

# The Choreographer's Toolbox: Developing the Creative Process



Emma C.W. Loy  
Mentored by Jade Treadwell

## Purpose

The use of the creative process in a choreographic study is an integral part of creating new work as a dance artist, and as with all creative activities, there are many unknowns. "You learn by choreographing, by experimenting, by creating little bits and pieces and fragments of dances and dance phrases, by playing with materials of the craft over and over again until they become second nature. You learn by getting your ideas out and into movement, onto a body (your's or someone else's), giving your dance independent existence." (Blom/Chaplin, 3). Dance is art, and art is subjective from one to another in how it is produced, having a wide range of tools to pull from when creating a new work allows for greater creative capability and for deeper subject matter to be explored through movement. Through URECA and the American Dance Festival, I have had the opportunity to take classes on the creative process, host my own rehearsals, and place a piece of choreographic work on dancers with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of my own creative process while preparing for a performance. Additionally, I was able to network and forge relationships with dancers from across the world. I met many of the most influential choreographers of our generation. I was able to speak with them, take class with them and from them, and hear them speak about the creative processes they have developed for themselves

## The Creative Process of *A Soft Place to Land*

### Working with a composer

The first step of this creative process was the development of the music. I chose to work with a dear friend and creative, Briggs Copeland, on the piece of music. This choice gave me large amounts of creative control on the overall outcome of the work, particularly as it pertains to the aesthetics of the production pieces. Working with Briggs allowed for the initial steps of this process to be full of discussion and, gave me a jumping off point for where I wanted the piece to move. In later steps of the process, we were able to collaborate on new sounds and accents in the music as the work developed and changed with the input from how the dancers interacted with the music.

## Creative Discoveries and Conclusions

This process has given me a plethora of information about the intricacies of my artistry. I have discovered that I am inspired by the dancers I work with, and the movement that feels comfortable in their individual bodies. I work best in a collaborative environment that is supportive of trying and experimenting with ideas, even if it is the wrong idea for the piece in the end.

I feel more confident in my abilities as a choreographer, creative, and in my arts administration skills from this experience. I have gained organizational skills to coordinate a large group of adults, and communicate my ideas effectively maintaining a sense of control, while also being able to take input from the dancers and feedback from mentorship.

Feedback from other creatives and mentors has been invaluable to me, and I will take that piece of this experience with me into all of my creative work. Feedback allowed me to have my ideas challenged, and resolve questions that I had for myself about intention and direction. I could list a hundred conversations and interactions that I will draw from in my future as an artist, and the ones I have listed feel like a scratch on the surface in comparison to the way I feel impacted by this experience. I feel empowered as an artist to create work that is representative of my artistry and abilities as I enter the professional landscape as a choreographer and educator.

## The American Dance Festival

Since its conception in 1934 at Bennington College (citation) the American Dance Festival has served as a home for growth and development for modern dance. Now housed at Duke University, "ADF ensures that modern dance remains a powerful and universal form of human expression and that this art form is accessible to all, now and for generations to come." (American Dance Festival, 2023) ADF provides developing artists, like myself, a simulation for what the professional dance landscape can look like.



Myself and Autumn Eckman

## Daily Classes

Within the structure of ADF's class schedule, students have a block schedule of classes four days of the week, with optional drop-in classes on off days. My block classes included ballet, with Autumn Eckman (former Giordano company member), 'The maker and the muse' with Adriane Fang and Stephanie Laipis (former company members of Doug Varone and Dancers), and 'Creative Process and Practice' with Jordan Loyd (Former David Dorfman company member).

### Work-Study

To lower the costs associated with attending the festival, I applied to be a work-study student at the festival. Thanks to URECA and the work-study program, I was able to attend with zero up front costs. My primary assignment during my work-study was driving visiting companies to and from the airport. This was an incredible opportunity to be able to speak with choreographers about their work and their company members about their experiences in the company.

## Performances and Choreographers talkbacks

The most-for lack of a better word- magical piece of the ADF experience is the opportunity to see so many major companies perform their work. This past summer, some of my favorites included Hung dances *Birdy*, Baye and Asas *4/2/3*, Netta Yerushalmy's *Movement*, and Doug Varone and Dancers (DOVA) *To My Arms/Restore*. These works among the many others I was privileged to witness were beautifully contrasting displays of the possibilities available to me as an artist. After most performances, students were given the opportunity to have a talkback with the choreographer and their dancers.

