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# Choreographic Excavation Through Dramaturgy

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Un-Airing the Dance:  
Choreographic Excavation Through Dramaturgy

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Submitted in partial completion  
of the Master of Arts Degree  
at Sarah Lawrence College,  
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## Abstract

The choreographic process is often described as one of construction, or of making. However, is it possible to understand the choreographic process in another way, as one of discovery? In the course of this project, I propose to illustrate a new understanding of the choreographic process, which I call *un-airing*. By *un-airing*, I mean to throw light on the activity of making a dance that is itself already imperceptibly present in a space perceivable to an audience's sensory apprehension. The methods employed to expose the *un-aired* work I characterize and illustrate as acts of excavation. Due to the expansion in the contemporary era of the realm of choreographic, the contributions and practices of dance dramaturgs have been incorporated into the processes of excavation, establishing new, dyadic modalities. I elucidate the effects of these new modalities with depictions of the process of excavating and *un-airing* my 2017 work *Venus and Adonis*, as well as those to be employed for another, my piece from 2019, entitled *Dress Form*.

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## I. Introduction

*It is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written.*

*Michel Foucault*

*The cause is hidden; the effect is visible to all.*

*Ovid*

Is it possible to excavate a dance from space? That is, if sets of tools, processes, and devices are applied to a performing space within the pertinent frame of time by certain creators, collaborators, and performers with the intention of revealing, or what I term as ‘to excavate’ a dance, what happens? These sets of tools, processes, and devices might be collectively referred to as what is necessary in order to perform the activities included in this idea, this urge to ‘excavate.’ In using ‘excavate’ in this way, I do not mean in its archeological sense, but rather as a metaphor to describe the process of exposing what was previously imperceptible to the possibility of sensorial recognition.

Could it be that this dance, already existing, inhabits the performing space unperceived by anyone until it comes into contact with the right sets of devices? What are these devices? If this contact is made, do the tools, processes, and devices applied together constitute dramaturgy? If so, it is possible to attempt to define a method through which the excavated dance will be eventually situated as a constructed performance, intended for consumption by viewers through their own sensorial apprehension and comprehension. So, does this dance occupy a plane of its own, its elements simultaneously existing imperceptibly until the disparate pieces are made legible to the naked eye through a series of exposing or expository processes that are understood, as I have suggested above, as excavational in nature? If it is possible to do what I see as *un-airing* to a work of dance, that is to bring it into the open, thus making it available for

witness' perception, that already exists inside a particular space, then it follows that, yes, the useful set of methods used to do so could be defined as dramaturgical processes. The act of collaboration between choreographer and dramaturg can only be exposed after the unique systems of dramaturgical processes, devised in a bespoke fashion for the work at hand, have been applied to that work. By doing this, the work can then be then perceived by an audience intentionally located within physical limits of sense perception.

By *un-air*, I mean to say that, like the removal of soil reveals what is buried there, the removal of whatever may be inhibiting a viewer's sense perception of a dance *un-airs* it for consumption. This activity is a kind of active intervention into the space on the part of the choreographer, used with the express intent of leading to the revelation of a work of dance. If choreography is the sum of what is finally excavated, as when the *David* (1504) emerges from a marble slab by Michelangelo's excavatory devices, or when seemingly invisible organisms are revealed to have always been present through the application of a microscope, then a particular choreography's distinct dramaturgy is the set of tools through which the choreography is revealed.

During every choreographic process in which I have participated, whether as choreographer, dancer, or in some other role, there are moments of immediate understanding. This understanding occurs as a kind of revelation about what had just happened, alerting us to the certainty that we had found something we were looking for. A kind of sudden converging of comprehension happening across every consciousness there in the room, but, in response to what, exactly? We were all in agreement, but how could we find something that wasn't already there? In rehearsal earlier this year with Hank Bamburger, Lu Dai, Cat Eng, and Kate Shugar, we

were working with a floor-length grey, silk shirt. Hank, Lu, and Cat had engulfed Kate, who was splayed out along the floor while being dragged horizontally by the hands in the skirt. Suddenly, Kate was able to emerge from the skirt, we all agreed we had discovered something there.

It could be that the work of a contemporary dance artist is in the act of spatial or sensorial excavation, using these dual tools of the contemporary landscape in the right moment in time in order to uncover completely and visibly to the naked eye the dance that is being mined for by the artist(s). How could the work be found if it did not already exist in the space, awaiting the intervention of by the artist in order to expose it? By thinking in this way, I argue that it follows that a dance isn't present as an excavated object until it is perceived, and these processes of dramaturgy make it perceptible, and prove its perceptibility. Perhaps, then, the actions that can be defined as a particular choreography's dramaturgy are the acts of excavation that make the dance work perceivable by the senses of the spectator.

