

Protean Pieces: A Lively and Thought Provoking Exercise in Adaptation
by Maranda Barry

On June 12th I got off the PATH train in Jersey City and checked my phone, verifying the secret residential address where I'd be attending my first live arts event in recent memory. When I got there I was greeted and led down a covert alleyway into a backyard, decked out with lights, chairs and speakers for a twilight screening experience. I bought a CBD infused rice krispy treat from the snack bar (a kitchen window) and settled into a big chair in the back amongst some rose bushes. I was here to see the culminating screening of *Protean Pieces*, a project curated by Jonathan Matthews-Guzmán for SMUSH Gallery, and I had a hunch that it would be a fascinating show. The premise: a choreographic swap meet between pairs of artists, based in both New York and New Jersey, that would result in four adapted versions of existing works.

When Jonathan was interviewed by Katelyn Halpern, artistic director of SMUSH, after applying to be a Curatorial Fellow in October 2020 with the ambitious concept, she expressed some trepidation. "She said to me plainly that this idea scared her, and noted wisely that my proposal could easily go wrong," Jonathan recalls. Indeed, it had the potential to be messy and hard to organize, at the very least. But, anyone familiar with Katelyn or SMUSH Gallery knows that the local arts hub often leans into projects that are gutsy, experimental in nature, and community building -- even if they have a slight scare factor. Jonathan got the fellowship and got to work.

28 years old, a self-described "doer-maker" in the fields of dance, theater, writing and music, Jonathan typically has many irons in the fire at a given time. But curation was something new to them, and *Protean Pieces* was one of the first specific show concepts they had come up with that they wanted to organize and execute. The original inspiration for the project came from the reality TV show *Wife Swap*, very popular in the aughts, which they used to watch when home sick from school. (I coincidentally loved *Wife Swap* as well.) The show is exactly what it sounds like -- a setup where the wives of two families swap places, and hilarity ensues as they try to either adjust their own approach to the new family, or enforce their usual rules in a new context. It stuck with Jonathan as a template, and sparked the idea that became *Protean Pieces*.

The word "protean" means changing frequently or easily, and is derived from the name Proteus -- a Greek god of water who also had the power to change forms. Jonathan had envisioned dance companies pairing up, and the choreographers at the helm would be the ones switching places, tasked with setting an existing work on a new group of movers. They particularly wanted to create space for choreographers to adjust their works to the new performers' bodies, personalities, and performance styles. This approach stands in contrast to the more common, industry-standard approach, where dancers are the ones who adjust to fit the roles and choreography of the previously created work, trying to keep it as similar as possible to its original form.

Any dancer who has learned repertory from watching a scratchy old VHS of the original cast knows this method has some drawbacks. But Jonathan had a more personal experience while in school at NYU Tisch that influenced this decision. Their friend had transitioned while in school, and the department had not adequately registered and supported the change this

dancer was going through. It “led to a lot of tension,” they remember. Indeed, there is a broader context in the dance world of highly gendered and appearance-specific casting, open calls that list height and weight requirements and are often only open to “men” or “women” who present a certain way. Casting like this does not allow space for dancers whose bodies and gender expression don’t fit those requirements, dancers who might be able to bring something new and beautiful to the work at hand. “We’re still really beholden to these old models of who should do what,” said Jonathan. Even when casting acknowledges a range of identities, sometimes that takes the form of tokenization, which can cause a different sort of harm. Jonathan’s friend went through a period of “being self-described and experienced as the token trans girl in ‘woke’ dance work for a while, before, dejected, she left the dance world altogether.” Open calls may also request dancers of color purely for aesthetic reasons, or to boost the company’s appearance of diversity -- oftentimes without providing meaningful support for BIPOC dancers in the choreographic process, and failing to make space for their multifaceted identities and creative input.

Jonathan explains that there is a silly side and a serious side to their motivation for Protean Pieces, and this is the latter -- a desire to prioritize and validate the whole dancer, so much so as to require choreographers to shift their work around them. They ask, if choreographers had to adapt their works to include dancers with disabilities, dancers of different body types, racial identities, and gender expressions, “how would the thrust of the piece still be fully present, and equally able to be done by anybody?” And how could the work benefit from being shaped by performing artists with different perspectives and experiences?