My favorite moment garnered from these talk backs was from the infamous Doug Varone: "...we're in a creative process, and I know where I'm going, but sometimes I don't know why I'm going there... throughout that process there was always roadmap that I was following that I knew where I was headed, but if I told you all the roads that were on it, I couldn't. That has always been part of my process. I don't ask questions of myself when I'm in process, I let the dance tell me what it needs and where it needs to go." (Doug Varone Post performance discussion, 2024) I have found myself returning to this idea of trusting myself and my creativity over and over again as I apply the tools I have gained in this process to my work, and it has allowed me a greater depth of freedom as I explore my own sense of creativity and process.

### "the ADF version"

The movement work for *a soft place to land* began at ADF with ten dancers. My time at ADF was spent developing phrase work that was adapted and changed throughout the initial rehearsal process. Additionally, a tool I gained from my class with Jordan Loyd was to give the dancers 'tasks' for rehearsal. While I would work with one group of dancers on developing phrase work, I gave another group of dancers the task of creating partner work, or experimenting with ways they could 'orbit' one another. This concept of collaboration with the dancers was informative of how someone outside of my body was perceiving and hearing concepts and ideas that I was playing with choreographically.

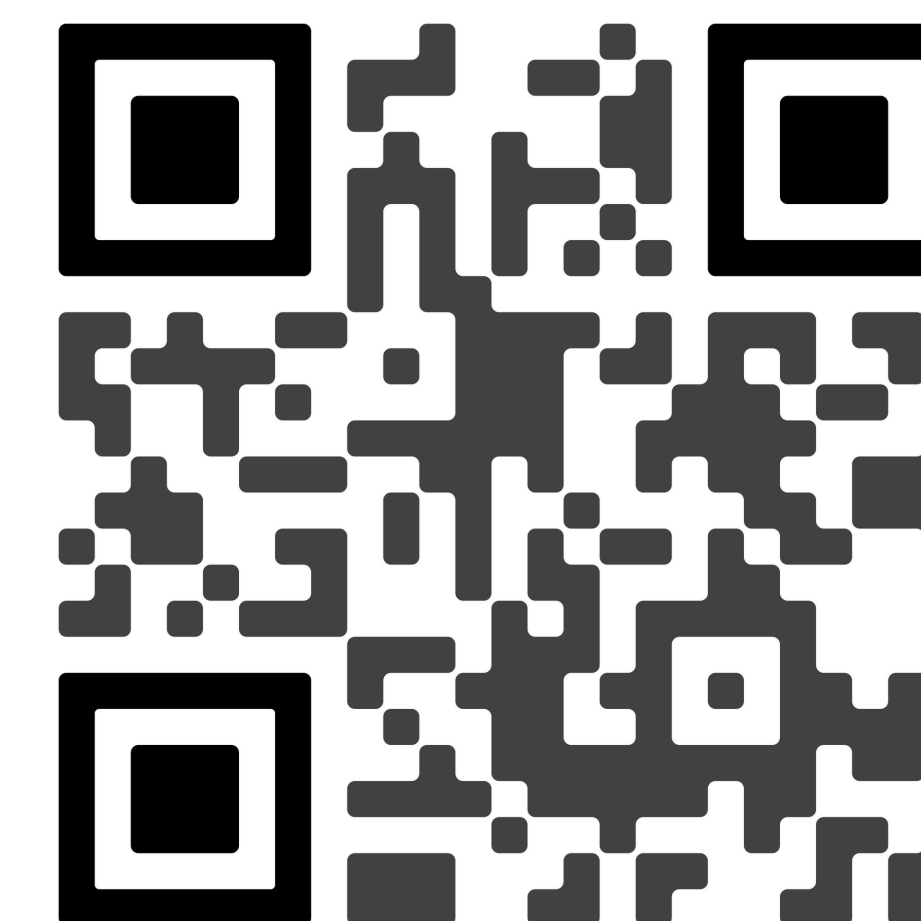


My ADF cast at our first rehearsal in the historic and beautiful Ark dance studio.

## Informal showing and feedback

While ADF does host a student choreography showcase, I did not feel that I was in the appropriate place in my creative process to have my work performed on a stage with technical elements. I felt I was more in need of feedback, and eyes on what I had been working on all summer. To do this, I hosted an informal feedback session at ADF that was hugely successful. Approximately 50 people attended, both student and faculty, and 10 student choreographers showed work and received feedback.

