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Motif Writing for Meaning-Making and Show Maintenance in Intimacy Choreography

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Abstract

Intimacy Direction, a relatively new field in stage and film industries, refers to creating and setting moments of intimacy. Moments of intimacy may be defined as moments that require personal vulnerability between characters, often involving physical contact. The goal of having Intimacy Choreography is to create work that respects the agency and boundaries of the performers while telling the story of the play, musical, ballet, film, etc. An important aspect of choreography is that it is repeatable. Therefore, documentation is necessary. The Laban Bartenieff Movement System is an incredible tool for Intimacy Directors/Choreographers because it provides a neutral language for coaching and creating movement coupled with notation and motif. This paper explores how the author used motif as a choreographer and intimacy director/choreographer to support her creative process and how the use of motif bolsters the creative process of the entire production as choreography is set, documented, and maintained.

Keywords: theatre, intimacy choreography, intimacy direction, Laban Motif, Motif Notation, choreography

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Introduction

I have been extensively trained in the fairly new field of Intimacy Direction/Intimacy Choreography. I bring to this field my dance training, a decade of creating movement for the theatre stage, and my skills as a Certified Laban Movement Analyst through Integrated Movement Studies. *Intimacy Direction* refers to creating and setting moments of intimacy (moments that require personal vulnerability between characters, often involving physical contact) in theatrical performances. The goal of having Intimacy Choreography is to create work that respects the agency and boundaries of the actors, while telling the story of the play or musical. Ideally, this work is safe and artistically satisfying—much like work in Fight Direction.

While kissing in theatre is nothing new—it has appeared in plays from Aristophanes, to Shakespeare, to now, and theatre professionals have found ways to do this work—the creation of a movement specialist for this field began in the early 2000s. The concept was first publicly discussed and codified by Tonia Sina in her 2006 Pedagogy of Movement MFA thesis at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).¹ Tonia had entered the program in order to become a Fight Director. However, as one of its only females, she was frequently asked to choreograph sex scenes and kisses. She quickly realized there was no protocol or method for setting this type of movement, but many of the concepts and exercises for Fight Direction and movement work could apply.

At VCU, Sina was cast in *Picasso at Lapin Agile*. The kiss between her character and the character of Picasso was not going well. The director instructed Tonia and her scene partner to “go out in the lobby and work on it.” This type of direction is frequently what happens in setting intimacy for the stage. Directors may feel ill-equipped or uncomfortable in handling intimacy, feel the pressures of time and skip this in rehearsal, or decide that the actors can set this better for themselves. But, as Tonia found, being secluded and unobserved in the lobby quickly led to this scene becoming about the actors involved, rather than the characters. The resulting kiss was “hot,” but the characters were unable to replicate on stage what the actors had experienced in the lobby. This unhealthy dissolution of boundaries convinced Sina a codified and systematic way of addressing intimacy on stage was needed.

After her graduation, Sina taught Intimacy for the Stage workshops for the Society of American Fight Directors. One weekend in 2014 she crossed paths with Alicia Rodis, another Fight Director, also teaching intimacy staging. The two realized their work would be stronger together. They met with Siobahn Richardson,

1. Tonia Sina Campanella. *Intimate Encounters; Staging Intimacy and Sensuality*. (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006).

a Fight Director in Canada. Together they codified The Five Pillars of Intimacy Direction, and established Intimacy Directors International (IDI).

With the #metoo Movement shaking Hollywood in 2017, the need to choreograph intimate moments came to national attention. Alicia was hired by HBO to work on *The Deuce*, resulting in HBO requiring an Intimacy Coordinator (the film/TV version of an Intimacy Director) for all shows with intimate moments. Claire Warden, another Fight Director, joined the organization. She recently brought Intimacy Direction to Broadway—first with *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*, starring Audra McDonald, then *Slave Play*, a new play about roleplay and race in sex, *Jagged Little Pill*, the Alanis Morissette musical, and *Company* starring Patti LuPone.

IDI has now dissolved, but many other organizations continue the work. Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) was founded in 2017, and is the other main training body for intimacy work in the US. Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) in the US and Intimacy Canada were formed in 2020 to train movement specialists for both stage and film. The Intimacy Professionals Association and Intimacy Coordinators of Color work mainly in film in LA. IDI-UK, now Intimacy for Stage and Screen, and Intimacy on Set, and others operate in the UK and EU, as well as Australia and New Zealand.

I first found the field of Intimacy Direction while researching how to properly teach and rehearse kissing with high school students (the correct answer is “Don’t”!). I attended an introductory workshop with TIE in Spring 2018. I immediately realized the power of this work, and pursued more training. Between IDI, IDI-UK, IDC, and TIE, I have approximately 250 hours of Intimacy for the Stage training. I was a member of IDI’s apprenticeship program to become a Certified Intimacy Director, and am now hoping to complete the apprenticeship process with IDC.

From the first workshop, I realized the Laban language had a lot in common with this work, as both are very interested in the relationships of bodies in space. I am particularly interested in the neutral language the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System (L/BMS) provides for creating and coaching movement, as well as the method of motif writing for documenting the set choreography.

As I applied the L/BMS to my work as an Intimacy Choreographer in *In the Heights* with Measure for Measure Theatre Company (Sunrise, FL) and later as the Choreographer and Intimacy Director for the US premiere of *The Glass Piano* at the Theatre Lab (Boca Raton, FL), I realized that one of the most powerful tools the L/BMS provided was notation and motif. The following case studies of the aforementioned productions explore how I use motif as a choreographer and intimacy director/choreographer to support my own creativity and how the use of motif bolsters the creative process of the entire production, as choreography is set, documented, and maintained.

Creation and Teaching of Motif Notation

An important aspect of choreography is that it is repeatable. Therefore, documentation is necessary. TIE has as a tagline “Passion fades ... Choreography is Forever.” This tongue-in-cheek slogan addresses two important aspects of the development of intimacy choreography:

1. Passion/Emotion
2. Choreography

Passion/Emotion: Actors are real people, with real bodily response and real feelings, even if they are in fake situations. The physical embodiment of intimacy, particularly kissing can cause real physical reactions. Tonia Sina often says in workshops she leads, “A kiss is the most dangerous thing you can do on stage.” Creating choreography for and around the kisses helps mitigate the danger.

While directors, actors, and audiences may know that the people kissing are only fictional, the danger lies in the fact that the body does not know. The book *The Science of Kissing* by Sheril Kirshenbaum details the many biological responses that occur in a kiss, from pupil dilation, to nerve and muscle activation, to oxygen intake, to neurotransmitter and hormone production, to the activation of all five senses.² Not to mention, “the disproportionate neural space associated with our lips compared to the rest of our body.”³ Our lips are our biggest area to receive erogenous stimulation! While we can verbalize and rationalize with consistency and adamancy the idea that the kissing is just fake, the biological responses that occur are quite real. Creating choreography, to move the focus to the techniques of acting and moving, can help create a container for that biological activity.

Choreography: To truly be choreography, it must be repeatable. Having notation helps this, as Stage Management can see what is important to me as the choreographer in each moment of intimacy, and use this for show maintenance.

I found that notating these moments helped me be very clear on what the movement was, and remember it for further rehearsals. As I notated the movement, I developed more ideas to coach the moments.

Creating the motifs highlighted what was important for the story-telling. In motif writing, I became very clear on the meaning behind the movement(s).

Those of us familiar with L/BMS are aware of the psychosocial affiliations with Effort, Modes of Shape Change, Approaches to Kinespere, and more. As I took the time to crystalize the motif of each moment, I also had time to reflect on these associations. I was then able to share this with the actors. In these

2. Sheril Kirshenbaum. *The Science of Kissing: What our Lips are Telling Us*. (New York: Grand Central Press, 2011), 74.

3. Kirshenbaum. *The Science of Kissing*, 79.

communications I was able to offer the actors not only movement coaching, but the intent and motivation of their movement(s), giving them a layer to their acting technique, and opening moments for collaboration as actors were able to share impulses and character development ideas.

Motif was championed by Ann Hutchinson Guest as a form of Labanotation that focused on the essence of the movement, rather than every detail. She writes in *Your Move: A New Approach to the Study of Movement and Dance*, that these symbols

provide a means of clarification and communication. If one can write down what one wants to say about a movement, then one can communicate this information to others as well as remember it later for oneself.⁴

I definitely found this to be true in my creation of motifs in my work.

I created Laban Bartenieff Movement Analysis (LBMA) motifs for all of the moments I choreographed for both *In the Heights* and *The Glass Piano*. These motifs were then placed in the prompt book for Stage Management's reference.

In order for these motifs to be helpful for show maintenance, Stage Management had to be able to interpret them (See figs. 1-3). None of the Stage Management team for either production had Laban/Bartenieff training, so I created a key and instructed Stage Management on how to read it. By allowing them to have this in hand for rehearsals, they were able to begin to understand what they were reading. I attempted to include in the key the symbols I used, as well as information that would be helpful for interpreting body parts. I broke the key into BESS+A and described it to Stage Management as:

- Body: Its whole and parts.
- Effort: How you describe HOW someone is doing the action or movement.
Shape: How you describe the FORM or look of the action or movement.
- Space: WHERE an action or movement occurs. May be in relation to the world, own body, and/or each other.
- Action: A specific type of MOVEMENT.

