

In An Other's Moves:

Empathy and embodiment in the creation of a
syncretic ensemble

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DECLARATION

I declare that this research report and creative project is my own unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts in Dramatic Art to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination to any other university.

Sarah Schwartz

This _____ of _____ 2010, _____

REGARDING CONSENT OF THE COLLABORATORS

All material including collaborators' writing, accounts of rehearsal, likenesses of the collaborators, and recording of the performance are used with the collaborators' express written permission as approved by the University of Witwatersrand Ethics Committee. All statements are in the researcher's private files as recommended by the Committee.

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ABSTRACT

This research project, both the performance *Flight* and the present written engagement with the work, interrogates how the processes of empathy and embodiment contribute to the creation of a syncretic ensemble which speaks simultaneously to the performers' individualities and to the communal voice made of those individuals. As Jean-Francois Lyotard observed forty years ago, the age of the Grand Narrative is over; the world has become pluralistic and fractured. Yet the intercultural trend in drama of the 1960s through the 1980s aimed at creating a communion through a universalized ensemble. These ensembles "built" themselves through stripping away cultural markings and individuality paralleling the rise of corporate globalization. This creative research project seeks to shift the method of building ensemble from stripping to genuine construction, thus working from each performer's individuality to build a harmonious collective voice rather than a uniform one. By using the practice as research paradigm to investigate the process of building ensemble, I, as practitioner-researcher, was able to engage deeply with theory to inform the collaborative production called *Flight* as well as to commune with the creative gifts of six performers who created the piece with my guidance. We worked from Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein's construction of empathy, Richard Schechner's concept of performance, as well as from Paul Ricoeur and others' understanding of narrative as an expression of identity to develop *Flight*. Using these ideas as our foundation, each collaborator worked to understand the others' stories well enough to enhance the representation of the experience with their own interpretation while preserving the integrity of the original. The findings of this research come from the work of creating *Flight* and from the reflections of myself and the six collaborators. This research traces the development of a unique choreography that functions as a translation of emotion, memory, concept or experience into physical movement. The paper illustrates the ways in which our process of alternating reflection and creation allowed a layering of different interpretations while remaining a cohesive narrative. By fusing our voices through performing each other's experiences, we found a way to build an ensemble voice that maintained the unique presence of each performer. Regarding the trend of "verbatim theatre" or

naturalistic representation, this study finds that a more abstracted approach, such as our “associative choreography,” allows a deeper personal engagement from performers. This translates into profound investment in the narrative and collaboration which in turn creates a layering of different personal interpretations in the performance. Additionally, in analyzing the theatrical performance *Flight*, this paper finds that by blending and linking different interpretations of the same story together, associative choreography creates a polysemic narrative that evades a singular meaning. In this way syncretism is not only a more realistic representation of the postmodern cultural reality but serves to destabilize the normative narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Taking Off: The enquiry and its scope

Though styles have come and gone, though cinema increases in popularity dwarfing the box office intake of theatrical production, the theatre retains a place in the current cultural landscape. A particular yet ineffable quality of the live theatrical experience maintains its grasp on the human heartbeat. The revered director Peter Brook (1990:47) explains this experience as a communication of the “invisible” to the audience. Yet even as he attempts to illuminate the experience, he maintains that there is a “mystery” to theatre which no one can explain (Brook 1990:73). Another famed auteur Ariane Mnouchkine declares outright that “doing theatre is an adventure because one doesn’t know what it is” (Williams 1999:118). She even calls this unknowable work an “act of faith” (Williams 1999:120). Some scholars would agree with this last remark to some extent. Many anthropologists cite theatre’s relationship to social rituals of the past as well as current traditions in non-western cultures (Turner 1985). Undoubtedly, both a certain element of theatre and theatre’s role in society remain “nebulous” (Brook 1990:110), which is precisely why it continues to capture people.

The unique communion of the theatrical experience gives rise to the question of how such an experience comes to be. Not only is it rooted in the relationship between audience and performer, it begins in the relationships among the company of actors. Brook routinely places emphasis on the actor-spectator relationship in analyzing his own work, but he acknowledges the “luck” or “what one loosely calls chemistry” (Brook 1990:21) among actors that contributes to the energy of a live performance. While some theatrical pieces require less togetherness, ensemble performance has increased in popularity in the last generation. But the ensemble’s “magic,” which lays the foundation for the ineffable connection among all parties in a theatre, remains reduced to unison and synchronization.

This project, both the performance *Flight* and the present written engagement with the work, interrogates how the processes of empathy and embodiment contribute to the creation of a syncretic ensemble which speaks simultaneously to the performers’ individualities and to the communal voice

made of those individuals. It asks how the function of empathy created through embodiment can build a syncretic ensemble presence and performance. This enquiry also investigates who owns a narrative, how a performer represents his identity on stage, how an actor can perform another's personal narrative, how different performers' aesthetics can fuse into a new communal aesthetic, and how the new aesthetic makes shifts in the accepted understanding of narrative.

The intention of this research has been to create a unified theatre ensemble that shares experience but maintains a polyphony of the voices which contribute to the whole. The work engages with the performance medium as a unique way of understanding the other. Thus the very process of creating and workshopping an original performance serves as a positive attempt to build a uniquely bound ensemble. Drawing from the practice itself, this work explores ensemble performance and its creation. The work endeavors to find a single syncretic voice in an ensemble of theatre artists that speaks both to its diverse individuals whilst maintaining its cohesiveness as a voice of the collective.

Misconceptions of Collectivity: Why create *Flight*?

While the era of modernity prioritized an enlightened linearity, an ideal propagated by theatre practitioners and historians who still cling to drama's historical ties to ancient rituals and the resulting community unification (Turner 1985), as early as the 1970s, scholars observed the breakdown of old methods of comprehending the world and producing knowledge. In his famous report *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) declared the death of the Grand Narrative. The constructed singular mode of explanation, whether of scientific knowledge, history or the human condition, had "lost its credibility" (Lyotard 1979:37). Grand unification has been replaced by a series of bonds and ties. The structure of the world has become pluralistic, a fractured web of individual interactions and communications.

Though the present ruling capitalist creed bends postmodernity into an ideology which privileges the individual, many continue to search for community through interactive media, rock concerts, nation states (Anderson 1983) or team sport. This very contradiction spurs the need to find a way to rearticulate individuality within the context of a collective. In the face of the myth of owning an individual story outside and separate from others' stories or a collective story, one must seek to

speak oneself as part of a larger voice. This research interrogates the position of the individual in the group and the group in relation to the individual within a theatrical context.

Interest in the theatre collective and the intangible community feeling of ritual performance has grown alongside corporate globalization from the 1960s onwards, and in tandem to the corporate world, has drawn an onslaught of criticism for supposedly effacing culture. Intercultural practitioners such as Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski sought to unify actors by finding the universal quality that either threaded through (Barba 1996; Watson 1996) or existed underneath (Grotowski 1968) culture. Grotowski trained his actors using a process meant to strip away social conditioning to reach a true, "Universal Self" (Schechner & Wolford 1997:27). According to his logic, only from this united point can performers work as a company. Not only does this create a monotone group, this method, and others that seek to fuse cultures by eliding their differences, erase culture as well as individual experience and create a group which speaks together from a place of neutrality. This is counter-productive in a world where elements of tradition or culture are themselves being erased and written over by globalization. One must seek to understand others as they understand themselves, rather than erase the experiences which mark their memories, their bodies and their individual subjectivities.

This work makes a shift in the ensemble creative process' intent and thereby seeks to fill this gap in theatrical understanding. Additionally, the work contributes to and deepens the scholarship around producing original and devised work, particularly performances that are non-linear and non-plot-based. Rather than listing different trust exercises or providing instructions to create an impression of ensemble, this process focuses on how one builds the voice of an ensemble: its aesthetic, its presence and the content it chooses to express. By working with performers to create a piece that comes directly from their own experiences, and by sharing those experiences with collaborators through embodiment and re-enactment, the project looks at how this shared understanding creates empathy among the performers and how this in turn allows for a voice that is simultaneously particular to each individual and encompasses the ensemble as a whole. The process of creating a syncretic voice then shifts the focus of ensemble building from a process intended to

start everyone from the same neutral level to a process which actually *builds* a whole from wherever people are through understanding and investment.

