

Crossing an Impossible Threshold: Creating a Transdisciplinary Process in the Heart of the Pandemic

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Abstract: In this article we, both playwright and performer, look at the play *Fish at the Bottom of the Sea* and its unique exploratory process. We articulate an exchange between circus, sound, and theatre, and examine the larger understanding evoked by an experiential point of view rather than one attached to the identity of any particular discipline. The article alternates between our two voices and includes videos and excerpts from the play to capture the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of our project. Our co-writing approach mirrors our collaborative and interdisciplinary process. As this iteration of the play was generated during the pandemic, the article explores how the play's themes of isolation and loss are reflected in our collective experience and our need for connection. Further, we explore how both the form and content of this work was impacted by the pandemic. Our paper is organized around three central themes: exploring liminal space and the desire to cross an impossible threshold; embodying states of matter and moving through stages of grief; seeking virtuosity in performance.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, pandemic, eco-theatre, liminality, theatre, circus, devised creation, physicality, performance, new collaboratives, affect, loss, grief, death, self, isolation, new mediums, approaches

Fish at the Bottom of the Sea (*Fish*, for short) is a play about grief – its intimacies and intricacies. The project, which includes the disciplines of theatre, sound, and aerial circus, explores individual loss through an inherently collective means – live performance. This project was birthed in 2020, the year the world changed dramatically, and carries its mark. Over the last two years, the project saw different iterations in anticipation of a live production that was postponed multiple times due to enforced closures related to the global pandemic. Through two rehearsal processes and one residency, our conception of the play, *Fish*, has expanded not only into an extended interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary process but has become a container and a mirror of sorts to realities faced by many during the health crisis.¹

¹ These terms have been paraphrased from an in-depth analysis by Basarab Nicolescu (2014) in “Methodology of Transdisciplinary.” Nicolescu’s definition of transdisciplinary is inspired by *Jean*

Told through a plurality of voices, our project, *Fish*, integrates text, sound, and aerial circus into a cohesive artform, equally favouring each medium's nature, impact, and intention. The project's unfolding, exploratory manner straddles the tension between structure and creative possibility. This is achieved through a lens that is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, meaning that the project is looking at the transfer of knowledge between the artistic forms of theatre, sound, and aerial circus, as well as the larger understanding evoked through an experiential point of view: a search of knowledge, rather than a point of view attached to the identity of any particular discipline. To embrace the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of our project, this paper has a hybrid form. We alternate between the voices of playwright and performer, use digital content to capture the choreography, as well as include excerpts from the play itself. This type of writing also reflects the collaborative framework of the project.

Prior to beginning the project, we had several conversations regarding our roles and responsibilities. We agreed we wanted the creation process to subvert the traditional hierarchy of the rehearsal room, which usually places the director at the top of the decision-making pyramid. Instead, we built our roles based on trust, listening to (and hearing) each other, and on our own individual strengths. This collaborative way of working is by no means new. In "A Dramaturgy of the Body," Christel Stalpaert (2009) outlines several artists and companies who have opened up their processes and performances beyond the theory and practice divide, which, she argues, traditionally identifies roles such as that of the dramaturg as belonging to a "theoretical outsider" (121). These outside eyes could also be those of the director, the movement director, or the choreographer. Stalpaert lists Needcompany, Meg Stewart, and Jan Lauwers, among others, as artists who have opened up their creative process and challenged the division of roles in the rehearsal process. The sharing of intellectual responsibility in the devising process for *Fish* takes into account our individual expertise, while also allowing us to learn from each other's perspectives. We envision this article as a continuation of that process and aim to engage with this text in the same way we engaged physically with the work, by weaving between body, voice, and text. As such there will be times when Nicole will be speaking from her expertise as the playwright and dramaturge, while Léda will be speaking as the performer and choreographer. For ease of transitioning between these voices we have placed these sections in italics. We will use "we" throughout this article when describing the devising process, as it was a shared experience. Again, our intention

Piaget, who introduced the term in 1972, saying: "Finally, we hope to see succeeding to the stage of interdisciplinary relations a superior stage, which should be "transdisciplinary," i.e. which will not be limited to recognize the interactions and or reciprocities between the specialized researches, but which will locate these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between the disciplines" (Piaget 1972, 144. qtd. in Nicolescu).

with this choice is not to remove clarity of voice or authorship, but to continue to support the decentralization of this project and its process.

PANDEMIC AS CONTAINER

Our process shares a unique context with many creative works paused over the last two years: the fragility of the human body became central in both creative works and processes around the world. The pandemic reinforced our understanding of what a live performance can be and why it is essential in our communities. However, at a time when coming together as a community felt most essential, it was not possible to congregate, and artists' creative processes necessarily shifted to accommodate rapidly changing conditions. Projects created over the last two years occupy a unique historical space as the work being developed was constantly fluctuating to meet the parameters of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. We will explore how both the form and content of this work was impacted by the experience of the pandemic and the restrictions that were in place. In a way, these restrictions became a container for our work. Although the creation during the pandemic is not the central focus of this article, it has nevertheless become an intrinsic component within the multiple layers of this creative process and is a necessary thread woven through the fabric of this paper.

First, we will share the specifics of how our process was shaped by these circumstances. Then, we will briefly address how these circumstances relate to the broader context in which we are making art, namely late-stage capitalism and climate change. The pandemic is deeply related to this context as globalization has compounded the reach of transmissible viruses such as Covid-19. As such, we will briefly consider how live art in North America is responding to the times we live in, and ground this work in the wider field we occupy as artists. Following this, we will discuss our approach to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, as well as present the text of the play and the staging of the performance. The paper will then explore three guiding principles that have acted as north stars for our creative process: 1.0 Exploring liminal space and the desire to cross an impossible threshold; 2.0 Embodying states of matter and moving through stages of grief; 3.0 Seeking virtuosity in performance.