*I have behaved as if I were discovering a new domain, as if, in order to chart it, I needed new measurements and guidelines. But, in fact, was I not all the time in that very space that has long been known as 'the history of ideas'?*

*-Michel Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge*

Here, historian and philosopher Michel Foucault describes the question upon which my own ideas around excavation are inadvertently based. It seems clear that the act of excavating can expose the truth that the work was there in the space all long, waiting to be articulated by the right set of processes. Just as Foucault “suspected” that things were not as “immediate and self-evident as they appeared,” so too, can the dramaturg and choreographer together suspect that what they cannot yet perceive in not there to be *un-aided* (Foucault 135). Perhaps an idea exists on a continuum of this history of ideas, but once a dance made of choreography and dramaturgy

emerges in a way that is perceptible, it breaks through as its own form of *knowledge*. This knowledge is an idea, *un-aired* through excavation.

### The Expanding Realm of the Choreographer

During my research, I came to conclude that the separation of choreographer and dramaturg has resulted from an expansion of the realm of the choreographic to the point where the required, or even common, skill sets demanded in order to expose a dance work to the eye of the viewer have enlarged beyond the capacity of the single individual. The job has simply increased, necessitating a cleaving apart, calling for a natural division of labor in order to support the many activities required by dances as contemporary forms available to perceivers for consumption and interaction. Current choreographers are not limited by only choosing and codifying steps, or honoring an already existing libretto's narrative, or making musical visualizations (unless of course they choose to be).

*The choreographic is a metonymic condition that moves between corporeal and cerebral conjecture to tell the stories of these many encounters between dance, sculpture, light, space, and perception through a series of stutters, steps, trembles, and spasms.*

*-Jenn Joy, The Choreographic*

Writer, lecturer, and scholar Jenn Joy here articulates the clear and possible states of sense-perceptible-ness, in her words, "encounters," that the contemporary choreographic creates, or can create. This idea is critical for my project in the way that it illustrates how dancemakers can now decide what materials will make up the work. These materials may be those indicated by Joy, such as dance, sculpture and light, or they may be others, including different kinds of performers, music, recorded music, soundcores, sets, props, other kinds of objects, text, costumes, clothing, live viewer responses, or anything else they wish. They can opt for a massive range of time spans, even as short as choreographer Elizabeth Streb's single action piece, the



entirety of which is composed of a single dancer doing one thing once: she dives through a pane of glass that hangs from the grid above (Big Think, 00:00:40 - 00:01:03). In this brief instant, the dancer exposes a dance where once there seemed to be only a human body and a pedestrian object. The opposite end of the time spectrum is now also available for choreographers to choose. For example, the duo Leandro Zappala and Anna Mesquita, performing together as QUARTO at the Moderna Museet Stockholm in 2014, interrogate the very existence of objects in *Durational Rope* by unraveling them into the witness' vision and hearing over the course of five hours in order to "generate a tension between body and rope through constant motion" (QUARTO Artist Duo, 00:00:14 - 00:24:47). Choreographers can make endlessly repeatable work, as represented by a meticulously structured piece that emphasizes consistent performance such as choreographer Sasha Waltz's 2002 dance *noBody*, which she described as "rendering the non-physical visible," closely aligning with my own thinking (Arthaus-musik). At the opposite end of the scope of organizational choices are personally devised scores, like the group partnering and climbing of dancer and choreographer Simone Forti's 1961 *Huddle*, that are expressly different performed excavations in each discrete exposure to perceivable-ness. They can play with abstraction, or with stories and characters, or both in the same work, like in director and choreographer Anne Bogart's visually non-representative but aurally and dramatically metaphorical 2018 production for SITI Company of Euripides' classic, *The Bacchae* (SITI). Most vitally to their excavations, I think, choreographers can select where exactly a dance ought to be situated, whether it be a classic proscenium setting, a public museum, a private room seen only over a video streaming feed, or anything in between, in order to *un-air* it. These, and any other ideas, urges, facts, or fantasies that she, he, or they may want,

are all now part of this expanded, and still expanding, realm of the choreographer. Enter the dramaturg.

### Dramaturgical Modalities

How exactly can dramaturg and choreographer work together within this expanded realm? From what understandings can they begin their excavations? Dramaturg and professor Katherine Profeta explains that American dramaturg, editor, and lecturer Mark Bly thinks of this role with two words: “I question” (Profeta 9). I consider Bly’s approach to be not as much one that edges toward a brutal interrogation, but rather, one aimed at guiding the choreographer to herself. If this questioning method is employed with care, I believe it can enable the choreographer and dramaturg to together discover exactly what the choreographer is searching for, while also creating capacity to understand what she may have already found during the process up to and including the moment of particular dramaturgical inquiry. Meanwhile, theater director and choreographer Ray Miller writes that the contemporary dramaturg manages the expansion by working as an “activist co-creator” or as a “dispassionate observer” (90). The notion of the “activist” here seems most vital, as I believe that the writer, curator, and dramaturg Andre Lepecki illustrates similar practices along this instruction when he writes about a “not knowing” that is “resolved...by a practice of *doing*” (55). From this expression of not knowing, I take Lepecki to mean that the choreographer and dramaturg partnership functions in action, and especially, in the acts of excavation that will result in the *un-airing* of the eventual work.