The Language of Correspondence: A note on creative exegesis

The project sketched in this paper follows a creative research paradigm, also known as practice as research. The main precept of this methodology is that the research be embedded in the creative practice. The need for an exegesis or accompanying written component then stands in direct contradiction to this principle. With studio- or rehearsal-based work, the research is “initiated in practice” in that the enquiry, challenges and struggles the researcher investigates are “formed by the needs of practice and practitioners”; moreover, the investigation is carried out through the practice itself (Carole Gray in Haseman 2007:147). The research is not an experiment or procedure of trial and error. Rather, one “practices to a resolution” (Haseman 2007:147) rather than testing or analyzing to a solution. If the form of practice is primary, the written requirement becomes redundant: surely the essential exploration is contained in the artistic process and product.

The exegesis must not serve as an explanation or a double articulation but rather exist in a “dialogic relationship” (Barrett 2007a:3) with the studio or rehearsal work. As creative research is a relatively new form, the methodologies attached are “*necessarily* emergent” and thus open to adjustment and development (Barrett 2007a:6, emphasis original). Positioning the exegesis in relation to the practice is an element of the methodology which much discussion and opinion continues to alter. What scholars acknowledge about the written document in creative research is that its primary aim is to engage with the relationship between practice and theory. The ideal exegesis outlines this key component and how the research has understood and expanded both disciplines (Haseman 2007:154). Additionally, practice as research anticipates that the enhancement of the field of knowledge comes from a Heideggerian ideal of theorizing out of practice or based on practice, rather than testing theory through practice (Bolt 2007:33). Thus the exegesis must engage with this step as a way to offer discoveries to a wider domain.

The written component is clearly not an explanation but rather exists in correspondence with the work, tying it to a more extensive body of knowledge. Furthermore, the written component is

equally creative and thus both elements of practice as research “resist complete explanation” (Goddard 2007:119). Practitioners and scholars alike must shift the understanding of exegesis from an “explanation” or “interpretation” to a sense that it acts as a guide, leading one through the work but never replacing it (Haseman 2007:156). Therefore, the document is not an explanation meant to validate the creative process to academics, as some have understood it (Barrett 2007c:160). The report must unpack the practice in relation to theory for further application.

I therefore position this paper as a guide to the creation and performance of *Flight*. First, I will explain the underpinnings that led to the particular design of the practice. Following that, I will place my work with the ensemble in relation to those who inspired us but whose work has left a gap in theatrical scholarship which we hope to patch. I will then briefly visit the roles of those involved in the process before dialoguing with the rehearsal and creation period to identify and analyze successful approaches to building a syncretic ensemble. And finally I will examine the resulting production for larger implications and their relationship to the theory with which the entire company engaged throughout the practice.

LEAVING THE NEST: FRAMING THE PRACTICE

Wing joints: Theoretical underpinnings of *Flight*

Evolution of Empathy

Ensemble work by nature is intertwined with the interactions and encounters between and among individuals in the attempt to build the whole referenced earlier. This particular project is no exception in that matter: it focuses on the very inner-workings that contribute to the development of a unified group of finite individuals. However, in building a syncretic ensemble, the center of the method shifts. Instead of bringing everyone to the same level, one must bring each performer or “I” into the ensemble or “we.” Therefore *Flight*, the resulting production of this research, invokes philosophy related to the function of empathy and draws upon the discourses around identity, narrative and performance.

A return to the initial moment of interaction is key to interpreting the relationships which develop between and among people. G.W.F. Hegel (1977), among others, articulates that the most fundamental relationship of self and other is one of recognition. Each subject needs the recognition of an other to exist as subject: in fact the subject “exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel 1977:111). Since each (self and other) is a “middle term” for the other, a *mutual* recognition is necessary for the recognition of self. In this sense, one is not merely defined in relation to the other but recognition is in fact constitutive of consciousness. While this research acknowledges the potential for domination which Hegel articulates, Hegel’s formulation demonstrates the necessity of an other to construct the self; even discrete subjects are bound up with each other in the need to develop their own agency and subjecthood, that is to say their discrete being.

It is important to note here that while knowing oneself in relation to the other is key to the construction of self, the notion of subjectivity must also be acknowledged as another layer of this discussion, not only as one’s position or point of view but as a complex working of feelings, thoughts, and reflections (Ortner 2005:33). Moreover, this self is always “specifically cultural and historical” (Ortner 2005:33). Likewise it follows that the self thus constitutes itself not only in relation to one other in particular but to a multitude of others and to the totality of the group. In this way, it is clear that one’s “modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, [and] fear” (Ortner 2005:31) are tied not only to an other that defines the boundaries of oneself but to a larger community of subjects that relate to and affect one’s development.

Rather than deciphering such a tie simply as a similarity, relation, or cultural habit, one must also look to the function of empathy as the way in which the world and subjectivity within the world are constituted. As humans, our primary understanding of the world is our own experience, meaning that “what things are” are “things of experience” (Husserl 1931:148). Thus in recognizing the other as subject, I acknowledge the other as an experiencing subject like myself. I empathically understand that the other experiences the same object as myself *but from a different perspective*. The acceptance that the other’s point of view exists, intersubjectively constitutes an objective reality or “the world about us that is there for us all” (Husserl 1931:105) because it fills in the gaps of one’s own view.

This creates a “we” that is ‘communal subjectivity’ (Husserl 1960:70), more specifically a collective subjectivity that agrees on the differing individual perspectives to construct a whole picture.

While the common understanding has muddled the nuance of the process, reinvestigating the work of Husserl and Edith Stein clarifies the specific steps of interpersonal understanding built into the process of empathically building a “we.” The popular idea of empathy has become simplified and confused, perhaps because its definition, according to the Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, as “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another” can be appropriated to several accounts. Though a number of other thinkers offer insight into and create debates around empathy, the method of developing the ensemble performance *Flight* is inspired by Stein’s explanation. While Theodor Lipps argues that complete empathy results in a loss of individuation (Sawicki 1997:124) and a “oneness” with the other “I” (Hutt 2009:140), Edith Stein, the famous student of Husserl, maintains that others’ experiences are never primordially given. We understand the other from behavior (Husserl 1931:51), expressions and gestures because we intuitively know “what is hidden behind them” (Stein 1967:6). Additionally, empathic understanding is enriched and facilitated by linguistic explication (Stein 1967:10). Neurological research supports Stein. Studies evidence that we have brain processes meant to recognize emotion in others (Damasio 1999:52) and to understand intention in actions (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006:110). For Stein then, empathy is like memory: it is primordial emotion about non-primordial content (Stein 1931:10).

Empathy is not, however, merely the understanding of another’s emotion or a feeling with; rather it is a sharing of emotion. It is a mutual awareness. As Stein (1931:17) explains, if another empathically understands that I feel joy, then the other begins to feel joy himself. But his joy is not exactly the same as my own. In grasping the slight difference in our contiguous joy, each of us becomes aware of the “sides” not present in our own joy. Through this comprehension, each of our feelings is enriched by the other and hence we feel a new unified joy. One’s own emotion is enhanced by the other’s slightly different kind of the same emotion and in each subject’s respective understanding, a new third feeling is formed whose subject is “we” not “I.” But in this we, “‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘he’ are retained” (Stein 1931:17) yet unified by the shared emotion. As different perspectives fill in the objective world, our feelings fill in each other and thus there is a new feeling

experienced by a “we” which contains each individual “I.” Through the operation of empathy, it becomes possible to unify whilst maintaining individual experience. This function also serves as a model to build not only understanding but a cohesive group from each unique experience rather than tearing experience away in order to integrate.

The Body as Primary Experiencer

Because the body is primary experiencer—the locus and medium of emotion— it is perhaps indissociable from the empathetic process. Additionally, its discrete form contributes to the markings of individuation within the collective. The boundary of skin defines a body and thus an organism (Damasio 1999:137). However, the human organism does not consist, as Descartes argued, as two entities but rather the mind exists in the whole body (Thompson 2001:3). Through constant neurological receptivity to the body’s awareness, we structure and come to understand not only the environment around us but our own here (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006:62, Rizzolatti in Thompson 2001:3). Many performance artists have understood that “everything is filtered through the body” (Marshall 2007:160) and thus made it the “core” of their work (Marshall 2001:183).

Scientists also attest to the importance of the body as experiencer. The recent discovery of mirror neurons substantiates artists’ emphasis on the body and reveals the existence of an empathic process on a neurological level. Simply put, “the sight of acts performed by others produces an immediate activation of the motor areas deputed to the organization and execution of those acts” in the observer (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006:125). The system of mirror neurons activated upon seeing an action is also key to human understanding of gestural and communicative acts (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006:154-155). Moreover, Antonio Damasio (1999:279) asserts that “we only feel an emotion when we sense that emotion is sensed as happening in our organism.” His finding that emotion is in fact felt as “changes in the body” (Damasio 1999:280), which is echoed in Lorna Marshall’s (2001:57) claim, “Emotion is experienced in the body.” Thus the body both feels and comprehends a situation. Additionally, it serves as communicator through physical expression. Therefore in engaging with the process of empathy and building understanding, one must work from cognition and explanation but one must also place equal emphasis on the unconscious and intuitive contributions of the body.