Scan here to watch videos from the informal ADF showing and from a recent rehearsal



### "The MTSU Version"

Unexpectedly, when I returned from ADF, I was granted the opportunity to rework and present this piece in MTSU's fall dance concert. This gave me the opportunity to take the movement I had developed over the summer on fifteen dancers who were completely new to the movement vocabulary of the piece. As I brought this work back to MTSU, I played with free writing, an idea introduced to me by Adriane Fang. In an evening of rehearsal with these dancers, they were tasked with creating phrases as I read what I had written to them. The phrases that these dancers created are sprinkled throughout the most recent version of this work. This portion of the process has allowed me to take the ideas and concepts that I dipped into over the summer, and dive in deeper into what these ideas look like more developed. Additionally, thanks to the MTSU production team, I have been able to explore the technical pieces of the production, including costumes and lighting. The performance of the version will be presented November 21st-23rd, alongside dance faculty choreography.

### "The ACDA Version"

There will be one more iteration, presented at the American College Dance Association south eastern conference for adjudication at the College of Charleston. The piece will be reworked for ten dancers, and I am excited to see a comparison from the first performance of the work to the last. This last iteration will allow me in depth feedback on the finished work from respected industry professionals, as well as the experience what it is like to tour a piece of my choreography.

## Sources

Blom, Lynne Anne, and L. Tarin Chaplin. *The Intimate Act of Choreography*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982.  
Varone, Doug. "Doug Varone and Dancers Post Performance Talkback." *American Dance Festival*. 23 June 2024, Durham, North Carolina.

"About ADF." *American Dance Festival*, 14 Nov. 2023, [americandancefestival.org/about/](http://americandancefestival.org/about/).

Loyd, Jordan. "Creative Process and Practice" *The American Dance Festival*. 2024, Durham, North Carolina.

Fang, Adriane. "The Maker and the Muse." *The American Dance Festival*. 2024, Durham, North Carolina.

## Acknowledgements

An essential thought that I have returned to in the development of 'a soft place to land' has been that we are not meant to do anything completely alone. In the spirit of empathy and gratitude, I extend my thanks for making this experience possible to the Undergraduate research center for the resources that made this opportunity possible, and Middle Tennessee State University for their commitment to student excellence.  
The American Dance Festival, for decades of educational opportunities given to developing artists.  
To the faculty of ADF and Nile H. Russell, Autumn Eckman, Adriane Fang, Stephanie Laipis, and Jordan Loyd, for your weeks of commitment to education and passing your wisdom to the next generation of artists.  
To the MTSU department of Theatre and Dance, the production team, and faculty for the effort involved in producing choreographed works.  
My ADF cast: Mia, Rae, Julia, Natalia, Bea, Madison, Gigi, and Bryleigh for being so passionate about your craft and committing a piece of your summer to this work.  
My MTSU cast: Maya, Ally, Shelby, Rae, Cara, Anna, Amelia, Emma, Brooke, Morgan, Natalie, Xan, Keke, Rylee, and Brittany for diving deep into this process with me, and bringing your creativity and energy to late night rehearsals.  
To Alex Winer, Kim Holt, and Jae Ahn for your feedback and passion for the development of your students.  
To Bryleigh, for being excited to try anything and everything for the betterment of movement.  
To Joy, I am convinced that you can see inside my brain. Thank you for your listening ears, honesty, music time stamps, and memory to take videos at the end of rehearsal.  
To Briggs Copeland, for creating a beautiful piece of music, indulging every tiny change, sending me at least fifteen different "final" versions over the last eight months, and for being one of my very best friends.  
To Jade Treadwell, your mentorship, creativity, and commitment has been invaluable to this process and I will take the advice you have extended to me long into my career.  
My parents for recognizing the value that dance has in my life and pouring time and energy into understanding what it means to be supportive of pursuing the arts as a career, and then full sending that support in every way you know how to.  
Lastly, Elisha, for taking on the brunt of managing our life while I was in North Carolina for over a month, watching rehearsal videos over and over far too late at night and still giving meaningful thoughts, being my personal cheerleading squad, and for being overwhelmingly supportive when I said I wanted to finish my degree two months into marriage. I am convinced there's not a challenge we couldn't handle.