedy. It had to be introduced. It was their first duet and the awkward moments of discovery couldn't be glossed over. At a fast rate, Cantino and Sugiyama's movement may have been interesting on an aesthetic scale but their relationship became totally lost. While I appreciated seeing their effort to precisely perform the movement, I failed to direct them to maintain their relationship at the new speed, too. After a while Chris Aiken helped me to realize that this speed dynamic made Cantino and Sugiyama look as if they were moving each other around like furniture, not human beings.

To fix this, I told them to forget about the timing and to take as much time as they needed to make real discoveries within the movement. I worked with them to slow down their beginning movements and to really engage their sensory skills so they could perceive the other person anew. The first times they shared weight had to happen with care, even a little trepidation. This was sometimes difficult biomechanically, to catch the "ride" or move with momentum, but thematically, it made a lot more sense.

## Comedy and Drama

When studying theatre in college, I was told comedy and drama are the same except for speed. It was interesting to notice the ways the piece's tone ranged from comedic to dramatic with each performance. When referencing comedy, Keith Johnstone states:

In my view the man who falls on the banana skin is funny only if he loses status, and if we don't have sympathy with him. If my poor old blind grandfather falls over I'll rush up and help him to his feet. If he's really hurt I may be appalled. If Nixon had slipped up on the White House steps many people would have found it hysterical.<sup>18</sup>

This shift from comedy to drama was most perceptible when text was used; the amount of time between each person's lines had the potential to solicit an audience's empathy. I especially noticed this shift during the piece's first dialogue.

In order for the opening dialogue to be comedic, Cantino's, "Ok," in response to Rodgers' repeating "This is a Cup!" had to happen with a slight delay, as if it took Cantino longer than normal to respond. On Thursday, this timing was perfect; Cantino acknowledged the absurdity of the situation with detachment from Rodgers' state of mind. On Friday, Cantino anticipated her response and said her line a little early. This created a different kind of tension between the two characters, insinuating Cantino was concerned for Rodgers' mental state—Rodgers was, after all lying on the floor with cups strewn across her body. On Saturday, the length of time was even longer, prompting an assumption that Cantino had either misunderstood Rodgers or had difficulty responding. This also forged a different kind of connection between Cantino and Rodgers and again fostered the perception that Cantino felt pity or shame for Rodgers' crazed state.

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<sup>18</sup> Keith Johnstone. (Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre. New York: Routledge, 1981), 40.

Another section that wavered between dramatic and comedic was Cantino and Rodgers' faceoff, during which Cantino violently shook herself back and forth while Rodgers stood still. I intended the conversation to begin as comedy and end as drama. The nonsensical nature of the first group of lines almost always provoked a laugh. They were surprising and a bit of a non sequitur; more than half of the piece had already happened before any of the characters had thought to properly introduce themselves:

CANTINO: What's your name?

RODGERS: What?

CANTINO: Okay.

I wanted Cantino and Rodgers to deliver their lines without premeditation. To keep them focused on the present moment, I directed them to overlap their lines. They had no choice but to listen to each other because they always had to concentrate on their partner's language. Cantino and Rodgers' overlap also amplified their ideological disconnect.

Rodgers' final line deviated from the overlapping pattern and changed the tone of this section most. After watching Cantino shake for some time, Rodgers said, "But no one's looking." The last line needed distance from the previous set of lines because I wanted to create rhythmic asymmetry and for the audience to really hear it. The pause allowed the audience to focus on the long duration of Cantino's movement and in turn, empathize. When Rodgers broke the silence quickly, the audience wasn't able to fully perceive the difficulty of Cantino's movement, rendering the moment comic.

### New Contextualizations

My directorial practice includes both choreography and dramaturgy. When creating and tracking the dramaturgy of a piece, I ask myself circumstantial, meta-theatrical questions. I now realize I also often transplant these self-referential queries directly into my work; I comment on or question the material as I present it. In *Oh, a Cup.*, Cantino interrogated the larger scenario or “reality” of the piece by perpetually refuting the piece’s basic premise, that a teacup is “a cup.” I include these meta-theatrical moments because I value friction between piece’s world and the contrivance of the performance experience. These moments act as reminders that the performance is a small piece of a larger context and they are also often humorous, quirky, and surprising. I later learned this meta-theatrical approach was perceived as an allusion to Surrealism and Absurdist Theatre. In the subsequent text, I will reflect on these artistic movements to further contextualize *Oh, a Cup.*

In “The Manifesto of Surrealism,” André Breton defines Surrealism as a philosophy “based on a belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought.”<sup>19</sup> According to Breton, an individual is born with an “irrational” or dream-like logic. Reason causes the individual to organize her “organic” way of thinking. Since reason and rationale largely define the way the world runs from day to day, to be Surrealist is to be a revolutionary.<sup>20</sup> This rebellion often comes in the form of a lone individual fighting against the larger collective mentality. Cantino’s character arc portrays this very idea.