I, and these shows, had the advantage of always working with the Stage Manager or Assistant Stage Manager in the room. I believe all intimacy choreography should be created with the Stage Manager in the room anyway, in terms of safety, accountability, and show maintenance, and it was wonderful to work with companies who saw the value in that commitment as well. In our work, this had the added bonus of the Stage Manager seeing and hearing the creation and coaching of the moments, as well as the discussions around context and story. This consistency of presence was a crucial part of the success of using motifs for record-keeping and maintenance.

4. Ann Hutchinson Guest. *Your Move: A New Approach to the Study of Movement and Dance*. (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1983), xvi.

I was also given time to work with understudies, a luxury not always available. I feel this is incredibly important for consent to be present in the work. This also allowed me to communicate to the Stage Manager any changes made from the original motif to keep in mind should an understudy have to step in.

This process I have laid out was able to work for both productions with ease because of consistency in Stage Management and in actors. As both productions were limited runs, we never had to experience replacing a cast member or a member of Stage Management.

Motifing moments of intimacy required some changes from motifing movement in general. For example, in the motif for kissing, I include intensity scale numbers. I choose to use a numerical scale as opposed to Weight Effort, as the numbers help the actors to keep track of the “beats” involved, or the length of the kiss. Also, as the intensity often increases or decreases, numbers offered clarity on the gradations of intensity. I also used the symbol we discussed in my Integrated Movement Studies certification program (initially proposed by Hannah Fisher) for Overlapping Kinespheres (ω), as it was particularly useful for these motifs.

In some motifs, I included initials and/or set sketches to help the orientation of the reader to the stage space. In some I included stage directions (US, DS) for clarity, but now wonder if directional symbols would be more useful, allowing the Body Cross of Reference (ϕ) to orient. At the time of the creation of these motifs, I had not been introduced to relationships, Floor Plans, or pins in Motif writing. This new knowledge will help to make future motifs more clear and complete.

The remainder of this paper is an analysis of each scene I choreographed, as they appear in each show, in order to see the interplay and development of the movement and the characters. *In the Heights* was my first foray into connecting the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System, including motif writing, with intimacy choreography. *The Glass Piano* was the second. A summary of my use of the L/BMS in creation and motif writing concludes the paper.

Creation, Teaching, and Analysis of Choreography for *In the Heights*

Briefly, and focused for the purposes of this paper, *In the Heights* is the story of a few days in a neighborhood of Washington Heights, New York. Benny is in love with his boss’s daughter Nina, and has the confidence to make a move when she returns home from college. Usnavi is in love with Vanessa, and is definitely NOT confident enough to make a move, much to everyone’s frustration.

Dispatch Scene

The “Dispatch Scene” is the first moment of intimacy we see in the show. Unlike the rest of the choreography, this is without music. Creating movement for this scene was an interesting challenge, because I set it last, but the movement occurs first in the storyline. My organizing question for this moment was “How can movement foreshadow the growth of this relationship?”

The intimate moment begins as Benny is trying to give directions in Spanish (not his first language) to the taxi drivers. He is getting frustrated, so Nina takes over. As she Sinks (↵) onto her elbows on the desk we get one of my favorite moments—Benny Bulging Backward and Retreating (↵↵) into his chair to get a better view of Nina’s rear end. This came from an actor suggestion, and got an audience reaction every night. The real action of the scene is the changing of Nina’s shape as she Retreats and Encloses, then Retreats and Spreads, all quite Quickly, in an attempt to avoid Benny, who knows her directions to the cabbie, while efficient, are also illegal. Using a near full body Directional Spoke (↵↵), Benny lunges with Sudden Directness (↵↵) for the radio. After a few attempts, his hand Carves around her wrist with Sudden Strength (↵↵), causing her to Sink and Advance (↵↵) across his lap and the desk, creating a Shared Kinesphere (ω) for them. The moment lingers (↵↵) as his hand Floats (↵↵) gently up her arm, and is broken by the entrance of her father.

The shapes created by Nina create flirty images as she first Quickly (↵↵) Closes (↵) her body into an S-curve, or Screw-like Shape (⊙), showing just a bit of hip, then exposes her body. Benny’s initial shift in his seat (↵↵), Direct Quick (↵↵) lunges, and final graze (↵↵) of her arm demonstrate a man who knows what he wants, and is not shy about taking opportunities to get it. Nina’s Advancing when Benny pulls the radio is also crucial to the story telling. If she does not Advance, it looks like she is bracing herself against his pull, or at the least withholding herself from him. However, the goal of the scene was to set up mutual flirting and interest. Her Advancing and forming towards him gives that feeling. All of these movements create the flirty mood to set up their relationship for the rest of the show.

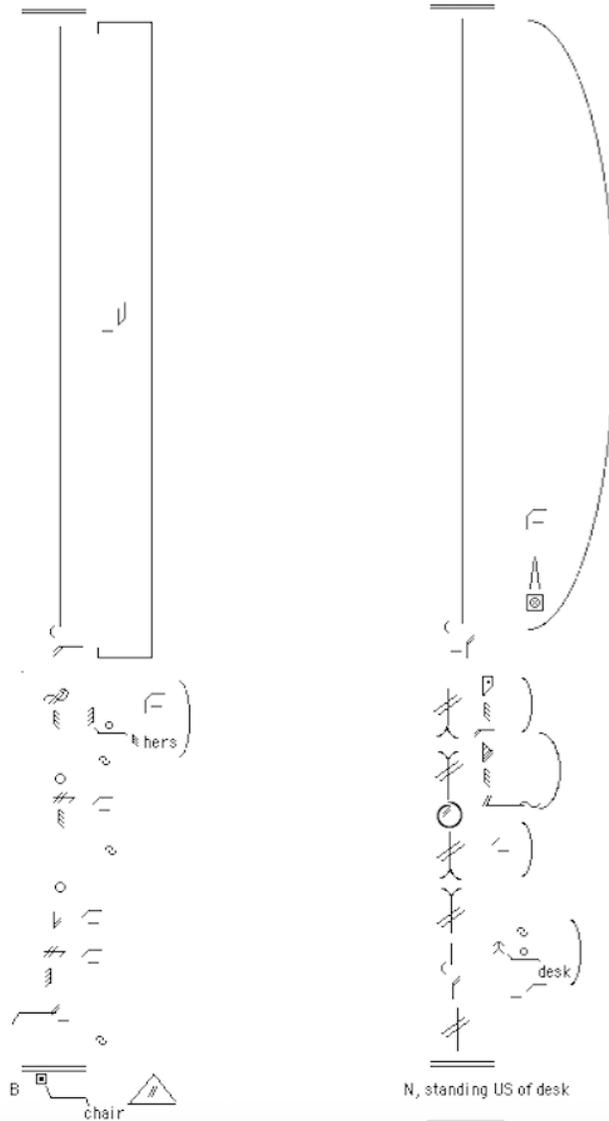


Fig. A.1. "Dispatch" Motif.

Blackout

The next moment of intimacy between Benny and Nina occurs at the end of Act 1, as Washington Heights experiences a blackout. The two have been fighting, but when the situation becomes unsafe, Benny realizes his priority is Nina.

Nina, however, is still angry, and that fuels her separation from Benny. But, when Benny is standing in a Pin-like Shape (†), and frantically looking everywhere for her with urgency (↵), she is moved. The two have a moment of direct eye contact before she runs, with Direct Quickness and Light Weight (↳). Nina Spokes her arms towards him (↑ ↗) to indicate her desire to be with him. She jumps (⤴) into his arms. He holds her tightly, and Time seems to stop as they connect in this Spell Drive moment of Diminished Free Flow, Direct, and Light for her, Strong for him (↳↳). Time is no longer needed, as her decision to be with him was demonstrated in the Quickness of her run. The Diminished Free Flow lets the audience feel the sense of containment, like the two of them are creating their own world inside the larger chaotic one, but are still pouring their energy and feelings into each other. This moment leads Nina to Carve (∞) around Benny, molding them to each other.

As the fireworks go off around them, they are an island, barely moving, now lost in a Dream State (†), attending only to their connection, sensations, and feelings. While the madness continues around them, they are investing themselves in the sensations and feelings of being together, creating that Dream. For Nina, this constellation of factors is her Light Weight and Diminished Free Flow (↳), while Benny's is Diminished Free with Diminished Strong Weight (↳). This entire series of movement is representative of their relationship- things are going to be difficult around them, and if they want to be together, they will be responsible for creating their own peace, their own connections.

Their kiss is as explosive as the fireworks, hitting a 10 on the Intensity Scale as the stage goes dark. While numbers are not part of Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis Motif writing, they are important to recording a kiss, and an integral part of my motif writing. I have included them as part of my phrasing in these motifs, as it is about the initiation, follow-through, and resolution of a moment.