While Jonathan was planning the project in winter of 2021, they realized COVID-19 would force the group into an efficiency-minded twist. It ended up that the choreographers didn’t just switch places to work with a new cast of dancers -- instead they became the dancers themselves. Each choreographer involved would also perform, and experience a work changing form around their strengths and personalities.

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The evening began with a lighthearted but thoughtful artistic primer led by dance artist Kelci Greenway, designed to prepare the audience for an ideal appreciation of the show. She accomplished this by leading us in a few select movements meant to increase our kinesthetic empathy. She invited us to replicate specific movements or prompts as a group, which turned out to be pulled from the pieces and would return to us later in the evening -- including “present your neighbor on the right side,” and “imagine you’re looking out of eyes in the back of your head.” With a little more levity in the environment, we watched an introduction from curator Jonathan on video. Then the evening kicked off, with the artists of the first creative exchange, spacejunk a.k.a. Lilly Joergensen and Ashley Yehoda, alongside 2nd Best Dance Company, a.k.a. Hannah Garner.



Emily Dean in Hannah Garner's original *Better (in some ways)*

Better (in some ways) / Better

Better (in some ways), as Hannah puts it, was conceived as “a journey through solitude and the stubbornness to make the best out of a tricky situation without having to make any compromises.” *Better* uses the form of a solo, but it centers around the absence of another person. The performer, Emily Dean, starts by confidently introducing herself and informing the audience that her dance partner couldn't make the show -- but she insists that “it's better...in some ways!” She then proceeds to struggle through a Broadway-influenced routine clearly choreographed for two, ending up in impossible positions, while narrating breathlessly what each section would have looked like if only her partner was there. The piece ends with her tiring herself out on the floor, gasping and struggling to replicate her partner's choreography and punctuating her effort with a lament that becomes less funny and more forlorn each time: “she's not here!” As the narration ceases and the effortful movement peters out, the lights dim and the performer collects herself into an inward-facing clump, dejected but seemingly in a more honest state than when she began.



And then we go



Ashley Yehoda and Lillian Joergensen in Hannah Garner's adapted *Better*

To adapt this work, Hannah was faced with the challenge of molding it onto two dancers she had never worked with in a rapid rehearsal process. They began with improvisation and games based on the original script. These often incorporated contact, which (unbeknownst to Hannah) is something Spacejunk rarely does. "We're partners that do not partner in our work," Ashley told me over zoom, laughing a little. "Coming out of not dancing and avoiding partnering like the plague, I was like...oh shit!" However, Hannah's approach made partnering feel accessible to the pair, because she wanted to purposefully lean into a clunky and awkward dynamic. What they ended up with was a huge energetic shift from the original work -- which Jonathan characterized as "backyard talent show" energy. Lillian and Ashley still introduce themselves to the audience, but this time it's not a person missing from the work -- rather, the premise is that the work is unfinished. They begin together, then break apart and Lillian describes her own unfinished solo and narrates Ashley's. My favorite part is what they call "the big finish," an eager shoulder lift and koala-slide (down the length of Lillian's body), then a succession of hilarious tableaux on the floor punctuated by the dancers' exclaiming "like *this!*" The pair ends by cracking up on the floor, and then finding themselves in a gentle, slower-paced, wordless contact duet that brings a feeling of solemnity to the ending. The adapted piece is still awkward and funny, but the warmth between the two performers gives it a more optimistic feel than the original.



Dot Armstrong, Kelsee Booker-Jordan, Paris Cullen, Lillian Joergensen and Ashley Yehoda in spacejunk's original *ten hail marys*

ten hail marys

The piece spacejunk chose to set upon Hannah, *ten hail marys*, was made for five dancers. A high-energy piece with a brooding tone, it perfectly fits the themes that the creative duo were working with: exhaustion, pressure, and failure as felt through a group dynamic. Five performers repeat drills of grueling and fast-paced movement, a little reminiscent of gym class. One of the five holds a whistle, and for that moment is the leader -- motivating the group with shouts and sharp language. But the leader continues to switch as the whistle changes hands, so that all members berate and are berated, as they continue to drill. Lillian and Ashley explained that the improvisational structure of the work actually gave the whistleblower real control onstage -- none of the dancers knew which drills would be called, and dancing until exhaustion was part of the design of the piece.