Identity and the Body in Performance

Much recent theory articulates in different ways that identity, the construction of the self, is a constant process perpetually enacted by the subject in the body. Homi Bhabha (1994) conceives of identity as “liminal” as it is constituted in each subsequent iteration of “I,” whereas Judith Butler (2002) locates the process of performing oneself in the body. She elaborates that identity is not something “waiting to be expressed” (Butler 2002:131) but must be enacted and perpetually performed in and by the body. It is only in “doing” one’s body that one differentiates oneself (Butler 2002:122). Likewise, culture, which is a “lived thing,” inhabits and is performed by the body (Soyinka 1988:183). Again, this has not gone unobserved by performance artists who articulate this symbiotic cultural process of performance and socialization as learning to “put on the proper body ‘costume’ for our culture, family, gender and class” (Marshall 2001:10). Understanding each individual in this way allows the research process to utilize these very performative elements as well as the body’s expressiveness as tools to create empathy by re-enacting and embodying them.

Richard Schechner (1985) theorizes the actor’s creative process in a way similar to the reproduction of performative acts which create identity. Schechner calls these performative acts “strips” of behavior. Restored behavior, in life and in theatrical performance, is the process by which “strips of behavior [are] ... rearranged or reconstructed ... independent of the causal systems ... that brought them into existence” (Schechner 1985:35). These are learned phrases of behavior that are *reincorporated* in new performances. In performance, the self is rendered “not me” (the behavior originates externally) and again “not not me” (the self is in fact performing this strip). It is somewhere in between that theatrical performance lives. But the performance “carries in itself kernels of originality” (Schechner 1985:51) as it can be “transmitted, manipulated, transformed” (Schechner 1985:36) in new situations or on new bodies. This process of embodying another’s behavior by pulling together different “strips” from sources known and unknown is the core of performance (Schechner 1985:100; Marshall 2001:163). Indeed, many non-western traditions work somatically in this way (Marshall 2001:64). Performers can therefore use a similar process of physical recreation and embodiment of the other’s strips of behavior in working toward empathy with other members of the ensemble.

While Schechner's explanation applies to voice, gesture and physicality as well as rituals, in the context of this work, embodying another not only encapsulates the external performative acts but also their (hi)stories which access an individual's understanding of herself. One can access the reality of another through the body and through story. Narrative, as Paul Ricoeur argues, synthesizes diverse elements, whether different incidents, means, characters or circumstances (Ricoeur 1984:65) and in doing so creates an "intelligible whole" (Ricoeur 1991a:21). Narrative also functions as the way one unifies one's life; through story, one gives meaning to and understands oneself as a whole. "We equate life with the story or stories that we can tell about it," Ricoeur writes (1991b:195). Moreover, the reflective act of interpretation and synthesis means that stories are the way we understand ourselves. This sentiment is echoed in scientific understandings of memory and identity, which assert that the notion of self is linked to "a nontransient collection of unique facts and ways of being" and "systematized memories" (Damasio 1999:17). Not only does the self "hinge on ... selected sets of autobiographical memories" (Damasio 1999:196), but the very expression of the story comprises identity. The expression of the story, or "how individual experience is framed and articulated" (Bruner 1986a:6), is more than the narrative which synthesizes; it also includes reflections on the actions and feelings of the story and thus infuses self-referential meaning into the narrative (Bruner 1986a:5). Because "stories make meaning" (Bruner 1986b:140), narrative has become essential to this process of embodying and empathizing. Our stories are expressions of experience and how we each comprehend our own identity and therefore provide the basis on which to empathize and the material to embody. In addition to building understanding through physical identification and explanation, narrative offers another point of entry into the other. Building these understandings establishes the empathizing experience and thus may unify an ensemble whilst retaining individual identity.

While *Flight* does not presume to create an ensemble through manipulation of emotions to the effect that all performers feel the same thing, the processes of creating the syncretic ensemble and its performance are inspired but the structure of a "we" which retains "I," "you" and "he" as in the operation of empathy. Empathy is based on the recognition of self and other as experiencing subjects. From each other's subjective positions, a shared reality is created. Or in the course of emotional

empathy, an experience is augmented and enhanced by grasping that others feel alternative nuances. Therefore, by engaging with various processes that relate to personal identity, such as “doings” of the body and physical expression, personal narrative and memory, an ensemble can forge a level of understanding that allows each performer to both infuse the others’ experience with their own and allows others to permeate their own experience. From this mutual awareness can be built a collective narrative—that of the ensemble—which weaves together diverse experiences without erasing the nuance and individuality of each voice.

Slipstream: A review of ensemble and empathy in drama

Despite the unique opportunities presented by the meeting of Stein, Schechner and Ricoeur's ideas, if one traces the lineage of this paper's enquiry, one finds that neither empathy nor syncretism have fully permeated the concept of ensemble. Empathy has become a muddled and misapplied term, whereas ensemble has, even in its attempts at engaging with otherness, unified under a singular code. Moreover, practitioners have engaged with each notion primarily as it relates to either the actor-spectator or actor-character relationship. This leaves a clear opening in which *Flight* makes a shift in the intent of ensemble work to engage with the possibilities of the functions of empathy and embodied understanding to create a syncretic group unified in a "we" that is built not imposed.

Empathy entered theatrical discourse early in written scholarship as a stand-in for the inexplicable magic of theatre and the value of the experience (Cunkle 1963:15). This of course relates to the audience-performer relationship and the magic of evoking an emotional response to fictional material. More recently, however its use has become vague and its meaning deteriorated (Cunkle 1963:17). Nonetheless, researchers and practitioners continue to engage with the empathic yet ineffable relationship between spectator and performer. The discovery and investigation of kinesthetic response (Smyth 1984), which engages with the stimulation of the nerves of spectators at the sight of physical performance, predates mirror neurons (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006) but both are acknowledged as "common knowledge" (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006:ix) among theatre artists, even those as famed as Peter Brook.

Not only has empathy been used to describe the essential relationship between actor and

spectator but acting instructors have used empathy to theorize the practice of entering and creating a character. As Lorna Marshall points out, empathy is one of an actor's "main tools for character" (Marshall 2001:183), which stems from the method of the father of realist acting, Constantin Stanislavski (1988). In his approach to performance, actors use past emotions, or their emotional memories, to bring truth to a moment in a character's life. In addition to using their own memories, however, if an actor only witnessed an appropriate event, he can transpose himself into the principal's place. In empathizing, the principal's reaction once only imagined becomes the actor's own (Stanislavski 1988:178). In Stein's (1931:31) terms however, these feelings are similar to those of an adolescent thinking he feels Romeo's passion: they are "acquired by reading." Though one believes oneself to have the feelings, they are "borrowed" (Stein 1931:31). This solitary experience creates a "false relationship" between the subject and the feelings; the performer *attributes* the imagined feelings to herself rather than *having* a strong feeling (Stein 1931:31). Such is the case with many concepts—rather than being innately empathic processes, they are in fact processes of imagination and extraction as they engage between actor and character rather than an ethical other.

Drama therapy has also developed empathy as identification with or connection to a character, using embodiment and narrative to build those connections. Though acknowledging empathy's potential for "emotional resonance, identification and high emotional involvement within any work" (Jones 1996:106), the scholarship around its function in drama therapy continues to be restricted to a spectator empathizing with a character enacted. However, practitioners of drama therapy assert that work with the body is crucial to understanding ourselves in relation to society and to the other. In this way, embodiment helps communication and allows clients to take on a "different bodily identity" for greater understanding (Jones 1996:115). Narrative therapy, which also uses stories and dramatic tools, involves an intricate process in which the therapist leads the client back into stories from the client's life. The therapists help the client re-author their stories to shape a better future (Freedman & Combs 1996). However, this work engages with inward-looking work rather than building relationships with other performers creating a public performance. *Flight* does not seek to "correct" the internal world of its performers, but works in a traditional theatrical setting to bring a new communication to the audience through empathy and embodiment amongst the ensemble.