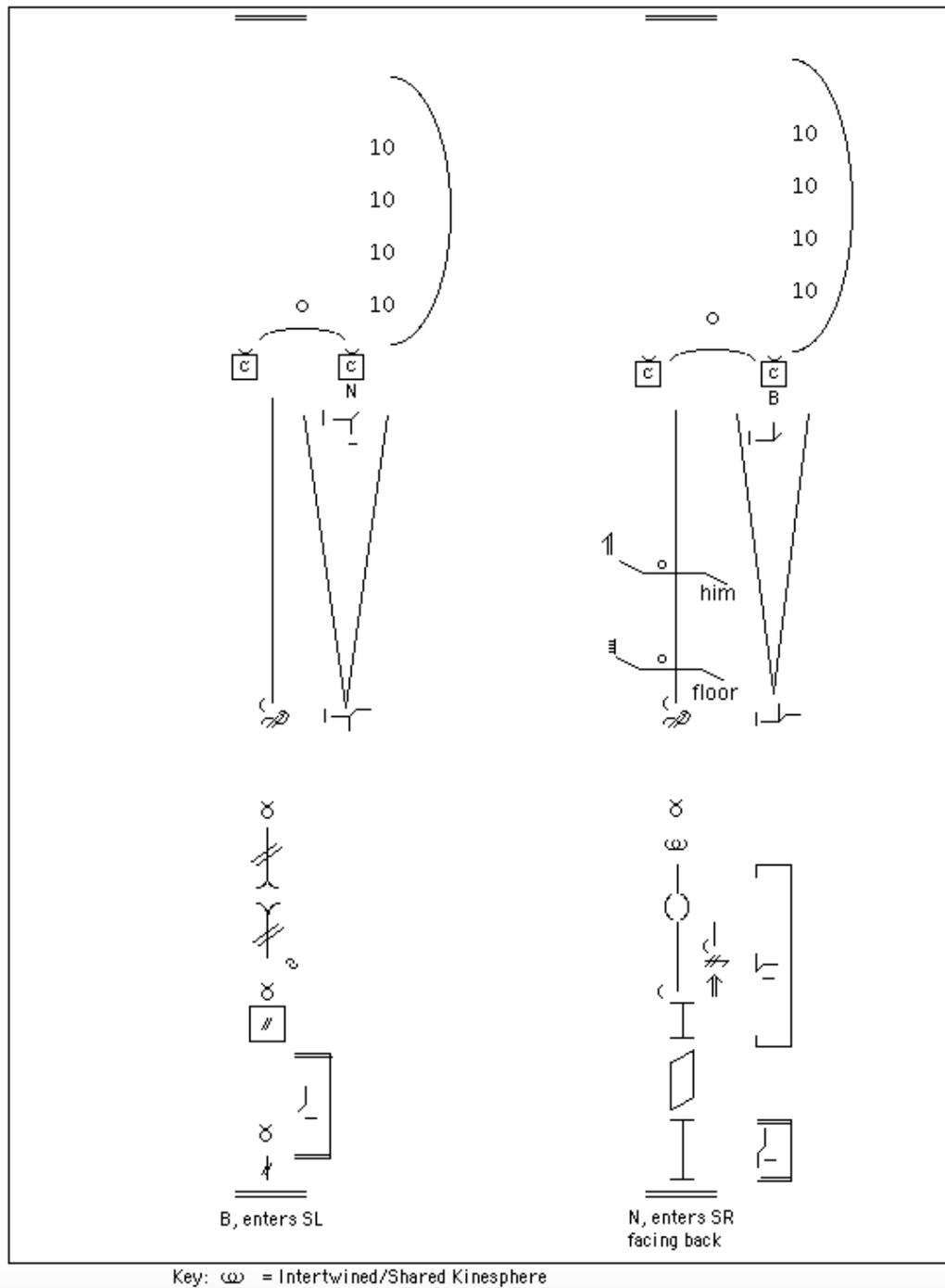


Fig. B.1. "Blackout" Motif.

Sunrise

We left Act 1 caught in a moment with Nina and Benny, and they open Act 2 for us. “Sunrise” is an entire song of intimate choreography. My organizing question for this moment was “How can the movement of this piece show the changes the characters are experiencing, and decisions they are making, in the song”? In musicals, songs are pivot points for characters, and I wanted the movement to support that. The lights come up on Benny, outside his apartment. Nina soon joins him. Importantly, she takes the lead on this kiss as she Rises and Advances (↘), then Carves (∞) around and yields into him and the connection she has created. Before, we saw his interest, so it is important for the audience to know that they are in this together.

A key moment in this number is when Nina and Benny are wrapped in each other’s arms, but his doubts begin to creep in (see Fig. C.2). I coached him to Hollow Back (↔) and away from her, as if his thoughts could not allow him to keep the connection. This was an effective use of Shape Flow Support (—), and the actor connected to it right away. After he breaks the connection, she is fixated Directly (↖) on a couple fighting on the street below. Her arm Suddenly Spokes out to them (↑ ↘ ↗), as if to hold them together. In this change of focus, we see her inner uncertainty. Benny returns to her, gaining her attention with his promise and his touch that Lightly and Directly (↙) traces a path from her arm to chin.

The number then turns playful, as Benny Spokes a finger with a Quick, Light, Direct Dab to Nina’s nose (↑ ↘ ↗). The mood shifts to sweet, as he takes her hand to draw her with him and into him, to share Kinespheres (∞) as they Carve around each other (∞). She Directly (↖) connects to him by Arcing her hand, and then head to his chest, creating a dimension where only they exist as the city awakens around them (see Fig. C.3). We end back in the same space on the balcony where we started, in almost the same position.

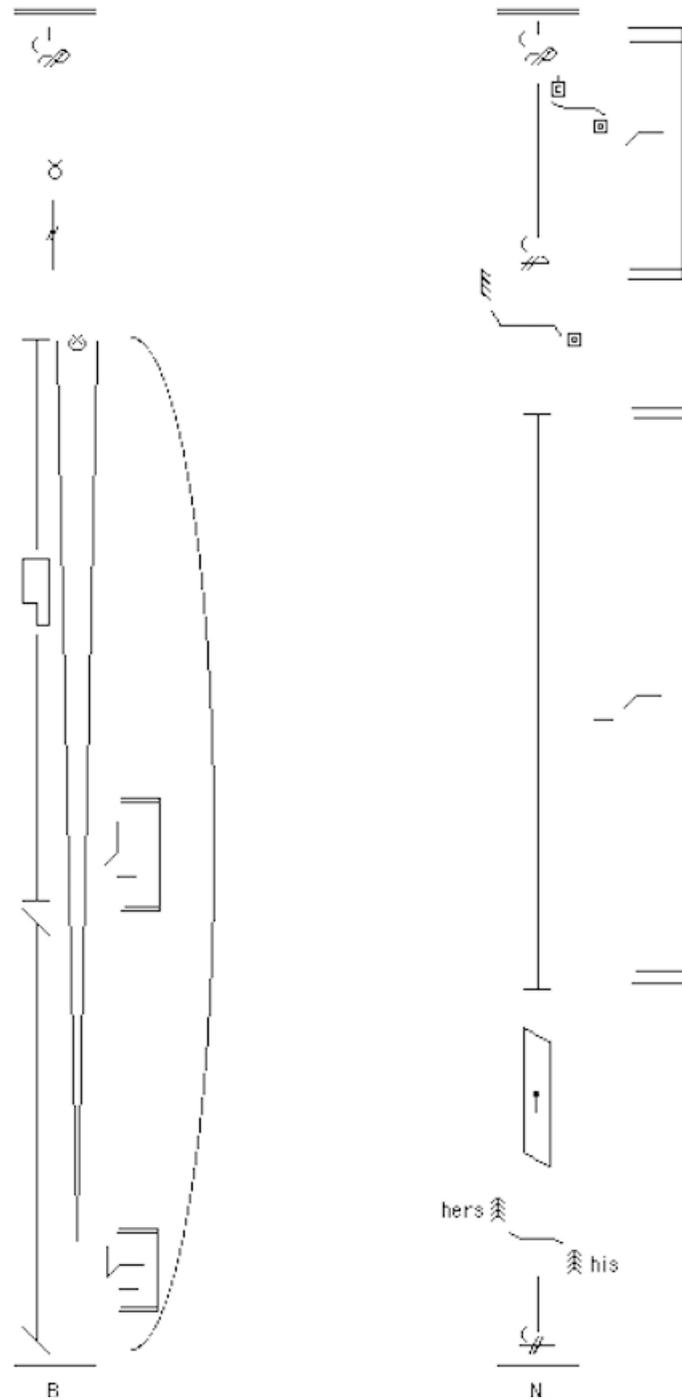


Fig. C.3. "Sunrise" Motif Notation Score page 3.

Champagne

The choreography for “Champagne” answers “How can we portray anger, sadness, and love in movement and Shape?” This was actually the first moment that I created in the rehearsal process. It opens with Usnavi and Vanessa separated by an emotional barrier, with the counter as its physical representation. Usnavi’s movements emphasize Upper-Lower Connectivity (⊕), his held torso (⊞) limiting this to Directional gesticulations with his arms (↑↔), and Weight Sensing (⊖). Vanessa matches his tension with her own Bound Flow (←), remaining rooted to her spot as they argue.

Usnavi’s Directional arm and hand gestures (↑↗) in Near Reach Space (⊗), combine with his Weight Sensing and Flow Flux (+) to portray an inability to act on his attraction to Vanessa. This lack of progress towards the goal frustrates us as the audience, who want to scream “Just go to her, dummy!” As his own frustration grows we see Strong, Direct, Quick gestures (⊖) with his arms, that Advance (→) his energy towards Vanessa. The Strong choices (⊖) are different from his everyday movements that are often without Weight. This Strength ultimately motivates him to move, but he cannot close the space between them. Once he clears the counter, he redefines his boundaries, creating a small Wall-like Form (⊞), protected in a small Kinesphere (⊗), still very separate from Vanessa.