When the performing arts theorist and dramaturg Konstantina Georgelou, choreographer and scholar Efrosini Protopapa, and performance maker, performer, and researcher Danae

Theodoridou write that while the role of the dramaturg can be “relativized and obscure” and “ungraspable,” the key is to engage with what I am describing as the expanding realm by both choreographer and dramaturg devoting themselves to a “common area of inquiry” (13). This area of inquiry must be the same space carved out when Bly dares to “ask,” and must follow a path of discovery that begins with Lepecki’s “not knowing.” All of these different articulations of various dramaturgical approaches expose a certainty: that the expanded realm of the role of the choreographer, opening to include the role of the dramaturg, contains extreme, persistent, and functional overlaps.

To help answer the question of why a carving out of each creative role with extreme overlaps has sprung up, dramaturg Bojana Cvejic offers that the “appearance of the dramaturg in contemporary dance...is all the more curious for the fact that choreographers themselves have never been more articulate and self-reflexive about their working methods and concepts” (40). In this reflexivity, choreographers understand that the function of devising their methodologies precedes what I like to think of as an *active spatial excavation process*. This process, while certainly undertaken in part alone, is massive, moving, and unwieldy, and possibly much better attended to alongside what Cjevic refers to as a “friend”, or an individual invested in ensuring “the process doesn't compromise in experiment.” (43) This reflexivity has also prompted choreographers to realize the need, and to find a way to repair the gap. It is inside the contemporary development of “this unique relationship between a choreographer and a dance dramaturg...that dyadic configurations” emerge in support of each work’s idiosyncratic modes of engagement and creative activities (Miller 91). By “dyadic”, I believe that Miller refers to his particular defining of the choreographer and dramaturg relationship as a distinct and peculiar

thing of its own that is *un-aired* when the two figures meld their efforts together along the agreed upon line of inquiry. It is clear that, as Cvejic suggests, creating what she terms as a false “binary division of labor by faculties: choreographers are mute doers, and dramaturgs bodiless thinkers and writers” is not a functional outgrowth of the role of dramaturgy within choreography, as each role-occupier is working concurrently toward the same revelation of an *un-aired* work within the same set of agreed upon tools, so that “the boundaries of these faculties are blurred and constantly shifting” (Cvejic 40). The blur and the shift are defined by each coupled choreographer and dramaturg in ways that are completely clear only to themselves. What is not clear is how, as Ray Miller explains in an interview with critic Bonnie Maranca, bringing to the choreographer “a wealth of images, associations, sliver of music or design element, historical documents, or contemporary perspectives (serve) as ways to stimulate the choreographic imagination” operates within the shift and the blur (94). I suggest that with each agreed upon proposal, the resulting intervention exposes another layer of the eventually excavated work, shifting the blur closer to being the visible, and bringing the members of the dyadic configuration closer to knowing, that is, to perceiving the dance itself, and farther from Lepecki’s “not knowing.”

Let me return again to my notion of excavation and *un-airing*, and in particular its relationship to dramaturgical actions in space. If, as Kevin Heatherington proposes that space is “socially constructed through the visual perceptions,” then what are the implications for my proposal that choreography is excavated out of space through active dramaturgical devices (124)? That is, since the choreographer, dramaturg, performers, and audience agree on what space the dance will occupy by occupying it themselves, does the dance itself begin to *un-air*

itself to all of their visual perceptions simultaneously as a final action of dramaturgy? Since these constructions inform the realities occupied by creative beings, it logically follows that the creations or re-creations we make in the form of dance are also about relating to visual and other sensory perceptions, or, more specifically, making possible that those exact things exposed in order to assemble a work of dance at the pertinent moment of contact with an audience can be perceived by human bodily senses.

Miller suggests that “dramaturgs provide a natural crossover between theory and practice, between history and choreography, and between performance and audience response” (101). This natural crossover might be considered as something of an intercession, meaning that the crossover Miller refers to is a distinct *activity* (or set of activities), and not at all a passive positioning of the dramaturg between an active totality of choreographer(s), dancer(s), and performer(s) and an inert, receptive spectatorship. This approach can be illustrated by a sequence described by dramaturg Pil Hansen, who has identified a series of strategies she calls a “multiplicity of approaches” that dramaturgs can then use to cut, paste, overlap, disregard, engage, and re-engage with whatever they encounter. These strategies are “transitory, lifted from ...(another) context, and rendered abstract principles” (7). These strategies, according to Hansen, are:

1. Work with the training of the dancers
2. Work against the training of the dancers
3. Facilitate collaborative process
4. Discovering interdisciplinary connections
5. Sourcing material

6. Generating material
7. Composing materials
8. Reopening material
9. Inviting the attention of spectators
10. Inviting the perceptual engagement of spectators
11. Inviting participation of spectators

Actions like those above can define the system of dramaturgy devised between dramaturg and choreographer for the task of the specific excavation of a particular work to create a kind of enlivened transmission, or moving score, that allows an audience potential apprehension and comprehension of the ultimately revealed work of dance. Their singular dyadic relation will necessitate an eventually unique approach that excavates and *un-airs* something never before able to be perceived.