Contemporary drama invokes particular methods of embodiment, primarily through language and realistic characterization, in documentary and biographical forms which lead to a unique understanding of material. The work of Anna Deavere Smith is a particularly poignant example as her "hypernaturalistic mimesis" (Martin 1993:45) allows her to literally get inside of her character. In her long-term search for American character through interview-based one woman documentary performance, Smith embodies each of the people she interviews in verbatim monologues (Smith 1992). Smith describes how she shirked the self-focused actor training of American Method acting, which brings the character closer to the self, and sought a way to bring herself to the character (the other) whom she was portraying. Reiterating the words with the same tone, pitch, and rhythm and allowing those speech patterns to develop into the other's physicality taught Smith about the other (Smith 1992:xxvi). Rather than using the internal Stanislavski system, Smith worked from the body to access the same level of presence and an understanding denied those creating character from their own experiences rather than seeking to represent the other's. Smith masterfully accesses and eloquently articulates much of what this research explores she says, "The frame of reference for the other would *be* the other. Learning about the other by being the other requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of the body, mind, and heart, as well as the words" (Smith 1992:xxvii). However, her work differs in its focus on learning many characters and performing them through her singular body rather than building ensemble.

Such is the case with a number of autobiographical and documentary performers, Bobby Baker, Tim Miller, Joey Hateley, and Doug Wright are only a few (see Heddon 2008; Stanescu 2006; Bottoms 2006). Other companies, such as Tectonic Theatre, use verbatim techniques in works like *The Laramie Project* but here the focus is on characters outside the ensemble rather than on using this kind of work to better understand co-performers. Though these works focus on realistic mimesis of persons who when the curtain goes up become characters, they avoid using these advantages to invest in the collective voice. The understanding which comes from this, particularly Deavere Smith's literal incorporation, inspired much of the work of *Flight*, but in the end limits work and closes off the possibility of meaning existing only on a naturalistic level.

While scholarship develops around documentary and autobiographical performance (see

Bottoms 2006; Etchells 2006; Hesford 2006; Irmer 2006; Stanescu 2006; and Heddon 2008), publications that engage with ensemble function as instructional manuals in devising theatre or histories of the intercultural period of the 1960s to 1980s. Contemporary writing about ensemble is restricted to either product-oriented how-to's (Ames 1993; Bicât & Baldwin 2002; and Clark 1971 are a few examples) or reports chronicling the work and philosophy of a particular troupe (see Mackenzie-Wood 1991; Williams 1999). The scholarship on process focuses on developing character and plot primarily for fictional scripted works. There is some observation of how the group dynamics might evolve during the process, however the observations and guidance relate strictly to blocks in development or disagreements (see Clark 1971, particularly 90-93). While helpful to scholars and practitioners interested in the results, the works engage little with the relationships among players, the process of building a group identity, the quality of the communal voice or the role of individual in the collective. The texts do not offer reflections on the meaning of ensemble.

Some enlightenment can come from examining the Ancient Greek chorus, which functioned as a single even unit though it consisted of numerous actors. The chorus has served as inspiration to some (LeCoq 2000) with its historically unison speech and unifying mask which eliminates individuality and creates a singular entity (Kitto 1956; Gardiner 1987). David Wiles (2007:61) characterizes this mask as the tool which made each performer anonymous. The Greek chorus did function in Sophocles' work as a single character with active purpose (Gardiner 1987:178), but all sense of individual members was suppressed in service to the aesthetic.

A similar stripping of individuality followed in much of the avant-garde work in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s. Practitioners like director Jerzy Grotowski believed in accessing what was common to all humanity—"the Universal Self" (Schechner & Wolford 1997:27)—through "a complete stripping down" of the actor and a removal of all social behaviors (Grotowski 1968:16). This approach is echoed in the work of Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba among others (see Pavis 1992; Barba, Brook, Pavis, & Watson in Pavis 1996; and Auslander 1997), who mined different rituals (which Schechner would consider both strips of behavior and performances) and performance techniques for underlying universal structures or motifs. While these artists had great success exploring motifs in different cultures, their work was criticized by a wide group for destroying,

negating, and decontextualizing cultures (Weber 1989:12; Bharucha 1984a; Bharucha 1988; Chin 1989). In re-envisioning cultures, practitioners in fact restructure the performers' subjectivities because, as Ortner and others reminds us, subjectivity is innately linked to culture (Ortner 2005). Though these visionaries developed tightly-knit and effective ensembles, they did not build from the individuals' experiences. Instead, they seek to strip away the voices until each performer speaks from the same neutered universality as those hidden behind masks in the chorus.

What we find then is a gap in the comprehension of ensemble but by making a slight shift in intention, we can direct work into that gap to open new spaces of articulation. Ensemble has come to mean a group unified under an imposed aesthetic, a joining in erasure. However, if we realign empathy with its theoretical construct, rather than its current casual application, we can use its sense of syncretism to build an ensemble from each performer's unique experience. The work of *Flight* is then a positive process; it assembles an ensemble from individualities and allows those to create a new aesthetic rather than adhere to an outside style. By working to create rather than to eradicate, *Flight* opens spaces of articulation among individuals and from the collective.

INTERWEAVING EXPERIENCE: THE CREATION OF FLIGHT

Roles and Reflexivity: The methods of creation

This paper asserts, like Estelle Barrett, that artistic practice “be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy of action” (Barrett 2007a:1). In this sense, the work of creating *Flight* is itself the research. Creative research privileges participatory and experiential knowledge (Conquergood 2004:315; Barrett 2007b:143). While the process does not serve as “data” in the sense of a scientific research paradigm, throughout the rehearsal and workshop period, reflection is important both to create the narrative (and thus the meaning) of the work and to (re)direct the rehearsal process in a productive and focused way. The consideration of both these elements in the practice, which in this instance is both rehearsal and production, serves as the contribution to the field of knowledge.

This research has come from the creation, rehearsal and performance of the physical theatre piece, *Flight*. During a four-week workshop period, six performers (all current students at or recent graduates of Wits University) and I devised the piece which was then performed for four evenings at the Wits Downstairs theatre. The creative process began with the assignment for each performer to research the circumstances of his or her birth. From these narratives, the performers built solo performances on which we based the larger piece. The ensemble created additional material to serve as connective tissue between the segments resulting in a tightly woven whole, rather than a series of short scenes.

The piece itself is structured as variations on a theme or theme and variations, as it is sometimes referred to in music. During the process we discovered the common link in all of our stories was the idea of belonging, though with different conclusions or questions. *Flight* then began, as a musical composition of this type would, by

introducing the theme. The theme was allowed to grow, change, alter its pace, and shift voicing before finally resolving itself in the coda, or the final incarnation of the theme in a composition. In *Flight*, we worked with images, movement and text rather than instrumentation to explore different elements and possibilities, and variations were guided by the experience of each individual even if developed by the whole.

Throughout the rehearsal period, I, as director, researcher and facilitator, sought to remain focused on collaboration and shared leadership both to create a positive working environment and as a means to allow the sense of ensemble to shape every element of the practice. Overall, I was guided by Paulo Freire's (1993) educational models, which have often been adapted for theatrical purposes. Instead of depositing and filling the cast with ideas and direction for material, I worked with intensive reflection to allow the group to influence each



*Fig. 1. Giving notes before a performance.
(All photos by J. Reynolds)*

other and draw out subject matter. In this way, each performer maintained agency within the process rather than “puppeting” or “parroting.”

Preserving such openness throughout the process requires a great deal of self-reflexivity from all those involved, most importantly from the researcher-practitioner. As a director, one is required to reflect-in-action, to borrow an educational research term (Schön in Neelands 2006:19). A director must be keenly aware of what is and is not working in the immediate present and be able to bring creative know-how to make the appropriate adjustments in the moment. This includes the ability to hear suggestions, try them and make instantaneous evaluations (Bicât and Baldwin 2002:96). A reflection-on-action is necessary to both director and researcher. It is the director's responsibility to revisit the work of a session and make appropriate amendments for future rehearsals to facilitate good work. Sometimes this means taking a more traditional power position to guide the work. In *Flight* rehearsals, however, this was always done with the aim of honoring the performers' stories. As practitioner-researcher, a similar evaluation is necessary both as means to observe what is holding people back and to maintain a deep connection between practice and theory. Furthermore, because of the subjective nature of creative research, researchers must use reflection to position themselves within the work (Stewart 1007:124). While working on *Flight*, I have followed David Fenton's model (in Haseman 2007:153) and used in-rehearsal feedback and free-writing as reflection in action and my own journaling as reflection on action, both for the work and for my place within it. It is from my writing and observation, as well as that of the six collaborators, that I draw the examples and opinions included herein.