Our collaborative process began in January 2020 in Edmonton, AB, a few months before Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic and the social distancing protocols and closures of theatres forced us to place the creation and development of this project on hold. There were many stops and starts along the way, and moments where we had to adjust our plans. For example, this project began with another performer, Samara von Rad, with Léda acting solely as the choreographer; however, due to social distancing protocols and closures Léda stepped into the role of performer. We

were then forced to pause the project multiple times due to bans on public gatherings and the closures of theatres and rehearsal spaces. We resumed work on the project in late March of 2021 through a residency opportunity at cSPACE, in Calgary, AB. At the end of this residency, in May 2021, we took our performance of *Fish* outdoors, allowing us to complete our residency and accommodate last minute restrictions such as building closures. Although we were able to complete our work on the project, hopes of presenting *Fish* to a public audience were dashed when a second wave of Covid-19 caused closures and social distancing protocols to be put back in place. As we write this article, we are hopeful to finally share *Fish* with a live audience at the Alberta Circus Arts Festival in Edmonton, in June 2022.

We believe presenting the play in the summer of 2022 will be charged with a different quality of knowing (and feeling) compared to how it would have been received pre-pandemic. Our perception and the way we, as a society, engage with each other is shifting as we collectively move into an age defined by the tipping point of capitalism and climate change as well as the resiliencies these times evoke.² As mentioned, the pandemic inherently relates to this context as the reach of transmissible viruses has been compounded by globalization. As society meets these unprecedented changes, art necessarily fosters emergent forms of knowledge in response. Artists are more intently focused on creating equitable spaces to hold the complexity of our current world and build community as we face multiple crises. Transdisciplinary practices, as well as efforts to decentralize knowledge and leadership in creative spaces, are gaining traction. Our perception simply of gathering together in physical space has shifted as well: Many of us possess a deeper awareness of the very air we share and of the vulnerability of our bodies to the exchange of a virus. At the same time, in the absence of being around others, we may have become more attuned to how our biology and the health of our nervous system depends on this shared witnessing and being in relation to one another. Further, we may be more attuned to the knowledge that by being in the presence of others, we are impacted on a molecular, physical level and are thus inseparably interconnected. The semiotics of how we navigate our world and what it means to be close to other bodies in space has changed dramatically for many over the course of bringing the project to fruition. Through the lens of the world-altering event of the pandemic and the months of isolation that have characterized the last two years, what it means to attend a live art event, or even simply witnessing a body performing onstage have taken on new meaning.

² Eco-theatre artist and theorist Una Chaudhuri has coined the term “fifth wall dramaturgy” to speak about new work that responds to the unprecedented ways climate change is shaping us (Chaudhuri 2016). She speaks about the theatre’s capacity to ground the audience at the scale of body and voice while engaging content that pushes the limits of what we can grasp – ie. irrevocable planetary change. Chaudhuri also hints at the phenomenological and felt awareness of the atmosphere that we share; an atmosphere that exists beyond language, culture, gender, class (etc.) and instead is characterized by the very physiological space we occupy on the level of air and molecular exchange.

Before we further explore our creative approach and the pandemic's imprint on this work, we first wish to situate you, the reader, within our approach to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity through the text of the play as well as the staging of the performance.

THE PLAY: TRACING INTIMATE GEOGRAPHIES

The poetic, and uniquely structured text of *Fish* tells the story of a woman, Eve, who is grieving the loss of her lover after a fatal car accident. It is an internal investigation of the character making peace with her loss. Outwardly, the character is making her way through the streets of Edmonton seeking a place to create a burial ritual for her lost love. The play challenges the traditional dramatic form, as the main action derives from Eve's inner wrestling with grief, desire, and death. Eve seeks to orient herself in the world anew. She is suspended in time, cycling through memory and experiencing the present moment as both infinite and static. Her desires are no longer compatible with the time and space she once knew. Therefore, she must reconstruct the rules of her world.

I wrote Fish over ten years ago in 2007 when grief altered my orientation to myself and the world around me. Though the event itself was an ordinary one (the loss of a relationship) it opened up a channel for me to a much broader human grief. The experience brought me closer to an unavoidable truth: that living requires confronting not only the loss of others but the loss of who we are at different times in our lives. Death (whether literal, or through change) demands that each of us reckon with it in our way. The action of the play is about charting a path through this human grief to another place (rather than to 'the other side) and is about being curious where we end up. The desire to chart a path through the unknown is also reflected in the content of the play. Although new narratives are being told, in North America we are still steeped in centuries of images and stories of women as seen through romanticized, sexualized and maternalized lens,' and often from the male gaze. I wanted to tell a story from a woman's perspective that begins with the end of a romantic relationship and that launches from a place of encountering one's self anew after a life-altering event.