Once he has broken the physical boundary, Vanessa is free to close the psychological and remaining physical distance. She Suddenly (↘) moves straight towards him (↓). This moment was one of the most difficult to get the feeling tone correct. I coached the actor playing Vanessa on Advancing (→↗), offering images of forming her whole self to him (as opposed to eyes, feet, or leaning in), ignoring her backspace altogether, and covering her front in eyeballs. What finally resonated with her was the image of not just walking to him, but also actively sending her heart and all organs to him. The goal of these images were for inner motivation to cause Forward locomotion (↓), to confront him with Directness and Urgency (↘).

After the two come together, the connective use of breath becomes the most important feature for both. By connecting to their breath, we hear Usnavi’s surprise as she Suddenly Arcs her hand Lightly, but Directly, to his heart (↘↗), causing him to Rise Suddenly with a startle reflex up (↖). As she maintains the contact and he continues to breathe, we watch his boundaries melt with a Diminished Passive Heavy Weight and Diminished Free Flow (↖). He Carves (↗) around her hand with his own. But, her final line of the song emotionally separates them, even as they are physically connected (See Fig. D.1). The realizations seen in their eye contact causes both of them to Sink (↓) with Passive Heavy Weight (↓) into their own selves. Their heads Arc (↖↗) towards each other, gazes now downward, denying further connection.

In my analysis of these moments of intimacy, I see configurations of Remote State (—), Spell Drive (+), and Action Drive (+). These tend to show up as clusters of Condensing Efforts: Direct Space, Bound Flow, Sudden Time, and Passive Heavy Weight, relevant for two characters fighting to control their situations and emotions. I suspect because these moments have occurred with music, there is a sense of timelessness and/or evenness as they move with the tempo, accounting for the moments of Remote and Spell. They both have reflex-like moments of Action Drive (+), where Sudden Time (↖) is used to help close the distance between them. There is a meaningful switch into Vision Drive (=) for Vanessa as she looks at Usnavi for her last line, but is still protecting herself by not investing her mass. By withholding her Weight (↓), she remains uncommitted to deep connection with Usnavi. Despite these effortful moments, most of my analysis is around Shape and Body, which makes sense as this moment is about bridging towards each other, or the inability to do so.



Fig. D.1. "Champagne." Photo by Kia Janell, October 2019. Spencer Landis as Usnavi and Lauren Horgan as Vanessa. Used with permission.

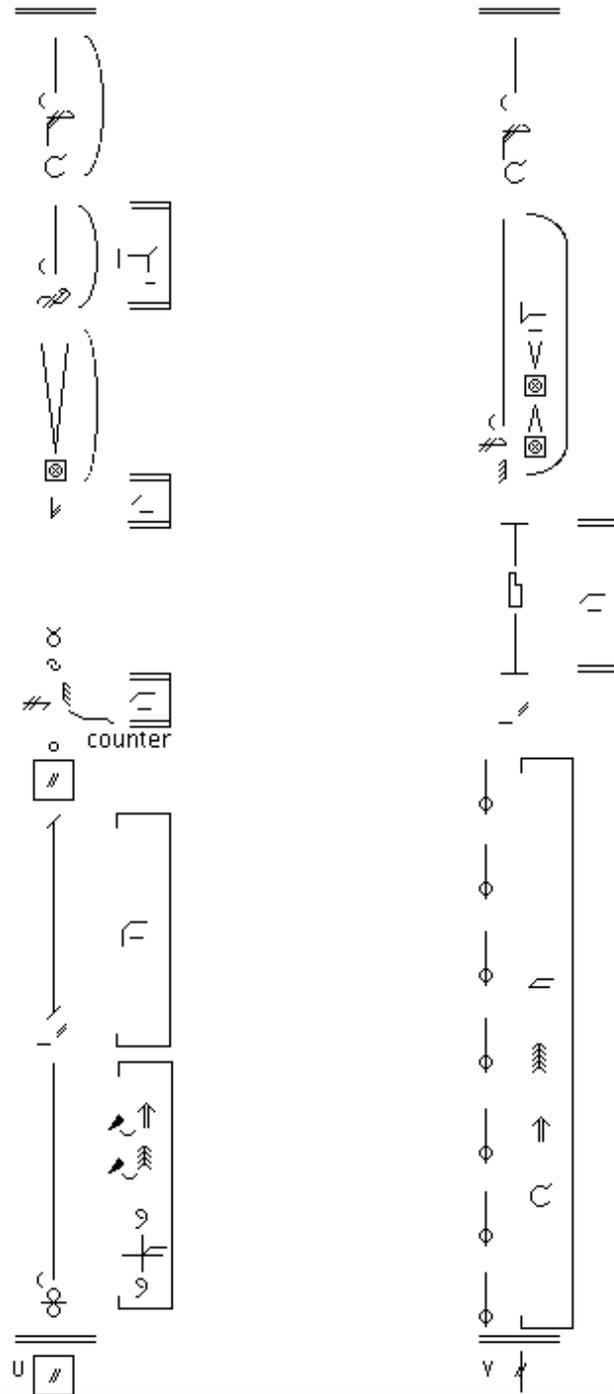


Fig. D.2. "Champagne" Motif Notation Score.

When the Sun Goes Down

The audience has also been waiting to find out what is going to happen in the relationship between Nina and Benny. “When the Sun Goes Down” answers this. I continued to represent emotional connection, and disconnection, via movement in this number. I also wanted to return to the movement seen in “Sunrise,” as both the worries and promises seen from these characters in that song are expressed more fully in “When the Sun Goes Down.”

The beginning of this number is characterized by an active Stillness and Holds (∞), as if each is anxiously waiting for the other to say the first hard truth. Benny finally does, but Nina playfully nudges his side with Direct, Light, Quickness (↳ ↗), appearing to not take his worry seriously. As she realizes the depth of his feelings, her arm Spokes out to him Quickly and Directly (↑ ↖ ↗). This is the movement we saw in “Sunrise” as she attempted to keep the other couple together.

Benny’s initial separation, followed by Nina going to him, are important to the story. He opens the space between them to hold his doubts and her choices. She closes that space, creating a Shared Kinesphere (∞), seeking connection by Arcing her hand to his (↷ ↗), then Carving into an embrace (∞). She initiates the kiss, Rising and Advancing into him, and Carving around him more (see Fig. E.3), showing that her dreams of the future include him. His audible breath at the end of the kiss is moving.



Fig. E.1. “When the Sun Goes Down.” Photo by TallGlass Photography, October 2019. Noah Noria as Nina and Chris Alvarez as Benny. Used with Permission.

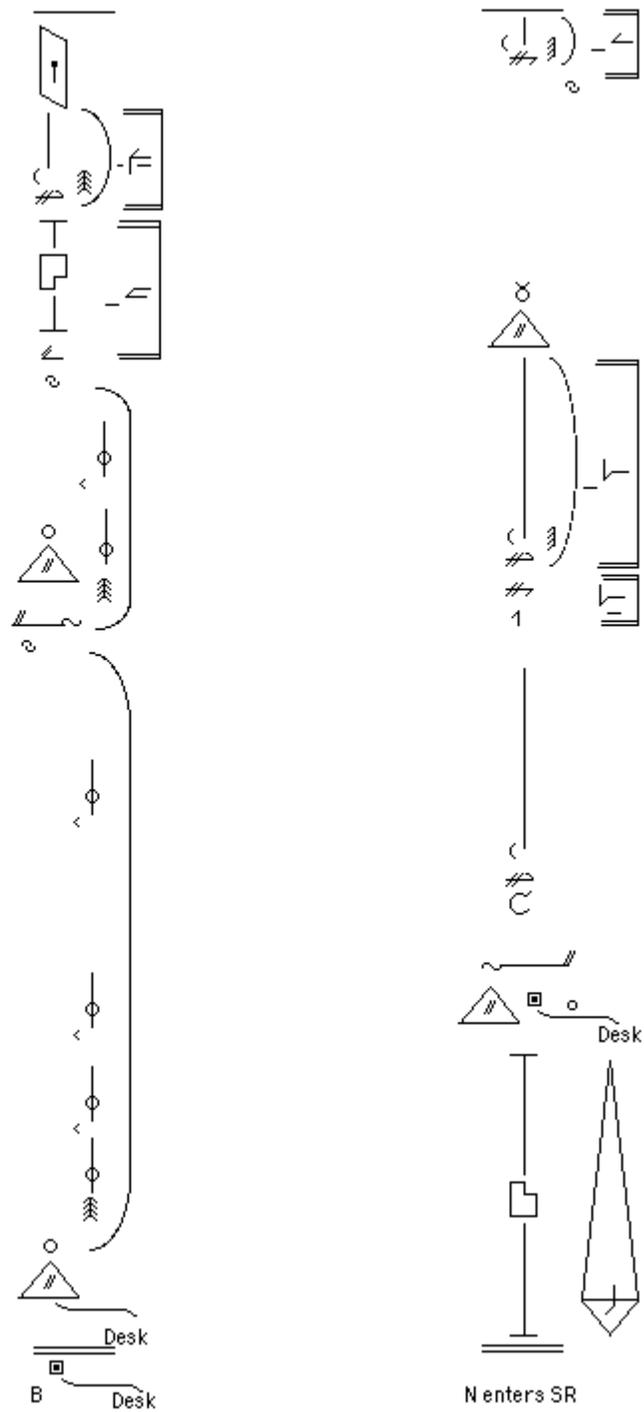


Fig. E.2. "When the Sun Goes Down" Motif Notation Score page 1.