The necessity of such reflection in making *Flight* became clear as the creative process naturally shifted from the vague image of empathy, embodiment and Anna Deavere Smith I, as researcher and director, had developed. Because of the deep investment in the character, mannerisms, and speech of the other in Smith's work, I anticipated a far more realist approach to what we as a company discovered and used. As a researcher, my entrenchment in details of neurological theory limited my understanding of embodiment, placing it in an intensive process of one to one imitation. I imagined that in imitating each other, a profound personal understanding would spontaneously emerge. The work evolved into a far more open process in which we worked to discover and create a

new language in which we all spoke, built and performed. Different aesthetics were brought in and fused into a unique physical language as we moved away from the literal empathic experience as prioritized in drama therapy and toward a new, shared mode of expression made from our personal experiences. The involvement of constant reflection allowed us the flexibility to accept the new direction and to understand it in the framework of the research. In the four weeks of rehearsal, the group worked in intense collaboration and self-reflexivity to build *Flight*, which, though different from the initial image in the director's mind, was a unique expression of each collaborator and the collective.

To build the new voice of the ensemble, we moved away from naturalistic approaches to character and into our own mode of expression. Rather than imitating or reincorporating each other directly, an abstract and primarily choreographic approach allowed us to feedback *into* each other's work. Speaking to each other's work involved discussion during rehearsal as well as a more complex process of collaboration in building performance material. Constant dialoguing and cooperative creation allowed us to be true to one performer's story while fusing many voices into the final product. In this fusion are "kernels of originality" (Schechner 1985:51) positioning the performances not as a reproduction of another's work but as a new collective adaptation. This process produced a sense of communal ownership of the piece, which in its fusions and polyphonic voice destabilizes the idea of a single, dominant meaning or narrative.

One of the key methods we used in building material was, appropriately, a far cry from direct imitation but rather a nonrepresentational, associative approach to choreography. I will refer to this process by the umbrella term, *associative choreography*, though it has many slight variations in technique. The simplest explanation is that a performer creates a phrase of movement from a series of still images created by what one might call an intersemiotic translation from phrases, textures, or ideas. Often, a series of words or associations in another format are compiled and one still image is created for each separate item on the list. When complete, the images are strung together through the performer's improvisation. In other instances, the performers are asked to create a series of images around one thematic idea, such as death, and then link them into a movement phrase. Once a movement phrase is created a performer can play with its rhythm, pacing and extension. At different

points one can perform the phrase to a variety of different musical styles or in different places on stage to find nuance and complete the phrase.

This method suited our process because we did not set out to specifically make a physical theatre piece and therefore approached movement from a variety of different backgrounds and skill levels. Associative choreography allows the body to communicate in its own aesthetic because it asks the performer-choreographer only that she express (from) her own subjectivity. This technique allows the body to move in its natural way and allows the feelings and personal relations of the performer to speak. In the workshop for *Flight*, I encouraged non-mimetic movement to better access subtext and emotional experience. Approaching material this way allowed us a unique access to each other that did not require character imitation, but rather asked the performers to relate intimately through emotional texture and presence.

“Searching” for mutual understanding

Using associative choreography to create the “Searching” segment introduced performers to relationships in the segment’s narrative and allowed them to embody the piece and support the central performer. When the company sat down at the end of the first week to tell crafted stories of our births, Nidaa, a third year physical theatre student, took the group through the winding narrative of her parents’ numerous relocations that led into Nidaa’s own early childhood. The following week, she presented a solo performance based only on the period of her mother’s pregnancy. Though we began work to expand the piece, Nidaa continued to express her dissatisfaction—not with the work but her own choice of focus. After performing the piece for the second time, she scrunched her face and confided with exasperation, “I’m not satisfied.” She and I worked with free-writes and brainstormed on other themes, but when the group began to discover a recurring sense of belonging in the various pieces, we returned as a company to her parents’ narrative as it clearly expressed a search for belonging. We set out to maintain the shape of chaos Nidaa had created in her solo piece while, through the idea of a search, adding a “playable action” (Bicât and Baldwin 2002). The idea of searching clarified the piece theatrically which both helped us create material and made the segment more relatable.



In this instance, we used associative choreography to build short duets representing the central character's (played by Nidaa) experience in each place. At the beginning of the rehearsal, Nidaa narrated the story of each place. Though her explanations were brief, she hit upon the central nerve of the story accessing the emotional elements of her own family history. These stories were how she understood her parents and her own history. From the stories we distilled key ideas or images. The story of her father's time as an adolescent in Lichtenburg produced "childhood, vast, dust, rough games, brothers, ready to conquer bigger things,"

while her mother's youth in Dublin became "nuns, snow, happy carols, safe, kid, not wanting to leave." The ensemble then broke up into pairs and built the seven short duets of "Searching" from these ideas. In some moments there were literal interpretations: "rough games" became a playful hand clap that built into an angry jump. Other moments were abstracted as the slow limb extensions in the Dublin sequence expressed the pleasure and desire to linger. The work created by different

members of the ensemble spoke to Nidaa's personal



Fig 2.Above. Rethabile and Nidaa play games in Lichtenburg. Fig 3. Left. Liesel and Nidaa extend and linger in Dublin.

story. As people invested deeper over the course of development, the group told Nidaa's story in its own voice with its many personal inclusions.

When we set the duets into the narrative structure of a character searching for belonging in various places, a greater amount of specificity was needed and thus we revisited Nidaa's experience. As each performer was playing a different place that Nidaa's character visits, such as Durban or Lichtenburg, the cast was able to teach the choreography directly onto Nidaa's body. Rather than explaining or learning a part separately, she simply stepped in and filled the place where the stand-in partner had been. While the other performers had embodied her story by comprehending the emotional experience of each place, Nidaa now embodied the others' understanding of her story. In her body and performance of the material was a fusion of a plurality of versions of the experience. Yet she remained distant from the work herself and had trouble emotionally investing. I realized that we needed to deepen both Nidaa's and the ensemble's sense of the beats and relationships involved. I asked Nidaa to journal about each story and bring in intentions with which she could direct the other performers. After she shared these, we worked through each sequence using a repetition exercise in which each person would perform the duet while speaking the intention or need that Nidaa had offered. Watching the new performances after this work, the whole segment became clear and engaging. Each experience was different. Much later, during the performances of the show, when the



Fig 4. Flirting in fetas.

flirting of the Fietas duet and the violence of Durban Two (as we called it) were clear, the whole piece flew and spectators commented on their ability to relate to the piece because of the specificity of the journey.

Specificity of this nature came from sharing in Nidaa's narrative, including its feelings, reflections and meaning. Initially it was hard even for Nidaa to access that place. As she writes:

There were points where I felt like my own personal associations and feelings towards these stories got in my way of freely expressing—I found I had to almost treat it a bit impersonally at first, so as to not get stuck in fear of not representing the truth. Once I accepted that there were starting points that could help develop in various ways and no way was wrong, I was able to let go and find the story.

At the outset, Nidaa felt that there was only one truth in her story. She must *relive* and recreate the actuality of the narrative. She writes that only in distancing herself, or treating the material “impersonally,” was she able to evolve her performance. In accessing a less literal view of the events through distillation in her journaling and repetition work, she was able to access the experience of the narrative. Nidaa

had to step back from the events to access that which makes narrative: synthesis and interpretation. Her initial sense of “truth” was tied to events or the “emplotment” of the



Fig. 5. Nidaa and Ikalafeng let Johannesburg live in performance.

narrative rather than the reflective and interpretive elements “that distinguish it from a simple sequence of action[s]” (Ricoeur 1984:56).

While Nidaa lived in the alternative truth of the moment, substitution became key to filling out the rest of the ensemble's process. They tapped into the idea or intention and then made it

specific with their own experience and memories. While seemingly antithetical to empathy, in fact, by relating to the moment and finding their own sense of the feeling Nidaa described, the cast was adding to the felt emotion and fusing it into a new, enhanced sense as Stein outlines. In “Searching” the ensemble expressed neither the original story nor one person’s understanding. In it is a fuller version that includes elements of every performer’s interpretation and personal associations. Understanding the interaction in this way also helps to explain the remarks from many audience members, that the performance contained so much of each performer’s identity, presumably because of their heightened emotional presence. One performer’s mother even remarked that this was the most she had seen of her daughter in any performance. Through the different steps, the ensemble created something new together fusing Nidaa’s story with their own understanding of it and finally putting the communal voice back into her body.

A “Map” of Memory

The work of “Map” both raised contentious questions about the research process and allowed a number of different layers and fusions as with “Searching.” The creation of this segment began simultaneously to “Searching” and was the beginning of one person using another’s associations to build movement, which we also used in “Searching.” Rethabile’s solo performance of her birth story functioned as a map on the rehearsal room floor, using thick felt markers on separate sheets of newsprint to mark highway off-ramps related to different parts of her life. After watching it the first time and discussing its meaning with the company, we all understood the piece as an engagement with memory not only because the piece was a personal narrative but because the series of (re)visitations called to mind a reflective journey through memory. As the piece interrogated the role of memory in life rather than simply chronicling Rethabile’s memories, I spontaneously asked Rethabile to write five associations with each place on the back of the sheets in her solo piece. The following session, she and I randomly handed each sheet to different people and then set them to build images for each association and string them into a phrase.