The play is a stream of consciousness style, one-woman narrative that forms through Eve's weaving together of memory, secrets, and dreams. The text, this self-made ritual, traces geographies throughout Edmonton that are imbued with Eve's daily life and memories with her lost love: the High Level bridge, the corner of 109 Street and Jasper Avenue near the Save on Foods, the old Shoppers Drug Mart building on the corner of 109th Street and 82 Avenue. Her journey is made of this memory-driven time. It could take place over twenty minutes spent walking the High Level

bridge as the light sets over the river valley, or years spent tracing daily pathways. Eve could be physically charting these paths or mapping them from memory from her apartment. The text takes on a spiral structure, spinning up and down, gathering momentum towards an exit point from the river of grief. The writing is expansive and imagistic. It intentionally leaves space for multiple staging possibilities. For instance, a key moment in Eve's letting go of her past takes place as she crosses the High Level bridge and says goodbye to her love through a fantastical memory:

We come to the bridge,
 as we often have,
 and we stop in the centre,
 as we often do,
 and we look
 down down down
 into the dark water
 glistening with moonlight
 and you take my hand,
 as you often have,
 and for a moment
 I think we are going to run and jump together,
 release our bodies to the night,
 but instead we land softly
 in the folds of your sheets.
 (Schafenacker 2021, 19-20)

Eve seeks to make sense of her new reality and to find peace in this new terrain. Much of the dramatic tension of the play occurs through Eve seeking a connection to her lost love that negates the physical confines of her body on this earthly plane. However, the core action of the play transcends the loss of the relationship and becomes about Eve's journey of confronting death itself in order to chart a path into new life.

Prior to this particular collaboration, *Fish* had several productions as a play, all of which were directed by Elizabeth Hobbs. This is the first time it has been adapted for an aerial circus. Yet, in all iterations of the play the physicality and sound design have played vital roles in bringing forward Eve's process of letting go as she navigates the puzzle of her grief and searches for a way to surface above the grip of "all that is left unsaid, undone" that pulls her under (ibid., 23). This article speaks to the most recent adaptation which also includes an extensive sound design and the use of an aerial bungee apparatus, both of which respond to, and work in concert with, the play text's cyclical and poetic form.

In this current iteration of the play Eve's internal struggle to stay afloat in the undertow of grief took on new layers of meaning. As collaborators we navigated months on end in isolation. Our own individual experiences of loss and grief through the pandemic significantly informed the way we worked. With the project on hold, we stayed afloat in dialogue about the play through the pensive suspension of virtual space (Zoom). Through these conversations we found that the influence of the pandemic registered with the intimate and sensitive qualities of the play: coming intimately in contact with death and the loss of her lover reveals a different kind of intimacy between Eve and the world. This in turn resonated with our own personal senses of the fragility of relationships, and the social ecosystems that make up our world, as artists seeking to create work through this time.

1.0 EXPLORING LIMINAL SPACE AND THE DESIRE TO CROSS AN IMPOSSIBLE THRESHOLD

The process of creating a dialogue between text, sound, and the aerial apparatus allowed us to go beyond the forms of circus and theatre and create a piece that oscillated between these boundaries and their aesthetic modes of communication. We came to see this process as a liminal space in its own right. Our process embodied the territory of the unknown. We asked: How can we communicate in the space between defined disciplines? How can the mediums of text, sound design and aerial performance relate and respond to one another? To help chart the complex territory of combining multiple storytelling languages together from a performance perspective, Elizabeth offered the spine of Eve's journey as a desire to cross an impossible threshold (Clurman 1974). This helped us to ground the poetic nature of the work into playable action.

The dynamic quality of crossing an impossible threshold was embodied through Léda's engagement with the aerial apparatus itself which consisted of a series of bungee cords tied in loops of two different lengths, attached to a swivel and hung 13 feet in the air from a larger metal frame known as an aerial rig. Our process of staging the play delved into this liminal space somatically through an investigation of the body's reaction to this aerial bungee apparatus. The relationship between the performer and the aerial apparatus created another language with which to enact Eve's journey through the murky waters of grief. It allowed us to tell the story not only through text, but also sound and physicality inherently related to the play's narrative.

The play itself begins in this liminal space. In her opening monologue to the audience, Eve says:

I'm standing on the corner of this and that...

I'm waiting to find a job,
 waiting to hear the next song on the radio,
 waiting for the right haircut,
 the right outfit,
 the right party,
 the right people,
 waiting for my next cigarette break.
 Waiting to love,
 to live,
 to die,
 to meet you.
 Again.
 (Schafenacker 2021, 3)

The staging of the opening scene feels emblematic of how we worked from different artistic languages to meet and create this new inter and transdisciplinary form of Fish. In the original stage directions Eve enters with a bouquet of flowers that she proceeds to destroy. She says, "I bought these flowers to put on your grave but moments after putting them there I decided to smash the shit out of them instead" (ibid., 4) Several key dramaturgical questions presented themselves as we shifted from the original theatrical opening image of Eve smashing the flowers on the grave of her lover to the aerial form.

The first image of the performer and the aerial apparatus set up the semiotic systems in the world of the play ([watch The Screaming Goats Collective, "Thresholds," 1:53](#)). Because we had been working in a way that established the aerial apparatus as being akin to the memory of her lover it seemed that Eve should always be in contact with the apparatus, and that she would enter with it as she is already bound by this memory. We sought to capture this same quality of exploding tension and release without the prop of the flowers and instead through engaging the aerial apparatus. We discovered a way to do this was by Léda entering tightly bound by the apparatus. Rather than smashing flowers Léda struggles with the tangle of the bungees wrapped around her, seeking to free herself from their grip. This task achieved the same visceral quality that had been evoked by smashing the flowers and added a new layer of meaning by defining Eve's relationship to the apparatus as being akin to her lost lover.