Though “...originally, *dramatourgos* simply meant someone who was able to arrange various dramatic actions in a meaningful and comprehensive order” (Romanska 1), as the field has continued to evolve, the job description of a dramaturg becomes less and less definable, much like that of choreographer. I want to suggest that this seeming shortcoming is actually a strength, as it places the onus on the creative duo to define their terms for themselves in service of each new excavation, each process, and each new imagining. For example, the dyad could agree to Miller’s proposal of using concrete, agreed upon inspirations as starting points. Or, perhaps their previous individual methodologies can be melded in order to expose the eventually perceivable dance through more varied and less nameable means. In my experience, I have found that the excavatory process inevitably includes excavating the very nature of that singular

choreographer and dramaturg collaboration, again and again as the process continues and as the needed devices, over time, make themselves clear.

Most ideas about excavation lead toward a kind of hollowing out, with a suspected result such as an empty hole or gap, into which one could peer, like a construction team blasting away at earth in order to make space in which to lay a building's foundation. A dramaturgical revealing, however, must be a kind of digging in reverse, in that an awareness of the dance's existence must be agreed upon by the choreographer and dramaturg, and their activities, like those proposed in the above by Hansen, applied to *un-air* it must constitute a mutual methodology. It must be a removal of the perception of emptiness, unattended to by the senses, so that the materials of the dance can come to occupy the place where only the air and the imperceptible-ness once were, like in the case where Streb's dancer and the pane of glass collide. The preparations that include conversation, research, and agreement regarding inquiry that come to together to create the beginnings of dramaturgical actions can be envisioned as kinds of anti-emptying. These actions can constitute anything agreed upon as mutual methodology by the choreographer and dramaturg, and can include decisions as large of the physical situation of the work on a stage or on other kind of place, and as small as the rate of breathing that the dancers will attempt to embody. The material-assembling required in most dramaturgical activities serve to begin to fill the perceptual gap that will eventually be occupied by the completed work. In his theorization of the dramaturg, Andre Lepecki refers to this gap-filling as "the exercise of interrogation" that happens in complex support of what he calls a "composition...*for* dance and *in* dance", which as I am suggesting dovetails with my notion that the act of dramaturgy is part of this unique uncovering or *un-airing* activity (51). Lepecki discusses the quality of "not knowing"

that surrounds the compositional act, and states that dance dramaturgy must always “invoke and promote this kind of going without knowing” (54). As I see it, this activity within the not knowing is where dramaturgy begins to risk exposing to the eye what already invisibly occupies the space. But key to Lepecki’s notion of interrogation is the activity of creating a situation inside which the choreographer and dramaturg engage in inquiry, and the answering of the resultant questions, that enables the “gap-filling” so as to make the dance itself perceptible to the naked senses.

In 2017-18, Sara Rudner gave a Graduate Seminar at Sarah Lawrence College, a portion of which concentrated on the exploration of using score as a choreographic practice and tool. Rudner defined score in the following way: “A score is an outline; or a description of what will happen in time, space, and action.” When UK theater artists Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, co-founders of the devised theater production company Frantic Assembly, describe the dramaturgical techniques they employ, the most central idea that they agree upon is that the rehearsal process is a “non-linear event,” and, using this time idea, they create a score (6). Using their score, they dig down in support of the work as it reveals itself in its own way, using the processes they associate with theatrical devising, like interrogating the potential of found materials, or recontextualizing movements or texts until they reveal new meanings, in order to make their unique kind of what Hetherington might view as a social, spatial “construction.” Much like the choreographic “encounter” as described by Joy, Graham and Hoggett use unique, various and assembled dramaturgical actions for each new work. For example, they created a score with a set of chairs called *Chair Duet* that can be revealed differently and anew by anyone following the online score (15). The score included instructions they call “building blocks,” like



“move your partner’s hand” or “avoid symmetry.” They invent new methods for each excavation, according to dramaturg Clare Croft, in order to ask “questions about how dance creates worlds through the intersection of image, movement, space and sound” (181). This idea of “world creating,” I suggest, is another way of understanding that Graham and Hoggett employ their questions in an excavatory fashion, as their stated intention when attempting to uncover a work is “not to know” (7). This idea resonates with my project as well, as it is just the state of not knowing that allows for the excavatory process to be initiated. Lepecki’s own conception of not knowing confirms the dramaturgical logic of artists choosing to use various and distinctive processes to *reveal* a pre-existent unplanned, rather than impose nonexistent ideas onto the creative space by force. I extend Lepecki’s idea to show that in fact, it is not just how Crofts examples intersect, but what they expose to the senses when they do so that illuminates the *un-aided* work of dance.

This not knowing can create an upside-down openness, or a kind of anti-void or anti-gap around the creation of a work that I believe allows the pre-existing work to reveal itself to the excavators, or to eventually make itself sensorially perceptible to an audience where once it was not. This work is only discovered after the particular systems of dramaturgical processes developed for the work at hand have been applied, or during their application, and so that this work can be then perceived by those in proximity.