While we worked on developing the phrases and adjusting them for practical staging reasons, I still had a feeling of unease. Watching Rethabile watch the phrases, I felt a sense of scrutiny. I

asked Rethabile to think of elements related to the quality of each place and then direct the other performers to incorporate that sense into the quality of movement. Perhaps metals would create a heavier or more rigid sense of movement. Water might add a smoothness that was lacking. I told myself at the time that setting the task helped the ensemble get closer to Rethabile's experience and thus was a way of respecting her story. Even the skeletal or structural elements of a narrative, such as the language one uses in writing, are interpretive and personal (Bruner 1986a, White 1978). Much the same logic was used when, after we watched each phrase, the rhythms of each were starting to become similar. In response, Rethabile immediately fed back to each piece with her emotional relationship to the memories associated with each place so the performers could reinvest in the choreography with feeling. The performers' deep investment in Rethabile's memories and the fusion of the performers' personal understandings with Rethabile's experience marks a successful endeavor of intersemiotic translation.

Yet these attempts to have all members of the ensemble invest and reinterpret each individual's memory and experience brought on a new set of questions about power. Members of the ensemble came from diverse South African backgrounds, ones that in the past—including the past we were depicting—had come into conflict with one another. Doubts about positioning different performers within others' pieces due to cultural differences dominate my reflections on the first session of creating choreography for "Map." I could not help feeling uncomfortable asking Liesel, an upper class suburban Afrikaner, to represent Tembisa, a black township northeast of Johannesburg. Or rather, I was comfortable with the engagement, but I felt a great tension watching Rethabile watch Liesel creating choreography. Some sense of this must derive from my own immersion in cultural theory rather than the reality of Rethabile's thoughts. However, later in the process Liesel confided that sometimes in the process she felt "pressured" by the person whose experience she was performing. She, like I, acknowledges that this is likely her own internal critic, but I think the interrogation is valid, particularly in this instance.

Regardless of where precisely the initial tension came from, it was important for me in that moment to reflect on the politics of cultural representation and that reflection provided insight into the inner-workings of the empathic process. The colonial heritage is one of annihilation of people's

beliefs in their own cultural heritage and practice—Ngugi wa’Thiongo (1986:3) calls this a “cultural bomb”—and its enforcers are made the “enemy of authentic culture” (Soyinka 1988b:179). In South Africa, Afrikaners have inherited this legacy much as the English in India and the French in northern Africa though in South Africa the systematic legislative practices went far beyond those of colonialism. These historical tensions remain in South Africa even today. That made our effort as an ensemble more delicate. I had to question what it meant to have a descendent of a colonist represent the formerly oppressed and whether the ensemble and I were borrowing and representing others’ cultural traditions in a way that has often been criticized for decontextualizing sacred practices and exhibiting a lack of respect in an exercise of power (Bharucha 1984a; 1984). If the director’s responsibility when engaging with customs, or Schechner’s “strips of behavior,” is to learn the meaning rather than performing the practices “without knowing or caring about what it means [which] risks a simplification and distortion of its content” (Bharucha 1984a:14), then I had the job of reflecting on how we were engaging with each other’s cultures.

I could never be certain how every individual would read our representations, but the important point to note here is not the possibility of misrepresentation or exploitation. It is the acknowledgment of the self-conscious fear itself. It reminds us of the necessity of reflective practice and enhances the understanding of how empathic relationships were at the center of the rehearsal technique. The kind of interplay between the two different people and their different (some would say antithetical) backgrounds in the creation of this segment reveals critical elements of building syncretic ensemble. Because we were not attempting to translate experience, which is the implication made by Rustom Bharucha and similar critics, but to get inside of it, I did not feel nor did I observe a discomfort with the product of the work. Rather I was concerned about respecting Rethabile’s history and wanted to be sure that collaborators—particularly Liesel—sought to deeply engage with the narrative rather than superficially reproduce it. Only by seeking profound understanding of the personal could such a moment avoid *mis*representation. When observing Liesel’s willingness to take Rethabile’s direction on the matter I realized each of the collaborators involved in the process was trying to understand and explore each other’s experiences. As Ortner has demonstrated, an individual’s subjectivity is not merely composed of point of view but is also entangled with cultural

habits, norms, and opinions (Ortner 2005). When engaging with another's subjectivity, one necessarily encounters and interrogates another's culture. Therefore it was necessary to engage with these issues but because of the structure of empathic understanding and the repeated explanation, I felt these were not commodified or misappropriated pieces of tradition or experience.

In the process of doubting my position as a researcher-practitioner in relation to the sensitivity to culture, I discovered how associative choreography could change to be widely applicable. This required the reminder that even though the practice serves as research, the work must never evolve into a scientific model of experiment rather than an experience. The battle between the two approaches has been constantly present in my mind during creative research works, and in an earlier project (Schwartz 2009) it paralyzed my ability to lead because I tried to follow strict methodological rules. However, in creative research, shift happens and the discoveries that lead to shift and change are often the most insightful with regard to the initial interrogation. Part of the pressure I felt to get Rethabile's experience "right" came from the sense of a realist character embodiment as I have already noted was my initial intention. The discovery of cyclical feedback as a way to abstractly empathize experience, fuse emotion and forge a new feeling offered entirely new possibilities with regard to aesthetic and structure. "Getting it right" no longer meant exacting mannerism or gestural work. Rather, we as an ensemble could build the same intimate connection from associations and abstract expressions. By adding qualities of movement and intention, performers could access the essence of each other's experience somatically. Through feeding back to associative choreography, we could still create nuance and poignancy. Returning to the source to develop movement further built in the specifics of the story, including the ever-important emotional experience which is stored by the brain with memory (Damasio 1999). Achieving this level of work allowed us to do justice to Rethabile's story and thus to respect her as memory, experience and narrative are the ingredients of her identity (Damasio 1999; Ricoeur 1985, 1991b; Bruner 1986b). Returning to Nidaa for deeper explanation allowed the performers the space to find a personal relationship to their intention and role in the story, which in turn brought color to the performance and made it a group piece. As practitioner-researcher, privileging experience over experiment allowed the ensemble to discover a more applicable approach to empathy and embodiment that became central to our work.

Diverging from “Hypernaturalistic Mimesis”

Though we primarily found a mimetic, one to one embodiment unsuccessful, collaborative approaches to performing each other's stories excited the company. One instance in which we found a one to one approach feasible was when one person performed another's personal movement phrase. *Flight* began with all six performers whispering numbers to themselves on stage. As the house lights went down, each performer fetched a piece of chalk from the mantelpiece upstage and wrote the whispered number sequence on the floor in front of them before performing a short, self-choreographed phrase of movement. The performers built these movement phrases early on with associative choreography; I asked them to create six still images of birth, which became the connected phrase. Naturally, the numbers spoken in rhythm and written by each performer were the dates of their births. After each performer completed his own sequence, a series of switches took place as each attempted to do the others' phrases.

When I say that this instance of embodiment was successful, I mean that the performers struggled little to invest in each others' phrases and that this segment communicated something with which both the process and the final product engaged. The opening moment of the show narrated

Fig. 6. Leonie and Rahiem perform their birth phrases.



each performer's journey of discovering herself inside her own assigned identity, primarily in one's own skin, one's documented self (through numbers), and one's place of birth or home (as articulated in the dialogue that followed the movement). Because the scene told the story of each person trying on different bodies or identities to see which fit best, it became easy for the performers to step into each other's personal phrases—the motivation was scripted. The whole performance of the movement was about discovering the movement itself and therefore did not need to be exact or the haunting “right.” It allowed the performers freedom to bring

themselves into another's story, and because the body is the locus of experience, someone else's

experience, memory and identity.

This is not to say that learning and performing movement phrases by people from different artistic backgrounds was without difficulty. Each person was still learning another's body (or many) and how that body moved. Non-physical theatre students struggled to keep up. When running some segments, I watched Liesel, a fourth year performance student, focusing deeply but having to pull back on some of the moves that required significant muscle in particular areas. Often she would run short phrases of movement when the rest of the company worked sections for which she was not needed. More than simply keeping up with the others, Liesel articulated late in the process something key to the work we were doing. "Challenges for me," she wrote in her scrawled playful handwriting, "were to learn moves that came naturally to other people's bodies and not my own. I was physically challenged by having to fight sensations and habits in my body." Not only was she trying to master the choreography, but she found herself stepping outside of her own comforts and habits to access the movement and being of another body. Though we worked from an abstract choreographic sense of "character," this work parallel's Anna Deavere Smith's notion that "the spirit of acting is the *travel*



Fig. 7.
Above. A moment from Rethabile's birth phrase.