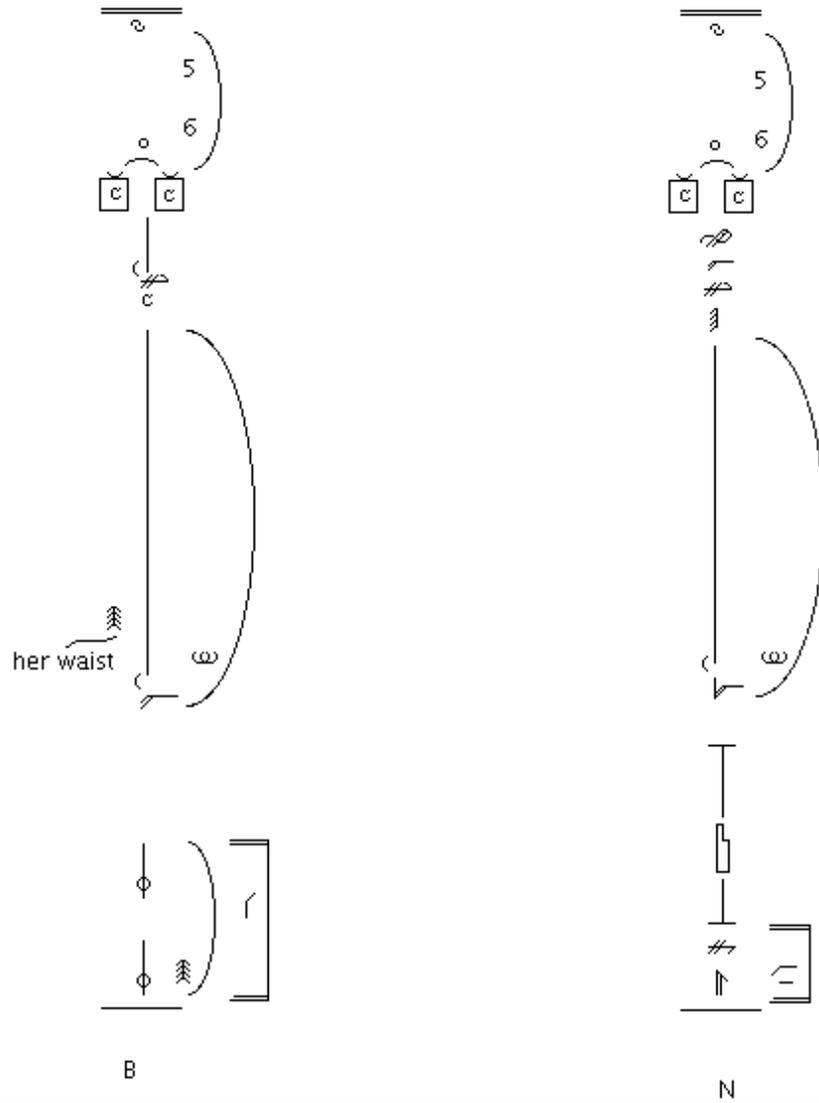


Fig. E.3. “When the Sun Goes Down” Motif Notation Score page 2.

Finale and Kiss

In the “Finale,” the audience and characters finally get the closure denied them at the end of “Champagne.” In this moment, I hoped to answer “How can we change existing movement to change a mood or narrative?” As Usnavi sings, he declares he will ask Vanessa for a second date. He reveals the space between them as he Arcs (↗) his upstage hand to her. She places hers immediately, Directly, and Strongly in his (↖), excited he is finally making a move. He easily, with Bound Flow and a gentle determination, guides her to face him (↔). They sing the final “Home”’s to each other. She bridges to him by Arcing her hand Quickly and Directly (↗) to his chest. He Carves around her hand as before (although this time with his downstage hand), and once again their heads bow towards each other, making a Light connection with a moment of Sustainment at the foreheads (see Fig. F.1).

This is the movement motif created in “Champagne,” allowing the audience to come full circle. But, beginning with Usnavi offering to close the space between them, then doing so with an investment (although small) of his Weight (↓), we know that this story is different. Usnavi continues to seek connection, allowing his upstage hand to Spoke out Directly but Lightly to touch Vanessa’s face, then Carve her hair out of the way (see Fig. F.1). Their forms Advance and Enclose (→↖), molding towards each other. It is important this Shaping happens in the Upper-Lower Pattern (⊕) and include their pelvises (⊖), as a Retreating pelvis (⊖) is a sign of discomfort or non-romantic physical touching, which is not the goal here.

Once their Kinespheres overlap (∞) and bodies connect, the heads Arc again (↔), this time, each to the right. The eye contact shifts to lips, and Usnavi initiates the kiss with Direct Quickness (↖). He enters at an 8 on my Kiss Intensity Scale, and she meets him at 8 for two additional beats. As the band plays, they de-escalate to 5, where they break off. During the kiss, they each allow their hands to Carve and Float (↖↗) in a gentle, all-encompassing, lingering caress over each other’s back and side bodies. The high intensity of the kiss, countered with that touch, gives the audience feelings of romantic desire, rather than pure lust.

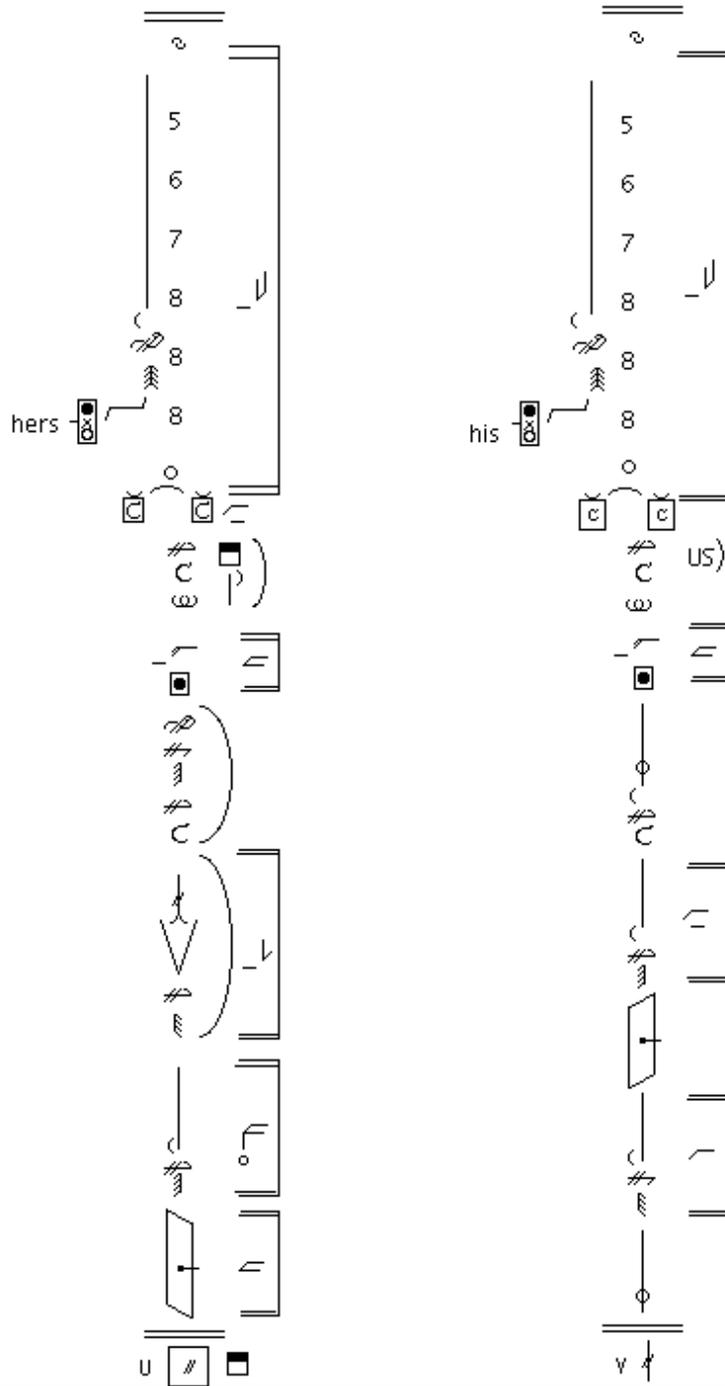


Fig. F.1. "Finale and Kiss" Motif.

Creation, Teaching, and Analysis of Choreography for *The Glass Piano*

Briefly, and focused for the purposes of this paper, *The Glass Piano* is a new play that finds its origins in the story of Princess Alexandra of Bavaria, who thought she had swallowed a glass piano. Whether real or imagined, it restricts her life, already constrained by the rules and roles of being a member of the royalty. During the course of the play, she and her father, King Ludwig, explore a desire for freedom, born of love for an unacceptable suitor—the divorced Lucien Bonaparte for Alexandra, and the maid Galstina for Ludwig.