#### Separate but Dependent

An independent act of dramaturgy can precede other compositional approaches included in the acts of creation, as in those expected to be put into practice inside a rehearsal space at a later date. Curator and dramaturg Sandra Noeth takes her redefining of dramaturgy from an

old-fashioned literary term toward an extremely active contemporary understanding that aligns with my notion of dramaturgy as a deeply researched yet live excavation process, and as in being wholly active and considered while retaining the possibility of spontaneous reconsideration.

According to Noeth, one can think about dramaturgy as “less a task than as a potentially shared *function* within a process” (415). This shift from task to function is a critical one, as the notion of function carries with it an eventual result, in these cases, a perceivable and excavated work of dance. This function could be whatever sets of tools, processes, and devices are applied to a performing space within the pertinent frame serve to excavate the dance in order to make it sensorially perceptible to a viewer.

I am proposing that dramaturgy is active, it is live, and to cite Lepecki, “performed as a process,” but I am also suggesting that it is more than a kind of performance; rather it is what must take place in order to reveal a dance within the space and time of its necessary exposure (Lepecki 53). For example, when the performers enter the performing space, they do so in the ways agreed upon by the dyad and themselves, making the revealed dance available for perception by agreeing to be present. This process is, as I have argued above, is inherently excavatory in that way that ideas proposed by or questioned by the dramaturg can shed light on embedded meaning from a previously obscured strata, akin to the way the archeologist delicately brushes away the earth from an ancient bowl or bone. It depends entirely on the unique properties and modes of engagement required for each work, in order to design both the choreographic and dramaturgical operations. I believe that the work between the choreographer and dramaturg is uniquely divided, and yet overlapping in each discrete collaboration, and that

the collaborators are inevitably separate in their task, but dependant in their inquiries and practices.

Might 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham's idea of "invention" have synergies with my notion of "excavation"? If so, what might that be? This concept of excavation could also be understood as relating to what academic Paul Carter reiterates as Bentham's idea of art as "invention" (15). If, as Carter relays Bentham, invention is "a perception or recognition of the ambiguity of appearances," it could then follow that the dramaturgical act is one of rearranging materials until they conjure something that creates the possibility for this perception through the senses, especially regarding how that something "appears". The often improvisatory nature of including dramaturgical activities over time within a rehearsal space is, as I am suggesting, essentially following the very nature of "interest" that Carter defines as "what matters in creative research, as 'what matters' and 'what is interesting' are synonymous" (18). "What matters" is what is was formerly hidden until revealed by the dramaturgical uncovering, and what is revealed serves as evidence of the set of agreed upon devices put into action.

From my initial research into the subject, the processes that come together to form dramaturgy as relating to contemporary dance can actually defined in a kind of backwards way, as the definitions must be extrapolated from the work that happens as the result of their excavations. Carter refers to the "material," which is "always in a state of becoming" (19), and this "becoming" happens non-linearly, and in a state of not knowing, in service of un-emptying space by excavating it to reveal a latent or previously un-manifest dance situated there, to then be perceived sensorially inside what can be understood as the resultant revelation. This nonlinearity is a function of the kinds of tools employed by dramaturgs, as their methods can be applied and

re-applied during a creation process until the necessary depth at which the work is found has been understood and achieved.

## II. The Case of *Venus and Adonis*

In the fall of 2017, I began to be constantly awakened in the earliest of hours by the sound of birds chirping outside my window. These were city birds; they had clearly grown up needing to tweet as loudly as possible in order to be heard, and to my ears they seemed to have the sound-producing capacity of classically trained singers. Sparrows, starlings, mourning doves, blue jays, wrens; why had I only ever noticed pigeons before? I found their predictable noise to be almost unbearable. My neighbor birds would not go away until they seemed assured that they had bothered me enough to inhibit any notion of going back to sleep. After a few days, these chirping creatures put me into a persistent state of avian awareness. Once outdoors, everywhere I looked, the birds would be. Flying just overhead, so much closer than I had ever noticed before, perched in branches low enough to see them in detail, hopping across my trajectory over the concrete paths and sidewalks - it was as if the act of cueing my sense perception immediately upon waking with the sound of their singing unlocked an unknown ability in me to make the birds perceivable where once they had been an imperceptible part of the urban landscape I had occupied for so many years. As if, in the act of perceiving, the birds had become *un-aired*, another aspect of what I thought I understood to be landscape of space before me revealed again and again.

What else had I been missing? I began to suspect, Foucault-like, that my surroundings contained much that was not self-evident. Could it be that, at any given moment, the air around me contained beings and notions, actions and ideas, all the while blithely eluding me? Were

there ways to activate the spaces through which I moved in order to enable my own sensorial apprehension? Or to enable my own senses to grasp what was already present in the space around me? It became clear that the persistent un-airing of the birds *must* inform some upcoming work, but which? I decided it had to be *Venus and Adonis*.