Fig. 8.
Left. The ensemble in the midst of performing the opening birth

from the self to the other” (Smith 1993:xxvi, emphasis original). Rather than training the body simply to get to a place, there is an attempt to understand and (re)create the feeling and reactions of an entirely other person, as Lorna Marshall’s (2001) training encourages. *Flight* sought a different aesthetic of performance but the sense and aim of the work remains the same: to step outside of oneself and allow a new understanding from someone else because “the more we inhabit the physical reality of another person, the greater our understanding becomes” (Marshall 2001:xiii).

This phenomenon is not limited to non-physical theatre performers working towards a new aesthetic. Trained physical theatre performers also experienced difficulty and the understanding that results from stepping outside oneself, as they struggled to learn a style of movement to which they were unaccustomed. Rahiem, a graduate who primarily performs in physical theatre, writes in his journal, “Because of Bailey [a lecturer at Wits who taught and often directs Rahiem], I was used to a very specific style of movement vocabulary and could easily remember and pick up anything in that style.” Ikalafeng, a fourth year physical theatre student, is the only other cast member who has been instructed in the same way. Rahiem expresses that he found it difficult not necessarily to master the movement as he has incredible control of his movements, but to remember choreography from traditional actors or from those who were trained in a different physical style. While it was “difficult to execute at first,” one of his main obstacles was actually remembering the choreography. While Rahiem could find the move, he had trouble allowing it to live fully in his body “perhaps because it’s something I was not used to,” Rahiem conjectures. He was not comfortable expressing himself in another’s language or expressing another’s being entirely and therefore had to step out of himself to develop an understanding of the others to fully embody their experiences. A direct embodiment of another’s associative choreography allowed access to another’s personal narrative, and thus their sense of meaning, memory and emotion, and identity (Damasio 1999; Ricoeur 1991b) through the body’s knowledge and memory, which is asserted by a number of practitioners and teachers (Marshall 2001; Auslander 1997; Suzuki 1993). The one to one work in the early part of the performance demanded the performers step outside of themselves in attempt to build greater understanding of those with whom they shared the stage. While this was difficult, the ensemble was clearly pushed out of individual comfort zones into a deeper sense of co-presence.

One to one work was less successful when applied to text, but the disappointment encouraged us to reinvest in associative choreography and collaboration which was already creating stimulating material. Liesel's solo performance included a substantial amount of text that was an exciting exegesis of numbers in her worldview. We decided to thread the short monologues throughout the longer performance as a way to draw parallels and expose tensions within the meaning of belonging. Liesel's "numerology" came from a need to make everything fit, even as the perfection of numbers contrasts the muddiness of reality. This created an interesting juxtaposition with the document numbers, which represented imposed belonging. Though the text brought a number of thematic



Fig. 9. Rahiem leads Nidaa in a moment of discovery in "Searching."

strands together, in performance Rahiem's attempt to "play Liesel," as he called it, never quite sat right. While Rahiem, who

also writes, had a keen comprehension of the intention in the text, casual feedback from friends and lecturers noted that his character was unclear in the moments when he spoke. Even on the nights when I felt Rahiem finally captured Liesel's original energy, excitement and neurosis, there was a specificity lacking in his performance.

Most of the difficulty came from Rahiem's inability to step outside of himself *cognitively*. He was able to master other movement and thus understand another's primal emotions somatically, but he had difficulty stepping into another's subjective reality. An actress and lecturer in New York who trained at the Actor's Studio in its heyday used to remark in class that if one did not know one's lines it was because one did not know what one was doing. There was a gap in the understanding of the

action and intention of the moment. This holds true for Rahiem, who had trouble keeping Liesel's monologues in his brain and mouth. "It was the fact that it didn't make any real logical or literal sense to me that I found it quite difficult to memorize the lines," he remarked after the run. Though he and Liesel did both physical and discursive partner work while I watched eagerly hoping Liesel's frenetic energy would magically inject itself into Rahiem, the segment never clicked with Rahiem. While I accept that only one's own experience is primordial—experienced firsthand in one's own subjectivity—empathy opens access to understanding others' experiences (Husserl 1931:51). Through text, however, it was difficult to access a comparable place that allowed Rahiem to understand Liesel's experience in his own terms because the work was imitative. Instead of using his own understanding to enhance the expression and feeling of Liesel's narrative and thus perform a new and more alive version of her story, text work limited Rahiem to imitation and approximation of rhythm, pitch and gesture without investing any of himself. The work on this segment highlighted the collaborative element of associative choreography that was making it a successful technique for the other segments.

Using both associative choreography and collaboration in a solo piece made a one to one embodiment a more engaged process than Rahiem found working with text to be. As Liesel writes of the segment in which she performed Leonie's personally choreographed solo, "Doing Leonie's piece made me feel like I was really part of the process." To focus the performance on an embodiment of Leonie's narrative and aesthetic identity rather than learning a piece of choreography, both Liesel and Leonie approached the process with precision and investment. Leonie first showed the piece to Liesel and then the three of us worked to expand the piece. Expanding the piece required an in-depth understanding of the moment-to-moment of the movement, so Leonie explained the corresponding memory and feeling of each. Liesel, Leonie and I created new work from the theme and ideas Leonie confided in us and pulled material from other movement the ensemble had created. We returned to images from tableaux that the company made early in the process to begin to distil overall theme. From these, we included a moment from the "Tradition" tableau, which Rethabile had created during the first week of rehearsals and called, "Queen mother, weight of world on head." Other bits we picked from a long sequence the entire ensemble had constructed from Leonie's writing which we had

decided not to include in performance. These inclusions meant that even the one moment of solo in *Flight* contained creations from every performer, which made it more exciting for both Leonie and Liesel to develop.

Some tension arose in the creation because the idea of representing one person's story, even if collaborative, invokes a sense of "rightness" or the sense that there is only one way to do the piece. Some of this feeling came from Leonie who after a long session of work on the solo, said that teaching it "required patience, because when something is personal, you want it to be performed in proper form." From the technical notes Leonie offered Liesel when working, I understand that she was

primarily
focused on
the precision
of the
moves.
However, it
was clear
from
Leonie's
moments of



Fig. 10. Liesel performs the solo from "A Flat in Grey Street."

frustration that the piece had become precious to her. Her sentiment is understandable; as she articulated, the work was highly personal. She felt she still owned the experience, which in the initial narrative is true, because "the action is the property of whoever committed it" (Ricoeur 1991b:191). But one must not cling to such ownership in creating original work; her strip of behavior will necessarily shift in a new context. The important step in our process is to communicate openly so that performers can relate to and honor the intention of the piece. In devised theatre, one makes the agreement to work in the unknown and to allow "happy accidents" to happen, therefore nothing can be precious. The use of many people's work and my non-hesitance to throw sections out when creating this segment restructured the process as one where nothing could be precious. Thus as we

began incorporating the ensemble's work, Leonie did open up to shift and change. She even allowed the segment to transition to group ownership.

Though we abandoned a realist sense of character imitation, we still found that one to one embodiment was less successful with realist text. Abstract physical expression and the method of associative choreography allowed a collaborative approach to embodiment that eliminated a one-directional imitation. Instead, the performers could collaborate and build something that while remaining true to the original narrative and thus respecting the performer's experience and understanding of himself, became a shared experience. The fusion of many voices in different elements of the process led to a sense of involvement, ownership, deeper investment both in the paired embodiment and larger group work such as "Map" and "Searching."

"ENTIRELY OURS": COMMUNAL OWNERSHIP OF THE ENSEMBLE

NARRATIVE

"A Definite Sense of Openness and Sharing"

The ensemble's efforts to layer and fuse their voices and experiences without losing the uniqueness of their own identities and contributions created a feeling of communal ownership of the stories. By the time we reached performance, there was a clear sense that *Flight* was *our* story rather than a series of performances of each other's character. From early on in the process, a general ethos of openness and sharing pervaded the group that eventually contributed to the sense of collective. In the first week, I set up periods of discussion and sharing, some of which were purposefully casual to facilitate sincerity and involvement. When it came time for each performer to narrate the circumstances of her birth, I invited everyone to bring a sharable snack and we had a child-like story time. This environment, as opposed to a high-pressure work or performance setting, drew more personal information out of the ensemble and helped them create the connections that allowed collective ownership.