Hannah Garner in spacejunk's adapted *ten hail marys*

Moving from five performers to one performer would likely affect the tone of the adaptation, but the fact that they were working with film also offered new ways to translate the sense of effort central to the work. Lillian explained: "We look a lot at exhaustion in our pieces, and what it takes for people to give up onstage. For that to translate in a proscenium theater you have to go really hard...You don't have to do that in film so much, because you can get so close and intimate." In the film Hannah appears alone, in a dimly lit corridor with red and gray tones. The vocal presence of a motivating whistleblower is gone, but the sense of pressure is felt in the walls that surround on all sides. The video, edited beautifully by Holly Sass, shows the performer drilling with a sense of impending defeat, often slouching against the walls, pushing herself off of them in a slow, heavy ricochet. She runs down the hallway and around corners, but the video never pulls away from her -- she keeps encountering herself at every turn. It's a more pared-down, beautifully sparse experience of that same struggle, maybe representing a later stage of loneliness following failure.



Sienna Blaw in Oluwadamilare Ayorinde's original *Patient, Not Serene*

Patient, Not Serene / Another Word For Love is Love

Sienna Blaw and Indah Walsh had worked together to swap works, and in the process found many common threads in their creative instincts and personal lives. The first piece we saw was *Patient, Not Serene* choreographed by Oluwadamilare Ayorinde in collaboration with Sienna. The original dance film begins following the PATH train into Journal Square, the urban landscape giving way frame by frame to an unknown natural space. When Sienna appears, her movement is subtle and organic, with the camera focusing on her expressive hand gestures. Both dancers are partially obscured by tall grasses. “What do I like to see in myself? How can I be the best mirror for you?” she asks on voiceover, in two salient lines from a poem accompanying the movement. We begin to see some color distortion and the use of smaller frames, where the dancers’ shadows commingle and sway, the gradual abstraction of their bodies leading us to the end of the work.

Sienna faced an extra hurdle in the adaptation process: the original choreographer of *Patient, Not Serene* unfortunately had to drop out and hand the work over fully to Sienna, who knew the work as a collaborator and performer. “It was scary when he was like, I’m not available,” she told me. But she rose to the occasion, and what came out of the process was indeed protean -- something with a similar intrinsic character or property, that was also noticeably transformed.

The adapted version of the work is titled *Another Word For Love is Love*, and was made in an improvisational process that began with long conversations. When Sienna found out that she and Indah were both ending relationships at the same time, it immediately became part of the collaboration. “The synchronicity of that was really striking to me” she recounted. “When we got into the space, I was like, we have to talk about this...I was hungry for any insight I could get into how somebody else was processing their grief.” Another coincidence was that both artists envisioned using steps of some sort in their adapted works -- in Sienna’s case, it was a ladder.



Indah Walsh in Sienna Blaw's adapted *Another Word For Love is Love*

The adapted piece begins with Indah entering a room carrying a large orange ladder. Her manner with the ladder infuses it with importance from the start; she looks at it warmly, with recognition, and when she lays her hand on it, we get a flash of an outdoor space, as if in her mind. She duets the ladder to Leonard Cohen's "I'm Your Man," finding negative spaces and places to support herself, all captured perfectly by cinematographer Natalia Curutchet from multiple angles that enhance Indah's curiosity and playfulness. The music changes to a controlled but swelling instrumental piece and Walsh goes through an energy shift, her movement becomes faster paced, independent of the ladder, and the dizzying flashes of the outdoor space beach increase, revealing themselves to be a beach, disorienting the viewer with a similar collaging effect as in the original piece. She wakes gasping, lying in the sand. She then approaches the ladder, walks under and out the other side, toward the water where she takes off her layers and wades in. I think what carries over most from the original work to the adapted work is the way it focuses attention; both versions have an immersive quality, and a way of concentrating the viewer's attention so that every gesture or microexpression feels important. We really feel the hard metal of the ladder, the precariousness of partnering with such a large and unwieldy object, and the water against Indah's skin.