The Proposal

Alexandra, because she has swallowed a glass piano (or at least believes she has), has lived a sheltered life in the castle, constantly in fear of shattering herself. Lucien’s charm brings out a part of her willing to trust, and explore, and we first see this in the Proposal moment towards the end of Act 1.

Up until this point, I had been coaching the actor playing Alexandra to Bind her Flow (←) in her movements, and make Pin Shapes (†) when still. It is in this configuration that we find Alexandra, as Lucien goes to one knee. As he proposes, hands clasped, Alexandra remains Bound (←), surprised by what she is hearing, and unsure of how to answer. She Advances (– ↷) as she says “Yes!” and he Rises (↵). His hands reach for her, to embrace her, but her sharp intake of breath and Bound Flow (←) stop him. Her body language tells him that while she may love him, she is not ready for all the physical forms that love may take.



Fig. G.1. “Proposal.” Photo by Julia Rose Photo, February 2020. Diana Garle as Alexandra and Jovon Jacobs as Lucien. Used with permission.

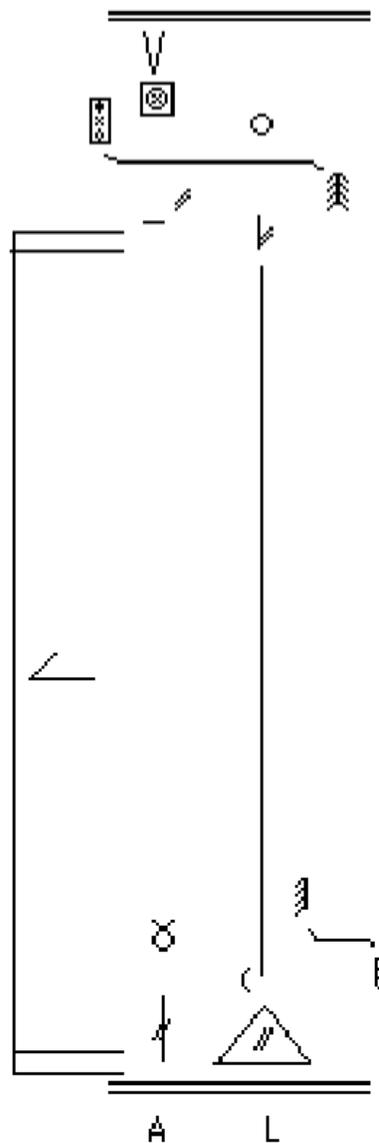


Fig. G.2. "Proposal" Motif.

The King, Galstina, and the Feather Duster

Meanwhile, in another part of the castle, Galstina has chosen to go to the King, an invitation he issued 7 years ago. She appears in his chambers with her ever-present feather duster. Ludwig is stunned by her arrival, and freezes in a Pin Shape (†). They both hold for a moment as the gravity of the changes to their lives, perhaps even the kingdom, settle in. Galstina Advances (—↷) to him. It was important to

the story and the characters that this “first move” went to Galstina. Otherwise, it could be interpreted as coercion or a power play by the King. Instead, her movement offers consent. They meet, Kinespheres Overlapping (ω), and Carve ($\sim\wp$) into an embrace. Galstina Quickly and Directly (\nearrow) removes herself from the entanglement, causing Ludwig to freeze in a Pin Shape (\ddagger) again.

Galstina Hollows Back and Retreats (\leftarrow) to the door, under the guise of dusting it, so she can close it. As her feather duster Lightly (\downarrow) dances across the door, Indirectly and Quickly (\downarrow), and Ludwig Advances (\rightarrow), closing the distance she created between them. He tosses the feather duster to the floor as their Kinespheres entwine (ω) again. As they Carve ($\sim\wp$) into another embrace, Galstina Rises (\downarrow), so they can meet in a Level 6 kiss that lasts for 2 beats. This time, it is Ludwig who causes Galstina to Hold (\circ), as he says something inappropriate to the moment. Galstina Quickly (\leftarrow) picks up her feather duster and tries to recover the moment by Gliding (Light, Direct, Sustained) across Ludwig’s chest and shoulders. They Carve ($\sim\wp$) into each other again, for another level 6 kiss, this one lasting 3 beats, then stay in each other’s arms.

The Waltz Part 1

The first part of the waltz that ends Act 1 of *The Glass Piano* can barely be called a dance. But it is certainly an intimate moment between Lucien and Alexandra. Like their previous moments, actual physical contact is minimal.

This moment picks up where their last one left off— Lucien dealing with Alexandra’s verbal “yes,” but physical “no.” As the music begins, Alexandra, while maintaining her Bound Flow (\leftarrow), bringing her Arms up and out (\uparrow), approximating a ballroom dance frame, becoming more of a Small Wall Shape than a Pin (\boxtimes). Lucien respects her fear of physical contact and reciprocates the dance frame from a distance. They both begin to move in a Curved Pathway (\curvearrowright), dancing together, but apart. As they move, Lucien’s pathway is larger, so he is able to take up space, while Alexandra practically rotates in place. They pause and address each other in Pin-like Shapes (\ddagger). Alexandra Advances (\rightarrow), offering a kiss, but instead Lucien gently wraps her into a full dance frame ($\sim\wp$), so they can waltz together. This entire moment is done with a Theme of Bound Flow (\leftarrow) — Alexandra’s born from fear and habit, and Lucien’s stemming from a desire to show her respect and demonstrate his own ability to care for her.

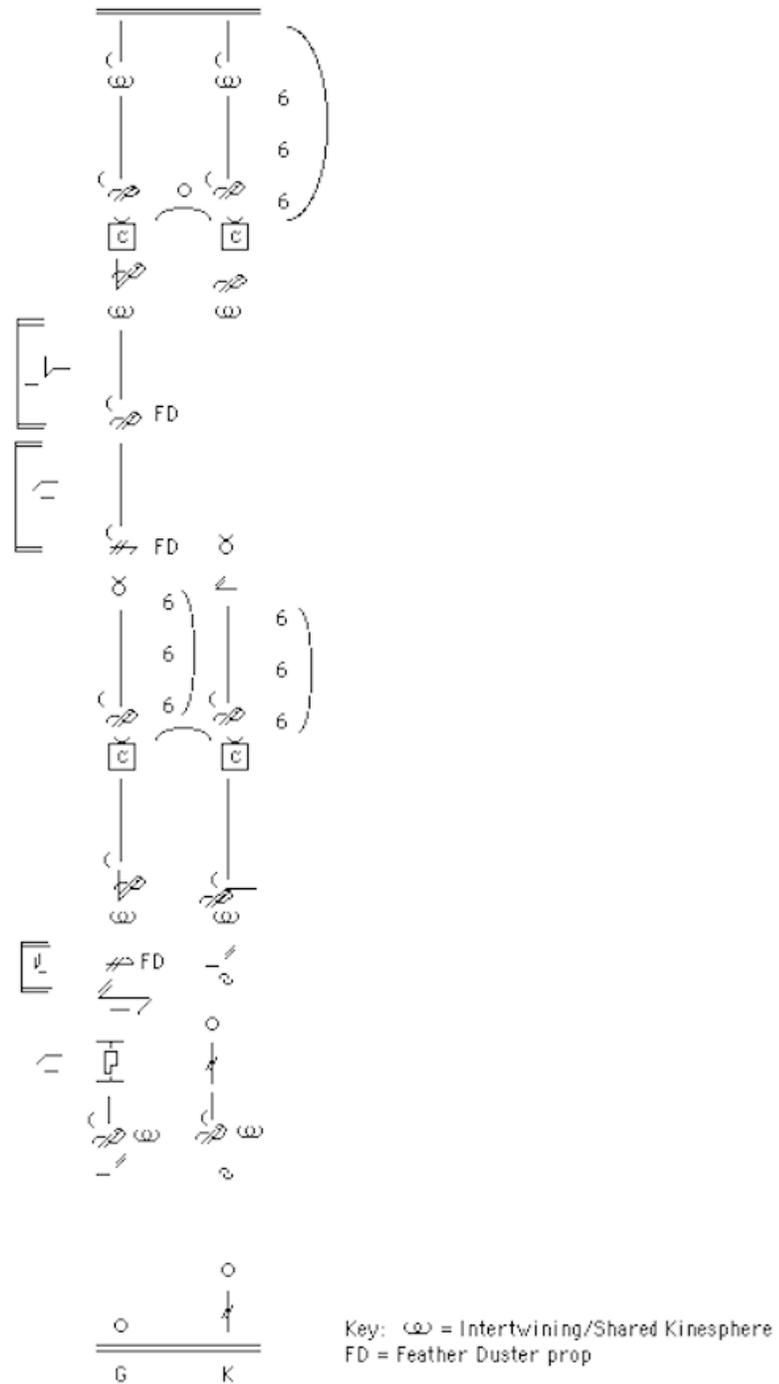


Fig. H.1. “Galstina, the King, and the Feather Duster” Motif.