A key question we asked ourselves in this opening scene was, what is Eve's relationship to the audience? This was another space where theatrical and circus performance forms differ. In traditional theatre the actor might preserve the 'fourth wall' and not directly acknowledge the audience. In circus arts, the performer may acknowledge the audience directly to engage them in the drama of the feat. The circus

performer's act is usually punctuated with a "ta-da" moment at the end to assure the audience of their safety and to encourage a cathartic applause. We discovered that the moment Eve steps into the aerial rig punctuates her offer to the audience to witness her dive into the netherworld of her grief and her search for peace. This also became the moment when the sound entered into the performance space. Ashley Weckesser, our sound designer, made the exciting offer of taping contact microphones to the aerial rig so that the Léda's gesture of clipping the apparatus to the rig literally amplified this key moment through sound. These actions –the locking into the rig, and the resonance of its sound – made it clear dramaturgically that Eve's conscious choice to step into the 'mouth of the wolf' is what ignites the play. Eve makes a silent contract with the audience as she steps into the centre of the rig and locks in the apparatus she has untangled herself from. This action is the entry point into the netherworld between life and death in order to carve a pathway to the other side of this experience ([watch The Screaming Goats Collective, "Aerial Bungee Apparatus," 1:39](#)).

Throughout the performance Eve negotiates the liminal boundary between life and death, a threshold that once passed through cannot be crossed again. She also negotiates the mundane daily tasks it takes to live in the world, which often feel insurmountable in the face of grief and depression. She plays with twisting the words, "carve, crave" as a phrase she repeats, embodying her struggle between succumbing to the grip of loss (crave) or breaking new ground into life (carve). The aerial bungee is metonymically standing-in for this invisible border between life and death. As a membrane, or boundary between life and death, the aerial bungee connects Eve to the memory of her lost love. In turn, it becomes a container, and a force, that she must resist against in order to achieve acceptance of this loss. This is reflected in the elastic of the bungee itself. When we want to go up, we must push down ([watch The Screaming Goats Collective, "Elasticity," 2:04](#)).

The concept of crossing an impossible threshold is also reflected in the architecture of the aerial rig. Rather than hiding this structure from the audience's view we integrated it directly into the choreography. Not only is Eve constantly attached to the aerial bungee in some way, she can also push against, lean on, or reach for the metal frame of the aerial rig. This way the rig becomes another border that Eve must resist against, giving the impression that she is caged within the invisible parameter of her grief and the memory of her lost love. The audience adds to this border, acting as a line of witnesses to her container of transformation thus heightening her attempt to cross an impossible threshold through their presence.

There is a transformation in the body that occurs for me as the performer while being witnessed. The co-presence of the audience renders physical and vocal choices more significant and palpable. Fish is a solo performance, and yet there is an aspect of direct address in the text that implicates

the audience in the action and Eve's struggle. Isolation is often an intrinsic aspect of grief, yet the participation of the audience as witness creates an intimate exchange between performer and audience, which eventually helps Eve break through the trauma of her loss. When relating this back to the imprint of the global pandemic on the performance, the show's solo structure also speaks to the isolation many people felt during this time, while also confronting those feelings of isolation through the implication of the audience. Although the character of Eve is alone on stage (with the audience as implicated witnesses), I am not the only performer.

Aerial performance as a dynamic form relates directly to Eve's central desire of seeking to cross an impossible threshold. Circus artist Andréane Leclerc (pers. comm., Playwrights Workshop Montreal and En Piste, Montreal, Zoom, January 25 2021.) speaks about circus as embodying an inversion of cultural codes. The upside down body or the body spinning in space may allow us to enter into a different emotional terrain than we normally inhabit in our world of pedestrian movement. We are thrilled when gravity appears to be broken or the spine bends in a way that is seldom seen. Engaging the physics that act on our bodies in a daring way can widen our field of vision; it can illuminate corners of the human experience. The sensation of the world being flipped upside down, whether experiencing intimate grief or grief on a collective level, is deeply relatable for many. Through aerial performance the sensation of the upside-down world is literally embodied by the performer, allowing the audience to empathetically and viscerally enter into this inverted space.

The desire to cross an impossible threshold is embedded in the content and form of the play. It shapes the content in large and small ways: It is in the moments of indecision about minute details. It is in the threshold between knowing and unknowing; once knowledge is realized it cannot be unknown. The interplay between mediums allowed us as creators to explore multiple physical thresholds. What is the threshold between silence and being able to speak (to give voice to the unspeakable)? What is the threshold between our past, present, and future selves? Challenging and observing the thresholds that make up (perceived) reality became a way for Eve to enter into the generative space that may also be held within grief, "I cut through all that is left unsaid, undone" (Schafenacker 2021, 23) Part of her journey is discovering how to engage life anew while being in the midst of death.

2.0 EMBODYING STATES OF MATTER AND MOVING THROUGH STAGES OF GRIEF

In the play text, Eve has an inner desire to move forward yet struggles to move beyond her grief. In other words, Eve is presenting one 'state of being,' while holding

several other possible states within herself. Conceptualizing certain parts of the play according to these states of being, or matter, became a dramaturgical tool for us to track Eve's journey through the play, and further, it informed the choreography. These dynamic states of being, for our purposes, were akin to stages of grief and its multiple and at times contradictory expressions within the grieving body.

One of the key ideas for how states shaped our approach to movement comes from the work of choreographer Meg Stuart. In her interview with Jonathan Burrows (1998), Stuart confesses she does not like choreographing movement phrases, rather she prefers to create a "physical state... a task" on stage. Stuart describes states as "frequencies and temperatures," "a window into a different reality," "activity plus intention," and "oblique relations" (Stuart and Peeters 2010, 19-20). Stuart uses "States" as a way to inform her process by creating while dancing. She notes that trying to achieve a certain state allows her to connect more emotionally with her movement and to trust her experience, specifying, "it is not just the state that the person is in which interests me, but also their relationship to being in that state" (ibid., 19).