Deborah Wright Houston

My interest as referred to in the above with the activity of dramaturgy stemmed from an accidental collaboration with someone who was hired to do an altogether different job. Former Artistic Director, stage director, lecturer, and costume designer Deborah Wright Houston was initially brought on to the project as costume designer for my 2018 Brooklyn Opera Works production of composer John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (1683). Houston and I had worked together on several previous productions, so the evolution of our collaboration into something more equal was very natural, yet wholly unexpected.

In my experience, Houston, due in part to both her extensive dance technique studies in her training years and to her lifetime of experience as a Shakespearean actor, has an intense, extremely expressive physicality with could be seen, once the inspirations had been unveiled to me, as even birdlike. In addition, Houston has a keen knack for imagery, as evidenced in conversations about and rehearsals for all of our many previous works together, that I find easy to engage with. The combination of these traits gave me confidence that a dramaturgical collaboration with her, rather than tying us inexorably to either the musical score or to any other preceding production of *Venus and Adonis*, had the potential to expose even more movement possibilities, to give even more depth to the emerging question of the birds, and to excavate in a deeper way everything latent in the stage space.

### Un-Airing the Choreographer/Dramaturg Relation in Research

During my initial brainstorming sessions with Houston, I told her about the way the birds seemed to follow me around Brooklyn. This led us directly to Bly's dramaturgical approach. That is, Houston wanted to question what I had been able to perceive about the various birds. What was their proximity to myself? What about their sizes and shapes, or the quality of their singing, or their presence as single creatures or groups of them, even my own state of mind previous to sensing them?

Houston always bases her dramaturgical approach in strong historical accuracy and representation (which I never do), so it was immediately apparent how important it was, and would continue to be, for us to be constantly and extremely verbal, establishing clear and almost constant communication with each other. This realization led me to the decision to open with my personal story of Brooklyn's birds, in order to set that kind of tone and practice of what Georgelou, Protopapa, and Theodoridou's "common area of inquiry." We decided to make images of flight, costume and prop materials based in feathers, recorded sounds of birdsong, the feel of grass under our feet, and the colors of summer birds priorities as we continued forward.

When Houston began to show me the materials of her research preceding our preliminary avian conversation, the idea of the birds was reiterated, strangely enough, again and again. First, she showed me Roland Joffe's *Vatel* (2000), a film set in France in the reign of Louis XIV (concurrent with Charles II in England) that is based on the real life majordomo, or chief steward, Francois Vatel (New York Times). In it, the character of Vatel, played by Gerard Depardieu, has a scene that revolves around a dialogue with Uma Thurman's character, Anne de Montausier, who, unlike Vatel himself, is fictional. Vatel has been charged with executing a

series of events of the course of several days that were designed to impress the visiting king, and de Montausier lends him support. Upon several viewings, we noticed that the mise-en-scene was heavily reliant on the presence of a bird cages, including one that Thurman is filmed sitting next to, and one that she knocks over in surprise. This leads the two characters befriend each other over the birds, in service of the overarching narrative of Vatel's upcoming spectacular. It was almost moving to observe how much like a Cvejic-style "friend" de Montausier was to Vatel during his excavation of his extravaganza, ever present even when off-screen, lending support to what she knew was to come. During *Venus and Adonis*, Houston embodied this same "friend" position, often processing everything taking place in silent observation, always ready to immediately offer her own evaluations of which, when, and where searched for sense perceptions may have begun to *un-air*.

Houston also brought to me another film, Alan Rickman's *A Little Chaos* (2014), that followed a much more fantastical and must less historically active thread about an independent female landscape designer at Versailles in the reign of Louis XIV. This film was mainly a source of pictorial inspiration to us, and revealed the possibilities of interrogating questions around the visible and invisible for our movement language and character exposure. It showed us the potential for those avian colors, and led to our final decision to create an entirely grass floor and seat scenic design, so as to capture the sensorial experience of birds at rest in nature. The film explored unique images of a commissioned enclosed garden, visible only from above (an angle enabling the birds to see it and enter into it), that functioned as both an excavated, hidden space within the estate at large, and as a kind beautiful prison for those invited there to join the king.

Houston, with no instruction from me, followed a method of Miller, bringing to me a “wealth of images, associations, design elements, historical documents” such as he describes. When Houston later explained to me her ideas around the ways of life at court, and we agreed that the courtiers’, aristocrats’, and royalty’s way of life might be summed up with a tidy metaphor based on the images we landed on together: the gilded cage. It seemed immediately clear to me that these kinds of unexpected connections could be understood as the concepts *un-airing* themselves. While the idea of a gilded cage is not necessarily new, the emergence of the connection to the themes and characters occupying *Venus and Adonis* was the result of what I have been calling ‘excavatory thought’ on both our parts, in our separate but dependent creative capacities. This conception directly informed my instructions to the set designer, and together we *un-aired* an especially planted enclosed garden containing a private performing space, bordered by only greenery and sky, but occupied by the monarch in such a way as to make these borders, for all intents and purposes, impenetrable for every other character within the opera.