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<sup>19</sup> As quoted in Edward B. Hemming. (The Spirit of Surrealism. Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1979) 26.

<sup>20</sup> Edward B. Hemming. (The Spirit of Surrealism. Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1979) 26.

Her trajectory was largely solitary and often in opposition to a prevailing ideology. Rodgers and Sugiyama (and I hope, the audience) recognized the cups as cups, but Cantino refused to agree. Ironically, I originally included Cantino's "This is not a cup" motif simply to add more conflict, not to necessarily remove her from the "mainstream" culture.

I sometimes worried Cantino's negation of an obvious idea would seem silly or unexamined, especially because we didn't offer a counterargument. I didn't want to open up a specific debate. Yet, with no real "case," how did Cantino *not* appear crazy or confused? Since the audience was able to see Cantino as aware, so in command, during her solo, I think they accepted her reasoning despite its vagueness. Rodgers and Sugiyama's characters also exhibited even stranger behavior than Cantino's disavowal. Rodgers used her stomach as a table and Sugiyama had a penchant for pouncing on Cantino's feet. Cantino also expressed her opinions with authority, no matter how illogical or undefined her argument.

Cantino's character arc mimics the Surrealist value of the individual revolutionary. Yet, I can't ignore or devalue her dances with Sugiyama. I appreciate the possibility of a contextual nod, but the piece diverged from Surrealism by showing the multiplicity of Cantino's psyche, the aspects that yearn for community. Despite the importance of her individual plight in relationship to a collective mentality, Cantino found and developed a strong bond with Sugiyama that the audience was able to see bloom, develop, and transform.

Surrealism also emphasizes the outward manifestation of a person's life experiences and imagination. For example, Salvadore Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) depicts a desert-like landscape with images of "melting" clocks. The clocks,

though recognizable, are highly distorted, suggesting some kind of representation of Dali's interiority. Like Dali's painting, these types of materializations often don't follow a common way of thinking. They are pseudo-real, based on a dream-like logic.

Importance is not placed on the artist's ability to depict a realistic likeness, but in the way he shares his dreams:

No longer interested in the imitation of external reality, the avant-garde turned to the imitation of personal experience which, it felt, was more truthful, more profound, and even more universally significant than any form of art that had preceded it.<sup>21</sup>

In *Oh, a Cup.*, Cantino's disavowal of the cups could be perceived as an embodiment of her inner thoughts, but we intentionally avoided giving Cantino a specific line of reasoning. While the audience could have assumed that Cantino had a nonrepresentational, imagined understanding of a cup, we failed to translate the results of her thought process, her motivations for calling the cups "not cups."

After seeing *Oh, a Cup.*, many people also asked if I had referenced René Magritte's painting, *The Treachery of Images* (1926). Magritte's painting shows an image of a brown smoking pipe with the words, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." written underneath in neat, black, cursive letters. The English translation of the text, "This is not a pipe." is semantically similar to "This is not a cup." *The Treachery of Images* was considered revolutionary because the phrase, "This is not a pipe." appears to contradict the clear depiction of a pipe. While the piece's image does show an accurate likeness of a pipe, the pipe is not a pipe. It's merely a representation of a pipe.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David G Zinder. (The Surrealist Connection: An Approach to a Surrealist Aesthetic of Theatre. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault. This is not a Pipe. Trans. James Harkness. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 7-8.

During the “faceoff” with Rodgers, Cantino said, “You just look at what’s there.” Cantino’s character had the ability to see beyond the object, to reevaluate the status quo in a new, innovative way. While Magritte and I share an appreciation for investigation deeper than the obvious or face value, Cantino’s reassessment of “This is not a cup!” is ultimately, untrue. The teacups are not representative; they are concretely cups. Conversely, Magritte’s declaration of “This is not a pipe” is accurate because the painting is only an image of a pipe.

In addition to these unplanned Surrealist allusions, my thesis also exhibited several Absurdist Theatre tropes. In short, Absurdist Theatre, as defined by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, portrays the “senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.”<sup>23</sup> *Oh, a Cup* is not entirely Absurdist, but it did portray the following Absurdist themes: refusal to accept the complacency of human existence; atypical structure; and devalued language.<sup>24</sup>

Each character’s ability to question the “identity” of the cups represents a continuum of “complacency.”<sup>25</sup> Rodgers was the ultimate complacent.<sup>26</sup> When Cantino asked her, “Are you sure? How do you know it’s a cup?” Rodgers automatically replied, “Because it is.” She was blindly insistent, unable to imagine anything beyond what has already been established. While Sugiyama’s character largely shared in Rodgers’ beliefs, he did try to provoke Cantino into a debate: “I still can’t understand why you can’t accept this is a cup!” In her negation of the cups’ traditional definition, Cantino was the lone revolutionary, the sole character who refused to become so steeped in what is “known” that she couldn’t perceive innovation.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), xx.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