Stuart's description of "states" as physical and emotional, while also relating them to "frequencies and temperatures" (ibid., 19) not only reminded me of the stages of grief, but also states of matter. Fish contains a lot of water imagery, the body is also 60% water, and water is a form of matter. As the choreographer and performer, I became curious whether the different states of matter could be physicalized using Stuart's notion of "states," and be connected to the stages of grief somehow. In other words, could the increase in energy (i.e. temperature) and its effects on the frequency of the matter's movement, be similar to how a person's state of being, can affect the quality of their movement in performance? Could a body's speed, vibrations, pliability, and energy also change depending on the stages of grief it is experiencing? For example, in my personal experience I have noticed when someone who is grieving finds themselves in a state of depression they may isolate, hold firmly in place, or have difficulty motivating themselves into action. Broken down, the term depressed can even mean deep-rest.³ These movement qualities might resemble that of the solid-state of matter outlined in the image above. Contrarily, anger, another stage of grief, is sometimes perceived as volatile. When someone is angry their voice may become forceful and people who are enraged are described as "flying off the handle." This interpretation of anger could resemble the gaseous state of matter. When conceiving of how I might begin to approach scoring the movement and text, this notion of states of being and the stages of grief allowed me to take something abstract, such as death and grief, and give it form.

³ I come to this idea by Martha Nibley Beck (2001), who articulates the correlation between depression and grief saying: "Grief pushes us into 'deep rest', weighting down our muscles, wringing tears from our eyes and sobs from our guts" (Beck 2001, 183).

This sense of inhabiting a certain state is a core part of the play's textual imagery. There is a recurring image of Eve being underwater which underscores the state that evokes in her the viscous feeling of grief. Underwater, time is slowed or even non-existent. The body, too, is suspended and forced to slow. The body is free to fall, dive, glide, or swim. All movement occurs under the pressure of water acting on the body. Sound is distorted and reaches the ears in echoes and reverberations. There is no breath. Eve enters this watery state as a way of finding her own answers through grief several times throughout the play. Sometimes this state serves as a container, or an escape from reality:

I'm in the bathtub, water running, water steaming, steam rising
 to form droplets on my skin,
 my body separated by that which is above and that which is below the
 surface
 just steam and skin and dark
 and I plan to lie here until I don't want to lie here anymore
 night or day
 silent now except for the running water
 and gentle lapping up against the tub
 that happens when my chest rises and falls,
 and time is going by the same way, lapping along,
 it's impossible to tell when I'm in the tub...
 (Schafenacker 2021, 6)

Conversely, Eve is challenged by the state of the fast-paced, bright external world and what it demands of her. Midway through the play she relives the death of her lover entering the hospital where, "the light is blinding and the walls are a dying yellow" (ibid., 10) and winds her way up and down stairs and through corridors to find his room. The state that the hospital evokes in her body is frenetic and full of sharp edges. Later, she goes on a nighttime walk to a 24 hour Shoppers Drug Mart where she "move[s] like a moth towards the backlit cherry-red sign, and flutter flutter flutter[s] through the automatic doors to meet aisles of shining white epoxy flooring laying themselves out... glinting and glittering under the panels of fluorescent lights" (ibid., 15). Likewise, the 24-hour drug store sets off a repetitive, yet stuck, state in Eve as she anxiously catalogues items from the Shoppers in the text. Confronting these worlds, the hospital and the 24-hour Shoppers, is jarring in contrast to the insulated and watery internal world Eve generally inhabits. The concept of states of matter, and their relationship to stages of grief, provide a language with which to understand and even extend the range and opposites that Eve embodies throughout the play in her grieving.

Another way we aimed to capture the states housing Eve's internal experience was through the sound design of the play. Sound is a particularly effective way of conveying the interiority of an experience and creating an atmosphere for it to live in. Working with a live sound design became a way to theatricalize Eve's experience of becoming undone by certain states, and measuring the shift from the expression one state to another. As the sound design was being performed, it became a means to respond to and underscore Eve's internal experience in real time. It also became a way of further engaging the aerial rig in the storytelling of *Fish*. Using contact mics to capture the friction or snapping of bungees, the resonance of a ground wire caught in the frequency of the sound channel, or the cables echoing in metal poles, created a sonic experience of being haunted. Further, Ashley began to explore working with a contact mic to pick up Léda's heartbeat. The interplay and tension between an organic sound (the human heartbeat) and inorganic sound (bungees and cables on metal) revealed another language to convey Eve's struggle to navigate the disorientation of grief. This element also created an opportunity for deep listening between Léda and Ashley as the qualities of sound and movement played off of one another in a dialogue that made Eve's internal struggle more visible.

The elasticity of the apparatus creates a *déséquilibre*, an unbalance, in the body. This is a response to the body's constant (re)negotiation with gravity and the resistance, or lack thereof, provided by the elastics. In turn, this instability became the entry point for the development of the movement score. Another way to engage this idea of (in)stability in quality of movement is through the concept of *allostasis*. Noga Arikha (2019) defines *allostasis* as "the process that the organism engages in to achieve stability, the regulation of bodily states through change." In *Fish*, Eve is struggling to regulate her *allostasis*, and regain control amidst her grief. This struggle for control and balance, as well as the collision of movement and stasis, is present in both the aerial bungee and the body. In our process, we began to examine how the apparatus could become a container for the character Eve's grief; exploring how the body responds to the elastic structure of the aerial bungee, with a border that is both tangible and intangible, much like grief itself.