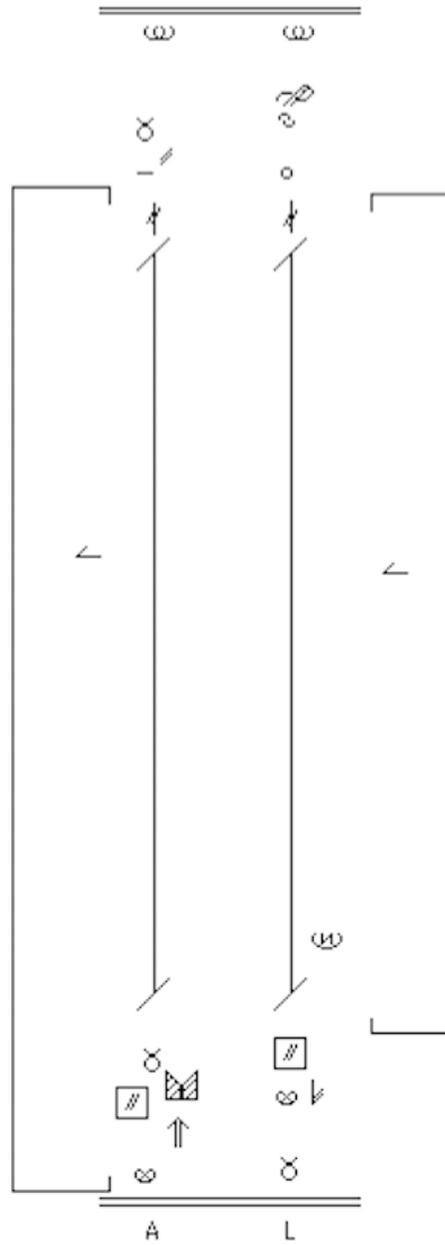


Fig. I.1. "The Waltz Part 1" Motif.

The Waltz Part 2

As the music swells we transition in the Waltz part 2. Galstina and Ludwig join Alexandra and Lucien in the dance of love and joy. Originally, we had Galstina being lifted off the stairs by Ludwig, but due to an actor injury after opening night, that moment was cut.

The motifs of the two couples are very much the same. The intent was to create a court dance that feasibly every character would know, but to adapt it to fit each pairing. As such, Galstina and Ludwig fly about their Curved Pathways (①) with ease, while Alexandra and Lucien waltz more tentatively.

As the couples hit their first mark, there is a pause while they Sink (↵) into bows and curtseys to their respective partners, before beginning the waltz pattern again. As you will see in the motif (fig. J.3), the actual waltz pattern was not what I was interested in communicating to the audience. Instead, the pathways and moments outside of the waltz were more interesting, as I felt that in each of these, we see who the couples really are together.

The couples dance a Curved Pathway (①) to their next mark, and the men Raise their Right arms (↵↗), so the ladies may turn under it. This sets them up for the weight shifting quick steps seen in their repeat in Fig. K.1. The ladies turn back into their partners and Carve around(↻) him with their Right Legs. You will see in Fig. J.1 that Galstina's Left Leg is raised, a choice made for the ease of the actor, again due to injury. This moment between Galstina and Ludwig is captured beautifully in this photo as she Raises her Leg and Head (↵) into him, seeking contact with him, and he is joyful, but yet not entirely attentive to her. It captures the dynamic of the maid and king perfectly.



Fig. J.1. “The Waltz Part 2” Photo by Julia Rose Photo, February 2020. Adjan and Gallant. Used with permission.

The Waltz Part 3

The dance continues, but I have marked it as part 3, as it is here that the differences of the couples become more distinguished. Ludwig and Galstina move with abandon, incorporating 2 more turns and 2 dips, written in the motif as Sinking (↯). Alexandra and Lucien still move cautiously, with single steps and pauses, before they finally Enclose (↷) each other into the Spiral Shape (⊙) seen in Fig. K.2. Both couples end the dance with a Level 8 Kiss that lasts 4 beats as the lights come down.



Fig. K.1 “The Waltz Part 3.” L to R: Adjan and Gallant, Garle and Jacobs. Photo by Julia Rose Photo, February 2020. Used with permission.



Fig. K.2. “The Waltz Part 3.” L to R: Gallant and Adjan, Garle and Jacobs. Photo by Julia Rose Photo, February 2020. Used with permission.

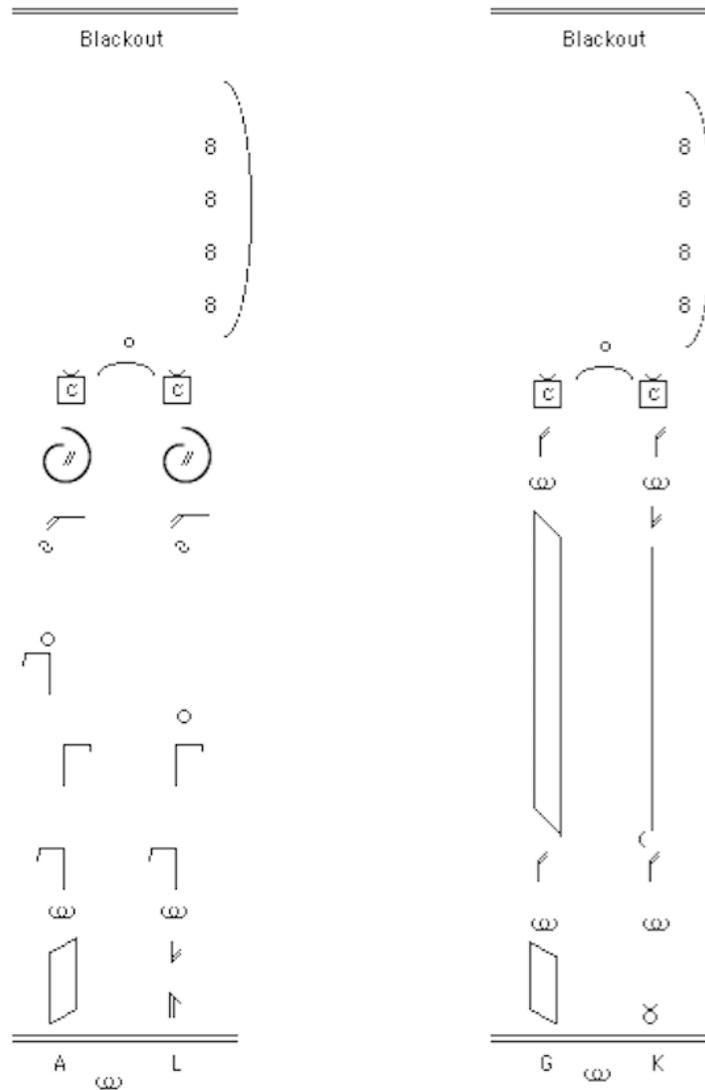


Fig. K.3. "The Waltz Part 3" Motif.

Aspects of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System that Appeared in Motif Notation Scores in Intimacy Choreography

The aim of integrating the L/BMS into my own choreographic and coaching is to use desexualized and specific language to coach movement, to give the actors tools for not only this production, but future work. It is my hope that by working in this

way with me, that actors develop skills to use in productions that may not have an Intimacy Director/Choreographer, but still has intimate scenes. Actors should be able to use the tools and technique of their craft in any production they are cast in.

In combining L/BMS and Intimacy Choreography, the focus becomes the *technique* actors use to tell the story, rather than the physical action itself. Actors are able to focus on agreed upon actions that tell the story, not having to split their focus between acting and wondering if it “looks OK” to the audience or “feels OK” to their partner.

Choreographed, rehearsed, and documented movement work frees the actor to act the character. It is this freedom that allows actors to be fully present in their acting, making their character and story believable.

By having the technique of L/BMS in my own creating and coaching, as well as documentation, I brought a sense of formality to a process that often had been treated casually, if at all. The words I used were neutral, however, when placed in context and embodied by the characters, they conveyed intimate emotions extremely well.

In working on these productions, I noticed the following connections between Intimacy Choreography and the L/BMS that appeared often in my motifs and meaning-making:

- Pathway

The navigation (or lack thereof) of distance has its own story. Whether distance is increased or decreased between two characters, and if that is done in a straight (|) or in a roundabout (∩) way tells us something. An example of this is in the “Champagne” motif above. I am also interested in discovering how we might notate for opening and closing the distance between people, not just the body.

Additionally, touch has a pathway. A Straight Pathway (|) between two points is different from a Carving touch (∞), or a tracing touch that Floats over many points (-∪). Going forward, I am interested in using degrees of Weight (†) to discuss and notate the intensity of touch exchanged between scene partners.

- Modes of Shape Change

Nearly every motif in my intimacy choreography contains at least 1 Mode of Shape Change, particularly Directional (⇨) or Carving (∞), which is not at all surprising, as this element is about bridging to self or someone/thing in the environment. How people come to interact, through their Modes of Shape Change, adds to the story. Shape Flow as a Mode (≠) adds sensuality. Directional Arcing and Spoking (⇨) are about connection. Carving (∞) is co-creative and can be consensual or manipulative. Having this specificity in connection between actors, especially when coupled with a specificity in Weight of touch, brings clarity to execution and layers a level of meaning-making to the interaction. Examples of these can be found in every motif above, except the waltzes. Since the other motifs were specifically

about moments of intimacy, these modes of connecting to someone, add not just to the movement, but to the story of the characters' changing relationships.