Indah Walsh and Jonathan Matthews in their original *Every Nook and Cranny*

Every Nook and Cranny

At first, Walsh had anticipated choosing a different work to adapt, but in the context of the COVID dance landscape and her own personal life, she found herself in a different headspace. “The thing that feels relevant to me right now is this thing I’m like, making in my apartment on my staircase,” she said. “It’s really been part of my personal healing process.” And, separately from *Protean Pieces*, she was in fact collaborating with Jonathan on this work.

The first song that plays in *Every Nook and Cranny* is “I’ll Be Your Mirror” by Nico. Right off the bat, the titular line echoes the question from Oluwadamilare’s work with Sienna: “how can I be the best mirror for you?” The movement starts out with a comical and frank tone, and is based on patterns of steps. At one point Jonathan performs a short, funny groovy dance on the stairs, shimmying and gyrating exuberantly, as if dancing with someone invisible at a club. Both dancers begin with an air of lightness and maybe even naivete, but when the music changes, they take on a heavier, more melancholy character. They slow their movement, keeping it relaxed and steady. Using the stairwell creatively, they start pulling and bracing themselves, finding support on hands, hips, back and knees, as the country ballad “Fruits of my Labor” by Lucinda Williams plays.

_____ Indah recalls that it was hard to make plans for the adaptation at all until she was in the studio with Sienna. A big part of their practice was bringing their whole selves into the studio, and honoring how they each felt on a given day. During their process, Sienna also dealt with sickness which limited their rehearsal time -- however, Indah appreciated the opportunity to prioritize her dancer’s wellness over the product, and says that’s a value she will take with her into whatever she makes next. Due to these limitations, *Every Nook and Cranny* is the only *Protean Piece* shot in the same location, to the same music.



Sienna Blaw in Indah Walsh's adapted *Every Nook and Cranny*

The adapted version finds Sienna performing a looped phrase on the staircase, this time using only the Lucinda Williams song. Natalia's camera follows Sienna's feet and face as she traverses the staircase, emphasizing how the movement quality shifts between swifty, sudden, and sustained. There's a feeling that she is leaning into the structure of the house to find something more than physical support -- her gaze is curious and a little bit longing at times. In her introductory video, Indah references "so many layers of letting go." That sense of a hard-won release is felt at the end of the work when Sienna leans over the edge of the stairs before hastily rebounding, approaching the edge again and finally stepping off.

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The mood after the show was warm and convivial, and I discussed the works briefly with the artists and a few of my friends. (I knew some of the choreographers already, given that Jonathan had furthered this goal by creating a platform for each artist to share a taste of their process with the larger community, by hosting virtual workshops taught by the five choreographers who were involved in the exchange.)

For me, there was a sense of excitement, combined with nervousness, to be able to have these conversations in person. Part of the reason this project felt so timely is that many dancers, like myself, are emerging from COVID with a sense that the industry needs a paradigm shift. Countless online conversations, artist talkbacks, and think pieces during the past year have shed light on aspects of contemporary dance culture, such as the aforementioned rigid approach to casting and auditions, that do not serve us well. And the COVID pause has offered an opportunity to find different practices. The values central to this project feel in line with the shift that many are calling for, embracing and prioritizing the whole performer, and creating

opportunities to learn from one another. There's already talk of another iteration of Protean Pieces down the line, though Jonathan isn't sure when or how. In my opinion, the template is very strong and would make a smashing return. Who knows what this choreographic swap could look like in the future, where in person performances aren't limited by capacity, and studios are fully reopened for larger groups? But I'm glad that my first exposure to Protean Pieces was intimate and experimental. I'm so glad to have witnessed these four beautifully curated and adapted pieces, and I'm crossing my fingers for a return of this innovative series.