During our process a strong sensation would occur in my body once I stepped off the apparatus. After having worked on the apparatus for an extended period of time, I would often have to stand still or lie on the floor with my eyes closed because the sensation was so overwhelming. I was destabilized. While I stood or lay in stillness, I could feel the ground moving underneath me, as though I had been on a boat for a long time. My body was holding two states at once, she was both yielding to gravity, while also rising with levity. Despite my body's best efforts to find stability, the aerial bungee is an object that is constantly fluctuating between a fixed and unstable state.

This not only speaks to the body's ability to hold two opposing states at once, but it also is a testament to the body's adaptability. Just as the bungee's elasticity is resilient, so is the body.

Eve returns again and again to the feeling of being underwater in textual images that both submerge her in their wake, and later, begin to wash away her sense of being hopelessly adrift. As explored earlier in this section, this watery state creates a small reprieve for Eve to orient herself. Her submersion in the water eventually gives way to a small moment of clarity:

I go back to the tub and sit under water for a long, long time
 my body above and below surface,
 and I realize that I am water surrounded by water, made of water,
 holding water,
 crying water,
 until I become light, I am light in the water,
 feeling the water around me, for the first time staying still,
 and I realize that even if there is nothing beyond there is something
 inside, there is something inside, fragile, breaking and beating.
 (Schafenacker 2021, 18)

The final bathtub scene mirrors the opening moment of the play when Eve chooses to step into the heart of her experience through the symbolism of locking the aerial apparatus to the rig and allowing herself to become suspended in air. Bit by bit, she feels herself immersed in the dimensions - the vital states of aliveness and being - that her encounter with death has opened. She goes into the centre of the deluge, as it slowly begins to loosen its hold on her.

3.0 CARRYING OUT VIRTUOSITY IN PERFORMANCE

Another way we broke from the conventional modes of creation in a circus or theatrical context was by attempting to define and embody the term virtuosity. We believed this to be an open-ended pursuit, not subjugated to the constricting movement-vocabulary typically associated with circus or theatre. Initially, we understood virtuosity to mean an extraordinary event, or a demonstration of a superior skill, but what did it mean for something to truly be extraordinary?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) the term virtuosity dates back to 1443, deriving from the French term *virtuosité*, meaning moral goodness. To show virtue (ca. 1100), *vertu*, is to demonstrate power, and an act of virtue is defined as

resembling an act of divinity, a miracle, a wonder. Later, the term was translated into the Italian *virtuoso* (ca. 1500), which is a popular term still used today to describe “a person who demonstrates special skill, or knowledge”. It was choreographer Jonathan Burrows’ definition, however, that became our main inspiration when exploring this term.

In *A Choreographer’s Handbook*, Burrows (2010, 89) describes virtuosity as follows:

Virtuosity raises the stakes to a place where the audience knows something may go wrong. They enjoy watching this negotiation with disaster. Will the performer fall, or forget what they’re doing, or will they get through it? The resulting anticipation, poised on the brink of success or failure, suspends time in a moment of in-breath. This slowed-down time, in the midst of risk, is as much of a pleasure for the performer as for the audience.

Burrows’ definition, particularly the notion of “negotiation with disaster”, insinuates a paradox of pleasure found in risk. The effect⁴ of this on the viewer’s perception of time has a strong bearing on the approach we employed. We could see how virtuosity might relate to circus disciplines, for example, a tightrope walker who is in constant negotiation with gravity and the suspension of time and the pleasure the audience experiences from watching her with uncertainty from below.

Yet, this definition also allowed us to imagine virtuosity more broadly. Imagine, for example, a glass cup filled with water on a table. The glass is accidentally knocked off the table, maybe bounces on the floor and then lands upright without spilling any of its contents. The person who witnesses the event freezes as the cup falls to the ground and holds their breath as it bounces on the ground without breaking or spilling its contents. There is no real technique involved here, since the glass falling was accidental, and there is no guarantee the performance could be repeated with the same results, yet it could be argued this performance⁵ is virtuosic. In line with the OED’s definition of virtuosity, this is a sensational moment in which the cup demonstrates a special dexterity. The moment also encapsulates what Burrows referred to as a moment “poised on the brink of success or failure” (2010, 76). This imaginary, yet plausible event, may leave the spectator feeling unsettled yet intrigued by the uncertainty of the outcome.

⁴ We turn to affect theory as examined in “The Affect Theory Reader” (Gregg, Seigworth, and Ahmed 2010) to explore how the emotional and visceral imprint of a performer’s action on us as spectators contributes to our perception of, and how we create meaning about, a performance.

⁵ In his introduction to *Performance Theory*, Schechner (2005) confesses that performance is a particularly challenging concept to define. Theatre is only one portion of a wide spectrum of events that could be viewed as performances. Some practitioners argue that “performance is a ‘quality’ that can occur in any situation rather than a fenced-off genre” (ibid., 22).

There is a feeling of *Angstlust*, a German term used to describe something that is both pleasurable and fearful, in that we are fearful the cup will break, yet we are exhilarated to discover it has remained intact with all of its liquid contained. Also, time seems to come to a standstill at the moment between the cup being knocked off the table and its landing on the floor unharmed. During this stretch of suspended time, we are completely present with the cup. We are not thinking about the moment before it was knocked over, nor are we reacting to the fall by trying to catch it.