After much more discussion regarding the nature of my hoped-for aurally-inspired patterns, birdcage shapes, outdoor scenic design, and my desire to set work in its entirety during an imaginary summer season, Houston and I did ultimately utilize a historiographically informed approach. We chose to precede other compositional approaches included in the acts of creation with dramaturgical research. For example, we decided that the musical score, as an already visible and perceivable piece of material, could be used, rather than as dogma, as another jumping off point. Initially, we used this musical score as a tool only in terms of the placement of the work in a real and historical time, specifically, in the era during which the score itself was written by composer John Blow in 1683, alongside a libretto likely written by the poet Anne



Finch (Wikipedia). We felt that this historical placement would operate as an efficient tool inside which to frame our continuing research, as this easily situated all of the characters beautifully within a kind of metaphorical gilded cage.

This mode of situating also would enable quick understanding on both our parts of the ways the music and libretto's systems of symbols might have initially interacted, exposing some kind of information about the past. For example, the composer Blow's decision to locate suite-style Baroque dances (Allemande, Courante, Bande, Gigue) between sung scenes. By doing so, Blow and Finch interrupt the flow of the narrative by fluctuating between states of mind and/or within various tempos and tones, but they could also be doing something else. By exposing that all of these varying emotional states, represented by the different dance types, could exist in simultaneity at a especially joyful or painful moment in the larger narrative, could Blow and Finch be *un-airing* the simultaneous nature of all of these many states? Houston and I decided that they could be.

In order to maintain one foot rooted in historical accuracy, Houston and I spent several weeks researching the sociopolitical environment in which the piece was written. According to Houston, Blow wrote this very early opera in England, and at the time of the Restoration (Wikipedia). King Charles II had finally returned to England, closing his political exile in Holland, and was restored to the throne, reinstating the monarchy as England's political system. Theater and art had been forbidden by the government of Oliver Cromwell during the era preceding this one, so Blow's compositions were written in the spirit of a new embrace by the citizenry of what they had been prohibited from since the execution of Charles II's father, Charles I. Specifically, the people had been denied access to the arts. The Merry Monarch, as

Houston often referred to Charles II, encouraged and supported artists at his court, so it did not surprise us to find that *Venus and Adonis* premiered in his presence (Harris). The work was presented with a cast that included the woman who was Charles' principle mistress at the time, Moll Davis, his acknowledged illegitimate daughter Lady Mary Tudor, and even other illegitimate children of Charles II who were active members of his court.

Houston and I also spent time researching the lifestyle at the court, in particular the general practices that took place in the summer seasons. This was particularly fruitful as it revealed a set a behaviors and attitudes that, when combined with our bird-based research, established a unique container for all the performers embodied activities. This embodiment was set inside a deep struggle between freedom and containment, between flight and the gilded cage. According to Houston, it was a common habit of monarchs of the era to travel with a large caravan from great house to great house, invading without invitation and demanding hospitality from their aristocratic hosts. There is also an example of this in our research film *Vatel*. (It was easy to imagine a parallel caravan of birds flying along the traveling court, decorating and moving the air around them in a similarly to the way land-bound travelers did.) These hosts knew that their social status was totally dependent on their ability to entertain the monarch on extremely short notice, so it was typical, in order to please, to go to last-minute lengths of near-bankruptcy (Houston). One of the most significant ways these aristocrats might divert the monarch was to commission new works of art, and because of the status-driven nature of the Restoration society, the courtiers themselves did the performing in a kind of extravagant and extremely heightened private theatrical.

This idea of the private theatrical led Houston and I to create the central device of re-creating the original. That is, staging the work in its entirety as a sort of play-within-a-play. So, each dancer and singer was cast not only as their particular character in the libretto and score of *Venus and Adonis*, but also has a historically accurate member of the court, many of whom were acknowledged, though illegitimate, children of the king. We thought that the inclusion of the double identity, both as a historical member of Charles II court and as a player in the opera's cast embodying a figure, for example "Cupid", would give each performer a dynamic method through which to enact their own double practice of excavation, first through the historiography of their first character, and then through the character from the score and libretto that first character was designated to embody. In retrospect, it was Cvejić's ideas of friendship that our collaboration was engendering, enabling us to confidently decide to situate the work at a specific geographical location. This location was Cliveden House, the home of George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, the best friend of Charles II, who had himself stayed with Charles during the time of his political banishment to Holland.

This play-within-a-play structure excavated a particular use of symbols, which, again, we structured as bird imagery. According to dramaturg Vessla Warner, theater director Eugenio Barba's description of the "three dramaturgies" includes the "dramaturgy of changing states" (350). So, as each singer or dancer moved from embodying a historical figure to embodying one from the musical score, her or she placed onto their person, or held, an avian symbol of performance. This double occupation of characters allowed for a double dive into the space, un-airing each figure anew as they don and remove their feathers, wings, fans or birdcage bars fashioned into hunting staffs.