The sequencing of *Oh, a Cup*. paralleled the illogic of Absurdist Theatre. While the piece became narrative, even linear, many events were seemingly random: Sugiyama's pouncing motif, Rodgers' belly table, and Cantino and Sugiyama's chase scene, for example. This aligns with Absurdist Theatre modalities in which:

...the audience is confronted with actions that lack apparent motivation, characters that are in constant flux, and often happenings that are clearly outside the realm of rational experience. Here, too, the audience can ask, "What is going to happen next?"...The relevant question here is not so much what is going to happen next but what *is* happening?<sup>27</sup>

As previously stated, I actively developed quirky, non sequitur moments. Some were utilitarian, attempts to maintain the piece's logic. For example, Sugiyama's first pounce on Cantino's foot came out of a need to keep Cantino onstage. Other moments, like Rodgers and Sugiyama's first entrance onstage, were intentionally odd. After what appeared to be a dance-motivated beginning, Rodgers and Sugiyama entered onstage with a picnic basket, tablecloth, and tea set. Additionally, once Rodgers and Sugiyama established their teacup arranging, Rodgers' first line, "This is a Cup!" was surprising because Rodgers introduced text into what was formerly an entirely movement-based world.

I have become particularly interested in a kind of acting where movement largely defines the delivery and thereby the tone of the text. As an actor, I found I delivered lines with greater integrity when I concurrently performed a specific, concrete action. Ironically, physicality released me from the pressures of conveying the words' psychological impact while simultaneously allowing me to deliver the lines, psychology and all, with greater and deeper facility. Performed in conjunction with movement, the language adopts the changeability of the physical gesture. Cantino's "shake" during her faceoff with Rodgers offers the perfect example. Outwardly, this approach to text can

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 305.

seem Absurdist; the language can become unintelligible, thereby seemingly devalued.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding text, Esslin states:

The Theatre of the Absurd has regained the freedom of using language as merely one---sometimes dominant, sometimes submerged---component of its multidimensional poetic imagery. By putting the language of a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to meaningless patter, or by abandoning discursive logic for the poetic logic of association or assonance, the Theatre of the Absurd has opened up a new dimension of the stage.<sup>29</sup>

This depreciation of text is a crucial tactic for Absurdist Theatre because it completely subverts any reliance on a play's text to propel the action. Yet, I wouldn't qualify this shift as a diminishment of text. I think of it as a reshaping.

Text sometimes seemed meaningless in *Oh, a Cup.*, yet I actually assigned a lot of importance and value to the energy behind the talk. When staging Cantino and Sugiyama's nonsensical "conversation," I directed them to stand in close proximity to each other. I asked them to speak urgently, beginning in a soft whisper and slowly swelling into a loud shout. I arranged the scene in this way to mark an important shift in their relationship. Once Cantino and Sugiyama started shouting, their bond began to unravel. Though they later held another discussion about the teacups, the debate was, in essence, over. Sugiyama realized that Cantino was unable or unwilling to acknowledge normalcy and subsequently changed the ways he interacted with Cantino, adopting an aggressive, combative edge. Although Cantino and Sugiyama didn't follow proper grammatical format, the audience understood the subtext.

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), xxi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

## Conclusion

As I look forward to new, yet-to-be-made work, I wonder: what are the remnants of *Oh, a Cup*? What am I taking with me? What have I learned? I've learned to say "Yes!" to change. While I approached this thesis with a clear intention, to make partnered dance, I've learned to modify my work courageously. I took full advantage of a relatively lengthy rehearsal process and tried "everything." Change is frightening but informative. The more adjustments I make, the more I learn about a piece, even if that means returning to an original idea or structure. I now value this fluid, variable approach to making dance theatre because it enhances the collaborative process. I'm perpetually surprised by my collaborators' discoveries because I am able to dwell comfortably in ambiguity. My propensity for change allows me to create a world in which teacups may or may not be "cups."

I'm also holding onto world-building, to the subtle unearthing of a framework already inherent, already present within the process. I haven't studied with Double Edge Theatre for years, and I thought I had tucked away their methodology as a mere memory, not as a basis for my dance theatre practice. I now realize this seemingly intuitive process is one of my directorial gifts because I can easily view and evaluate my work through a dramaturgical lens. I "tune" the conceptual landscape through this lens by attempting the "impossible;" I ask my collaborators to maintain each dance and theatre modality in its purest form. These efforts are often realized through the integration of movement and text. Related but ultimately different physical practices, dance and language create an inherent friction that allow a meta-theatrical commentary to dwell within the world.

Lastly, I'm taking away my ability to shape and lead a successful rehearsal process. I believe in collaborative equanimity. As a director, I often make the final creative decisions, but I want my collaborators to be autonomous, thinking, generative artists. I recognize and credit them as my colleagues. I find this lateral, non-hierarchical rehearsal environment is conducive to serious, provocative, and enjoyable research. In this thesis process, my collaborators were eager to contribute to the molding of *Oh, a Cup*. Their fingerprints were evident in performance.

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