In *Fish*, the tension in the processes we explore is the same. *Angstlust* occupies similar emotional territory as catharsis, a state that is foundational to the Western origins of theatre. In *Aristotle's Poetics* (Halliwell and Aristotle 1998, 200), catharsis allows the viewer to purge emotion while held in the ritual of theatre. The experience of being able to access emotion or states rarely available in day-to-day life can be said to be the lifeblood of why we go to the theatre. *Angstlust*, as evoked by virtuosity, is one means of creating the vital space shared by the performer and the audience. Rather than relying on the codes of theatre and circus, harnessing the work to a quest for virtuosity proposes an entry point that is based on inquisition and daring.

We engaged in the struggle to achieve an impossible, even virtuosic, task through a second compositional strategy inspired by the dancer and choreographer, Meg Stuart. Stuart's work has been described as speaking through concepts or situations, "she sets up little prisons," comments David Hernandez, "within which one must create" (Stuart and Peeters 2010, 17). These holding cells or movement structures are what Stuart calls "impossible tasks:"

Often my choreographies are constructed from impossible tasks, such as the will to compress time, to rewrite one's history, to live in many bodies at once, to fully experience the pain of another, to embrace emptiness, to show all perspectives of a complex situation in a single gesture, the choreography reveals the determination, the failure and the vulnerability of the attempt at the same time. (ibid., 17)

By means of this "impossible task", Stuart is approaching choreography through the paradoxical experience of humanity. This, notes Burrows (2010) gives the impressions of a movement structure that is constantly falling apart .

In Fish, I applied Stuart's notion of "impossible task" to climbing the aerial bungee. The bungee apparatus was created with the intention that I would be able to climb the longer loops to access the short ones above. This modification of the apparatus would allow me not only to move horizontally across the floor but also to climb up the apparatus in a vertical motion. However, I had never worked on this particular aerial apparatus before, and I was unaware of its possibilities or limitations. Needless to say, once I began working with the bungee, I discovered that climbing

the elastic cords proved to be very difficult ([watch The Screaming Goats Collective, "Impossible Task Rehearsal Fish 2021," 0:50](#)).

Each time I would grab overhead and step on the loops, giving the apparatus my full weight, I would sink right down to the ground. No matter how much I pulled down, I made no progress; the task of climbing was impossible. With each climb, the apparatus stretched out more revealing the conviction, collapse, and precarity of the attempt to climb all at the same time. However, rather than avoiding, or trying to find a smoother way to climb the apparatus, I embraced the frustration of the climb and used it as an improvisational framework. As I engaged in the experience of climbing the bungee cords, I became present with all my sensations and developed a deeper connection with the apparatus.

The struggle to climb, and the need for support where there is none, directly relates to Eve's grief and her desire to reconnect with her lost lover: no matter how hard she tries she cannot bring him back to life. Stuart says, "This kind of disagreeing body could show language, could show that movement was not just design but could actually carry meaning" (Stuart and Peeters 2010, 16). Similarly, the act of trying to climb the aerial bungee carries the meaning of the text, as well as conveys Eve's interior struggle. The visceral quality of this task allows the audience to enter empathetically into the physical experience of grief: the deep persistence it requires, and the inability of words to sufficiently capture this sustained effort.

The embodied presence that trying to complete this task evokes also relates to the inter and transdisciplinary goals of the project. The impossible task asks the body to speak in ways the text cannot, revealing the body's unique movement quality, conveying the information of the text abstractly and sensorially ([watch The Screaming Goats Collective, "Impossible Task Choreography Fish 2021," 0:37](#)). In turn, this allowed us as collaborators to break free of the disciplinary boundaries of circus and theatre. Therefore, we concentrated on the dialogue between the body and the bungee, conveying the meaning and sensations underneath the surface and allowing new movement patterns to unfold.

There is virtuosity in navigating the high wire act of grief. From Eve's perspective, the threshold of remaining lost and silent in her experience, or instead, giving word to it, is charged with risk. While the virtuosity of aerial performance accesses spaces that the word cannot, the act of speaking and putting language to a primal experience such as grief remains a necessary vessel for carrying Eve through to the other side of her experience. Language engages the voice and the physical reverberations that resonate through the body when an experience is spoken aloud. The play spins repetitive language on its axis, building cadence and momentum through its delivery. In performance, the black bungees evoke the image of loops of ink forming words. When

Eve finally arrives at the point where she finds a small exit to her despair it takes the form of a ritual conveyed in part through the spoken word:

I cut through all that is left unsaid, undone.
 I search for water,
 bare feet on black dirt,
 I step on cool ground in the moonlit night.
 Reflections in windows.
 I cast shadows across living room walls
 I bury what is left of us here.
 (Schafenacker 2021, 23)

Lastly, the role of the audience as witness is a central element to virtuosity. Harvard University's "Student Guide to Performance Studies" states that Performance Studies is not the study of behaviours as abstracted objects, rather behaviours "in relation to the individual or group that exhibits them" (Komitee n.d., 7). In this, the virtuosity of the cup falling to the ground and not breaking is a performance that is shaped by the audience that witnesses its fall. It is also these witnesses that determine the value of the performance by investing in the cup's potential disaster.