The scenic design concept was informed by drawings from our historical research into the outdoor theatricals presented for the monarch's entertainment. In these drawings, some of which were kinds of architectural event plans, we discovered examples of almost secret gardens hidden within the larger landscape of the estates. An example of a French take on this idea can be seen in *Vatel*. Houston and I then doubled the elements of privacy for the myth-based, play-within-a-play that the historical characters offer the king and queen, winnowing the characters down to royalty, aristocrats, nobility, and only one servant, all enclosed from view within the double protections of the private estate and the garden concealed within. This was important as it allowed for a distilling of what was essential to the plot. The nobles and servant were performed by dancers, and through their actions they provided the impetus for every point of plot. Each figure remained onstage, encircled by the garden like songbirds in a cage, and witnessed by both the public and each other, while acknowledging the observations of their fellow performers and repressing awareness of the to notice of audience. The characters embodied by dancers moved props and accessory garments around the performing space in flight patterns, each figure being prompted to perform for the assembled company when either handed by a another dancer their prop designating a new character to play, or dressed by a another dancer's hands in the accessory that meant a similar thing, at which point they would move toward the hollowest and most visible portion of the performing space in order to be seen and revealed as a double fictionalized performing character.

In order to uncover the final depths of our movement materials, Houston and I used video in order to study the behaviors of caged birds, using their movements, mannerisms, and energetic qualities to excavate an even more particular movement language from which to develop solo,

duet, and group actions. For this movement language, we encountered new depths of *un-airing* that were particularly excavatory when situated inside of our indoor/outdoor garden setting and scenic design plan. Placing these movements in bodies covered in complete and historically accurate Restoration-specific costumes also created another level through which to excavate, making more extreme the conflicting freedom of flight versus the constriction of the gilding cage, or corset in the embodied actions of the dancers. The unique dramaturgical system resulting from the various methods, devices, and protocols uncovered by our dyadic choreographic and dramaturgical process was indeed a work of peculiar revelation, a closed system that would not be an applicable active spatial excavation process for any other choreographer's and dramaturg's attempt at intervention into and excavation in pursuit of *Venus and Adonis*.

### III. Conclusion

As the work of the choreographer has expanded to necessitate the inclusion of the dramaturg, does the nature, function, or result of the excavation process deepen? In her "Anxious Dramaturgy" (2003), dramaturg Myriam Van Imschoot suggests that "dramaturgy as an activity is crucial enough that it is increasingly democratized, and should be" (11-12). This is one of the ways in which I would describe *un-airing* an extremely contemporary perspective, in that all participants in each process excavate to facilitate the *un-aired* dance. I hope to continue in this democratic way with my own latest experiment in dramaturgy and choreography, *Dress Form*. I have so far pursued this work without an individual named as the collaborating dramaturg, and while I have attempted to incorporate various dramaturgical practices I have encountered, researched, and invented throughout my research, the lack of a figure like Deborah Wright

Houston in the position of the “friend” has left me certain that something essential about the work remains still buried inside the space, as yet undiscovered and currently imperceivable by my senses or those of the audience.

It seems relevant that the performing collaborators who have made this with me (Lu Dai, Cat Eng, Kate Shugar, and Hank Bamberger, who replaced Part I original cast member Ingrid Dehler-Setzer) have actively and democratically engaged with every dramaturgical process I have proposed. They have used scores I devised to expose what I predicted would happen (or not) in the mode of Rudner, to time, space, and action. They have generously dug for information, physically and performatively, hidden within previously set movement sequences, and they have extracted possibilities from erstwhile fixed dramatic structures in order to answer new, Bly-style questions. They have expanded and contracted, sped up and slowed down, partnered and de-partnered, inverted and reverted, our agreed-upon movement actions and spoken sounds in order to *un-air* the particular space, the Bessie Schonberg Theater, in which we worked. These dancers have translated words read aloud from books into pseudo-theater games into written postings into drawn postings into actions with contemporary garments into actions with historical garments. They have reacted to various sound scores and pre-recorded musical selections. They have reimagined the overarching work together based on a casting change, and then again based on the addition of a second, starkly contrasting section that proposed to clear all the materials mentioned above away in order to reveal what remained in the space, *un-aired*.

If the dancers do all this, are they not participating in dramaturgy? If, as Profeta writes, by dramaturg we have after all “simply meant a person who is responsible for “the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation”, then the answer is yes. What is

important about this process is that each of us has had a hand in both the choreography and the dramaturgy, and we have all been separate but dependent in the act of *un-airing* our dramaturgical excavation.

To continue both *Dress Form* and my research into *un-airing*, excavation, and dramaturgy as a contemporary dance practice, I propose to dig into a three step discovery process. First, after collecting all the materials of *Dress Form*, including the eight dance movement phrases, one for each original cast member of Parts I and II, four mannequins, two dress forms, three pieces of unused music, two tracks of recorded music, one recorded track of breathing, many recorded tracks of sounds by the dancers, 29 costume pieces, colored markers, books of fables, sticky tack, and drawing posters, I will re-excavate the work with a dramaturg, then with another, and then I will excavate again with another choreographer and myself in the role of dramaturg. I expect to uncover a process, or series of processes, that, when set in motion together, operate in concert across time and space in a technically manageable but creatively unpredictable way, leading to a wholly uncovered, excavated, and *un-aired* work of dance that is specifically tethered to its own unique dramaturgical system.

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