- Shape Flow Support for Connection or Separation (—//)

I did anticipate that this would be an effective way of describing and coaching intimate movement, and it was. Having this language provides specificity to my movement coaching, particularly as it involved internal shape in search of connection, or away from connection. Examples are included in the above analyses of "The Dispatch Scene," "Sunrise," and "Galstina, the King, and the Feather Duster." These subtle changes may not always be consciously seen by an audience, but I believe they can be kinesthetically sensed and understood.

- Shape Qualities

Shape Qualities also appear in nearly every motif. Since this category is about "forming towards," again, it makes sense as a way of discussing seeking, finding, or withdrawing from connection between characters. While some Qualities, such as Advancing (—↗) were more difficult to coach, the Qualities of Rising (↘) and Enclosing (↻) seemed to come naturally in this work. By being able to give them a name and symbol, I was able to give the actors a way to codify the movement in their bodies and minds, which assisted with the execution and repetition of the movement. Examples of this are found in "Champagne," "When the Sun Goes Down," "The Proposal" and the Waltzes.

- Breath

The awareness of breath and sounding the L/BMS has given me is incredibly useful in my creation of intimacy choreography. This is a powerful element of Intimacy Choreography I rarely used before my training with IMS. During, and afterward, I have been much more conscious of use of breath and frequently choreograph it. In fact, I just directed an actor in a monologue piece, and as I coached her breath she exclaimed, "You are an intimacy director aren't you?!"

In *In the Heights*, I coached frequently for a visible breath, with an audible exhale. This was seen in "Champagne" and "When the Sun Goes Down." In the creation of movement for Alexandra in *The Glass Piano*, her breath immediately gives insight to how she is feeling—Sudden (↘), hissing inhales if she feels unsafe, Free Flowing (—↘) sighs when she is able to trust herself or her environment. Flow and Time are Efforts I see translating well to Breath notation.

During the editing of this paper, Charlotte Wile's symbols for inhale and exhale were introduced to be. While the original motifs did not include these, the edited ones composed on Labanwriter now do. I will certainly be incorporating these more in the future.

- Pause

Pauses are often underrated in theatre. But, just like "Silence speaks volumes," when implemented and timed well, stillness can do the same thing. I made use of stillnesses and holds much more in *The Glass Piano* than in *In the Heights*. A

question that I am holding about this difference is whether the musical nature of *In the Heights* kept the actors moving more than I perhaps would have chosen for a straight play.

Additionally in *In the Heights*, the pauses were classified as active Stillness (⊗). In “Blackout,” this is important for creating the “island of peace” that Nina and Benny inhabit. In “When the Sun Goes Down,” the active Stillness is used to create tension as the 2 plan how their relationship will move forward.

In *The Glass Piano*, the stillnesses are not active, but are holds (○), and occur mainly between Lucien and Alexandra. Since Alexandra lives in fear, she often moves hesitantly, testing each body part and placement cautiously. Part of her attraction to Lucien then is that he provides space and time for this. For Galstina and the King, their pauses are often one or the other as they take the time for proper protocols (bows and curtsies) and to test the new roles of lovers, rather than employer/employee.

- Notation

The L/BMS gave me clear instructions and a bank of images for my movement coaching, as well as a way to record the movement. I can easily see the worth of combining the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System with Intimacy Choreography for clarity of coaching, evocative descriptions of actions, and a way to preserve and maintain the movement for the run of a show.

As mentioned in the documentation section of this paper, the use of motif for recording and for show maintenance makes it a valuable tool not only to the choreographer, but to the Stage Management team and actors as well (Fig. L.1). Again, this frees the actor to focus on their job of acting, as the Intimacy Choreographer/Director is responsible for creating and coaching the movement, and the Stage Manager has a record of those movements agreed upon as both safe and supporting the story, to which the actors must be accountable.

During the editing of this paper for publication, I was introduced to many parts of motif that were new to me, as well as using LabanWriter. This continued study allowed for gains of both precision and clarity, as evidenced by Figure L.1 below. I look forward to applying this new knowledge in future work. Future work for me includes developing my use of Relationship Bows and Pins for Rotation (both introduced to me in the editing of this paper), as well as incorporating Floor Plans for clarity.

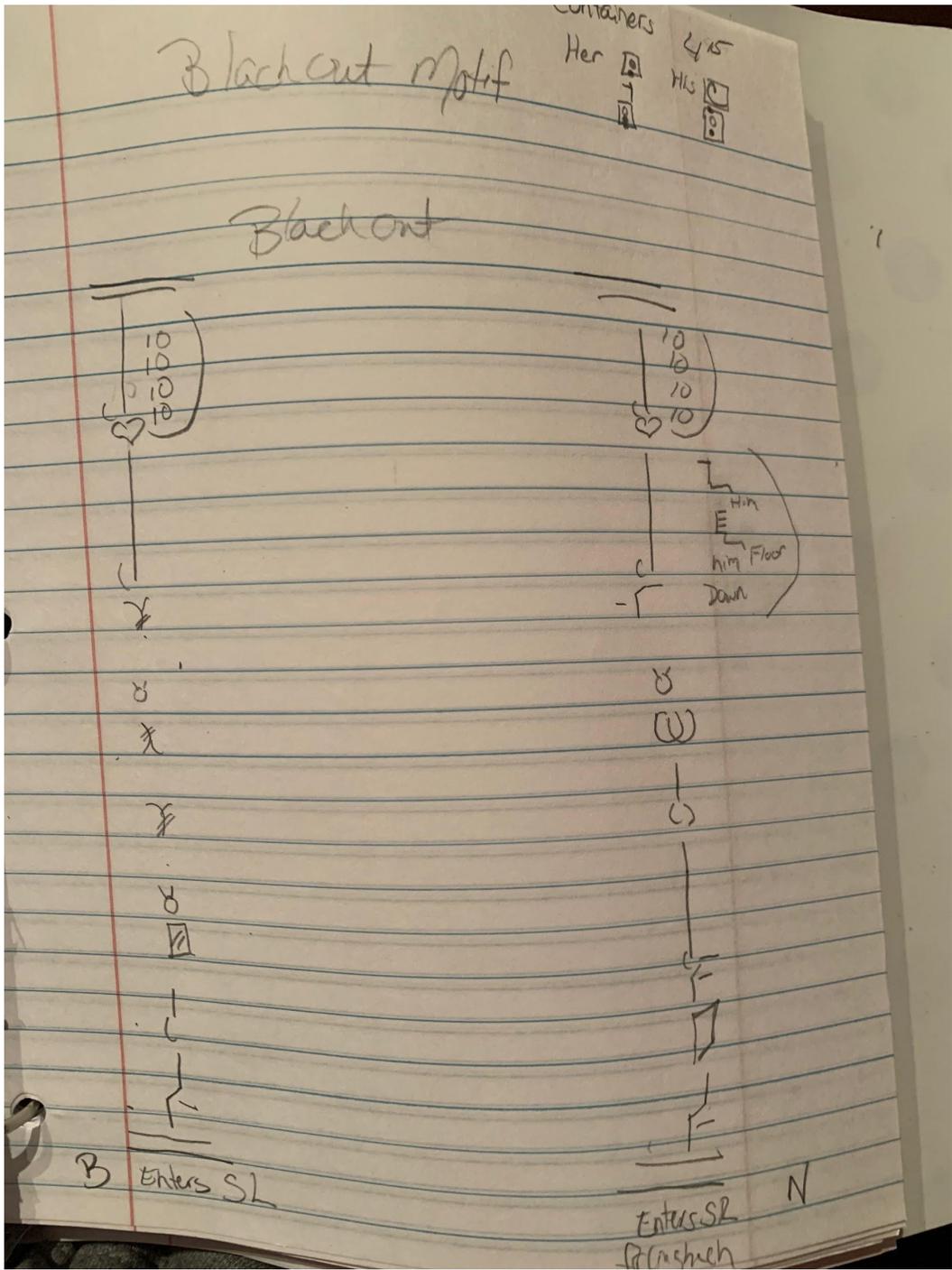


Fig. L.3. Original Motif Score for "Blackout."

Conclusion

As I analyzed each motif, I became aware of the above bullet points as choreographic signature of my intimacy work. The Shape Category is clearly where I choose to create, using the outer form of the actors to tell the story of the characters to the audience. I also find this category to be rich in meaning-making potential, for both the actors and the audience, making it worth exploration in creation, coaching, and notation. I use the other categories of BESS mainly as ways to express how we get to a Shape moment, or the quality of interaction in the Shape moment.

The frequent use of the L/BMS language and concepts, in coaching and documenting, allows me to offer the actors words and practices they can apply to future moments, developing their own acting technique. I am able to offer Directors and Stage Managers ways of recalling and referring to the movement when I am not in the room. In all of this, I am able to hone my own observation and movement creation skills to focus on meaning-making. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak in March 2020, I provided an online crash-course of Fight and Intimacy Directors on my use of motif, as a way to record my creative material, develop alternate methods of coaching actors, and communicate with Stage Managers. I offered it again as a workshop at the Women's Theatre (virtual) Festival in July 2020. It is my hope that this method grows in professional use, expanding the technique of Intimacy Choreography and the relevance of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System.

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