This is the same for me as a performer in Fish. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to perform this show to a live audience, those participating in the process, my collaborators, or even my video camera documenting my process, have become the witnesses that shaped my performance and therefore interpret it as virtuosic. My movement on the aerial bungee is still daring and skillful without a witness' co-presence, but there is no spectator held in the suspense of the unknown outcome of the event. Similarly, an actor reciting their lines alone in a rehearsal hall might deeply connect to their material and may strike a certain emotional chord in themselves. However, only when the actor can tap into that co-presence on stage with an audience (even if it is only an audience of one), is the magical space between performer and creator activated for a vital exchange to occur.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Taken together, these concepts of liminality, states of matter, and virtuosity have allowed us to carve out new space not only in our understanding of the content of the play but in our creative process as a whole. Creative risk and moving into the unknown is easy to talk about, yet hard to carry out in practice. Defining parameters that valued and were designed to engage uncertainty and the potentials of the unknown allowed us

to enter into vivid creative territory. By defining Eve's active objective, the 'spine' of the character, from the outset as the desire to cross an impossible threshold denies the possibility of a defined path towards an achievable outcome in Eve's narrative. Having an impossible desire and the very human hope of somehow reaching it opened up an oblique and expansive terrain that was full of life. The struggle of trying, of becoming derailed by minutia, or of being overwhelmed to the point of paralysis and the intimate knowing of failure, brought us into territory that revealed the human heart in a new way. Eve's narrative is somewhat contradictory to classical representations of theatre (the hero's journey) and to circus arts as spectacle-driven forms (mastery and perfection). We led with creative risk. We prioritized embodied knowledge over disciplinary boundaries and sought to discover what could be - and was - spectacular in the intimate languages of the body and voice whirling through the numbing, black waters of death to tell this story.

Arguably, the pandemic has shaped the form of theatre and the act of live performance unalterably. A radical reimagining of how and why we engage the live arts is taking place. We are living in a vital historic moment as we face climate change and global crises such as the pandemic. The cultural shifts taking place mirror the way new forms and approaches to art proliferated in response to the second World War. For instance, in the aftermath of WW2, new forms and genres that pointed to the frailty of the human body and the corruption of language emerged including Butoh dance in Japan and absurdism in the UK, Europe, and North America (Nellhaus 2016). Similarly, a radical re-approach to public art is gaining momentum in the aftermath of the pandemic. Particularly, a revival of democratic questions as to who can make art (challenging the exclusive nature of conservatory and university programs) and how it can be viewed (in public spaces, online, across time zones, for free) are once again underway. Stories that challenge the core of the narrative act - shaping random events into cohesive meaning - are upending traditional forms. How we have gone about the making (and non-making) of this project has undoubtedly been shaped by the unprecedented time we are living as a society, the new ground being broken in art-making discourse, and our changing somatic consciousness as a society.

The liminal space in which we are living and creating is rich with potential. It defies the linearity of time, holding past, present and future all at once. It is neither here, nor there. Inside it, you are simply a body suspended in space. For two years we have been collectively existing in a space that feels both isolated from the world, yet also deeply connected to it. At times, it seems impossible to move forward, yet behind us is only a memory of what once was. This liminal space is a paradox hinging on uncertainty. Further, we are living a sensational moment where we are each having to demonstrate our own special kind of virtuosic dexterity. Like the cup, or a performer on an aerial bungee apparatus, we are collectively "poised on the brink of success or failure"

(Burrows 2010, 89). We are living in two states at once, embodying a feeling of *Angstlust*; at times it may be pleasurable to be at home, and yet this can also be a fearful experience. Some days we find we are exhilarated simply to discover we have made it through another day with our minds and bodies intact, not unlike the cup which hasn't broken despite rolling off the table. Time has come to a standstill. We are in-between moments, no longer able to live in the way we once did, but uncertain what the future will hold. And yet, there is vital life in this not-knowing. As Eve says in the small-epiphany of the final underwater bathtub scene: "Even if there is nothing beyond, there is something inside, there is something inside, fragile, breaking and beating" (Schafenacker 2021, 21). During this stretch of suspended time, whether we want to be or not, we are compelled to remain completely present with our states of being in this moment, with reality as it is. As Eve discovers at the end of play, the bare-bones reality stripped of fantasy, ruminatory despair, and illusion - stripped of ideas of forgiveness, redemption, or neat and simple healing - contains agential wonder even if the truth of it is as dark as sea bottom:

Sink.
 Sank.
 Sunk.
 I'm there.
 I'm here.
 I'm here with the slippery fish.
 The slippery fish
 who live at the bottom of the sea
 and do not understand the language
 of light
 or dark,
 just of what is.
 (ibid., 30)

Fish seeks out what is possible beyond the codes and borders of disciplinary language. Just as the explorations on the apparatus cause a collision of movement and stasis, present in both the aerial bungee and the body, the process of *Fish* is carried forward, past disciplinary boundaries, through both an outward trajectory, as well as an inward investigation of sensations and the unknown. It accepts that the body can hold multiple states at once and moves towards the liminal by creating impossible tasks where the body must struggle for control and balance. And, it suspends time through a "negotiation with disaster", since it is unclear if the bungee will support the performer, or fail to break their fall. The uncertainty of the future has created yet another layer of

virtuosity, revealing the determination, the failure and the vulnerability required each time we attempt to begin again.

The exploration of liminality, states of matter and virtuosity came to be embodied in our broader process as artists trying over two years to create a show across great distances, lapses of time and deeply shaking personal circumstances, a show that may never materialize. The poet and philosopher David Whyte writes about the aliveness of “being close”, of “being almost there”:

Our human essence lies not in arrival, but in being almost there...Human beings do not find their essence through fulfillment or eventual arrival but by staying close to the way they like to travel, to the way they hold the conversation between the ground on which they stand and the horizon to which they go (2020, 18).

Like Eve we have been challenged to push up against the membrane of what we thought we knew, of where we thought we would arrive and when, and to allow new meaning and potentiality to emerge. As we tested our north star concepts against the limitations necessitated by the world we came to know these dramaturgical and choreographic concepts in a more expansive way than what we could have imagined at the start of the process.

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