A number of performers comment on the depth of sharing and acknowledge that it

contributed to their performances. Nidaa notes in her journal that “everyone shared their stories openly... [which] gave each of us a deeper understanding of each other and the awareness that we all have a much larger past.” There is a clear sense that everyone had given from the heart. Leonie comments that she “contributed to the group my personal story of who and what I am,” even “opening wounds” as she shared. While the “definite sense of openness and sharing,” as Liesel reflects, helped form the group bond as Nidaa has observed, it also deepened the performers connection to material in performance. Once the show had closed its run, Liesel confided, “I felt very vulnerable during performances. And I think that’s because there was something exposing about the performance—for everyone.” The performers offered something deeply personal in their stories and by investing emotionally in others’ stories. Therefore, the performance was equally personal and thus “exposing.”

Simultaneously to the early work of sharing stories, the ensemble worked through exercises intended to build the group identity. These two processes in combination bonded the group emotionally and professionally. Trust and focus exercises have become a given in nearly every rehearsal process. Brian Clark (1971) emphasizes in his instructions and exercises the need to bring actors together and the way physicality can unconsciously do that. Mirror work and negative space were used initially in our rehearsals to practice being present with each other. They also “helped [the performers] to become better acquainted with each other and with each other’s bodies,” according to Rahiem.

In the instance of *Flight*, however, the process of getting used to each other’s bodies had to move beyond awareness to focus more deeply on building a group who could pick up seamlessly on one another’s movements and one that functioned as an indecipherable whole. “Go” and “Follow the leader” were two exercises which were critical to building the group as a machine that was entirely aware of every element and one that allowed leadership to shift and change. “Go” involves a process of requesting permission to move, acceptance, and finally shifting position. These steps strengthened the ensemble’s ability to say yes to offers and to follow the central energy. This was important later in group movement sequences when people had to be able to follow and move in unison. More importantly, it trained the group to allow the focus to shift during the devising process. “Go” constantly shifts the center of focus and therefore the group never expected one person to be the star

of the piece—the performance was about the ensemble. As Rahiem observed, “The ‘go’ game . . . established the necessary connections to function as a whole.” This became evident during the second performance when during a group sequence, all six performers turned and moved in the wrong direction. Rethabile, Rahiem and Nidaa recounted how not one person seemed to doubt the movement nor was any one performer leading the group; everyone moved together. They found the incident humorous; I felt encouraged and proud.

Though I introduced “Follow the Leader” with the trajectory of realist imitation in mind, the skills it developed became crucial to teaching and learning in the process and contributed to the sense of shared leadership and communal ownership. The game requires the performers to form a cross or square formation. Whoever faces forward leads the group in a repeated movement or sound and movement. When the group turns, the leader shifts to whoever is now facing forwards. The goal is to reach seamless shifts of leadership as well as to move together rather than after the leader. After the third attempt, I noted that “they either were able to shift leadership seamlessly or were able to hit the moves together.” What I distilled upon further reflection was that the group needed a clear objective to unify them. I had instructed them to focus on something particular (unified movement) and that had come together, whereas the ensemble’s natural ability in the first two attempts to smoothly shift leadership dissipated. This discovery helped me phrase direction and set tasks through the rest of the process because I understood what this particular company of actors needed to achieve something in performance. Over time, the precision grew and therefore the performers felt supported by each other. Liesel later commented, “It was lovely to trust that the group was with you or a person was making suitable offers for you to join in on.” From her phrasing, it also becomes evident that the foundation of much of the process was give and take, mutual sharing and thus collective involvement. While these exercises were not original methodologies, they contributed to the group sentiment and developed skills which facilitated the rest of process.

The exercises and games also focused on shifting leadership in the rehearsal room, which built ensemble but was truly important because it fed into other aspects of building and empathic understanding such as teaching and learning each other’s phrases. Liesel’s observation speaks to the actions of the games, but that grew into a larger trust when different members of the ensemble took

the lead to teach bits of choreography. Because everyone had a chance to lead by teaching their birth phrase, a phrase for “Map,” or any number of other personal sequences, the ideas for the piece grew. Revisiting the intention behind a move or cleaning up a shape to communicate a more specific moment did not serve as regression but contributed to the sense of group ownership. Even though one person was teaching, others offered adjustments or their own associations to bring depth to performance. Rethabile often had the opportunity to do this because she remembered choreography by creating a personal narrative. Sometimes, as with Rahiem’s birth phrase, offering the idea of an animal in a particular moment helped the other performers reach the specificity of an arched movement forward that expressed Rahiem’s imagining of birth. Their voices shared leadership and added layers of meaning to the move. Reflecting on the leadership in the group Rahiem noted that “some people’s energies were definitely stronger and thus overshadow others but not [in] a necessarily negative way.” He noted Rethabile as one of the “stronger” collaborators but explained that because of the openness of the process and the act of shared creation, “when they did ‘overshadow’ other people, it was to the benefit of group and the process as their input is usually the most valuable.”

Rahiem’s nonchalance about Rethabile and Nidaa sometimes having stronger energies demonstrates not only the trust in each other’s work but the way in which that trust allowed the performers to relinquish unique ownership of different segments. Because the group trusted each other’s offers, as Liesel eloquently phrased it, each person allowed the ensemble to take ownership of her story. Moreover, the shifting leadership and group input catalyzed growth and expansion of each narrative. Growth did not come from direction. It came from sharing in responsibility and understanding. Many voices wove into one person’s story to deepen it and color it until it became a group story.

“The Central Nut”

The short choral text segments linking movement sequences literalize the interlacement of voices, and references the inclusion of my own. *Flight* contains little solo work at all; even the text was primarily choral. We did not approach choral text, however, with the aim of unison as in Ancient

Greece (Gardiner 1987). We sought to evidence a variety of voices but to unify in one piece both through combining texts and creating vocal scores. A number of collaged passages, much in the style of Charles Mee (Mee, C 1998; Mee, E 2002) and Jerzy Grotowski (1968; Schechner & Wolford 1997:xxviii), connected different segments. Everyone brought poems, song lyrics or other pieces of text that they felt related to other performers' solo pieces. This served both as an exercise in thematic reflection and identification for the performers and as a source of material for me when later in the process I composed the choral passages from the ensemble's contributions. However, when I sat down with the different pieces, a comment Rethabile made echoed in my mind. I thought of her explaining "Map" by remarking to the cast, "Belonging comes from familiarity." I was compelled to include passages from a text that I knew. Though I was writing the vocal scores for the texts, meaning that I composed who would speak when and how the voices would layer, build, strip, harmonize and echo, including a text of my choice called into question how much of my voice was allowed in the piece. I had focused so much on collaboration and shared leadership, particularly in allowing the material to come from the performers as subjects rather than receiving objects (Freire 1993), that I was not sure whether I also had the right to contribute material over and above guiding the process. In the end, I did include the passage because it was the best choice creatively for the piece.

Reflecting now, I realize that as a director, I was not overstepping bounds, and that in the context of the research, this was an exciting step in the process that incorporated my voice into the ensemble. As the director, I instigated the process, introducing the idea from which we worked. From then on, my role became that of a guide, particularly as I was afraid of falling into a traditional top-down structure, hence why I hesitated to include my own text. However, Chris Baldwin reminds practitioners that while the director's place is not at the top of a hierarchy; the director is "at the center of the rehearsal fulcrum, ensuring that everyone is working together and, at the same time, making sure that the project remains conceptually consistent and elegant" (Bicât and Baldwin 2002:13). The text wove together different threads in the piece to maintain coherence, therefore I feel comfortable with the decision to include the text. By adding the text, my—the director's—voice became part of the ensemble. Not in the literal sense within the scoring, but my understanding and empathizing with

different stories contributed to and enhanced the final narrative. I also shared myself and worked closely with the others' stories so in this moment, the decision was not related to my role as facilitator, but to my position as director, creator, and *collaborator*, thus it was appropriate to infuse the ensemble with my experience of their experiences, as the performers had contributed to each other's. Doubts of this nature demonstrate the democratic nature of the process. Even though some would consider the director the unquestionable leader, I placed myself on an equal plane as the other collaborators. Because of this shared leadership we all felt comfortable referring to the piece as "ours" rather than "Ikalafengs's" or "Sarah's."

"The Investment of Embodying Others' Stories"

The constant environment of offers and gifts between and among the members of the company evidences the profound investment from every person involved. In the first week and days of rehearsal, there was an underlying sentiment of trying to get others' work "right." This developed into a pervasive sense of responsibility in telling another's stories truthfully and the desire to honor another's experience. The way the performers found to do this was by investing their own personal material and selves as a whole in the narration of another. The only way to do the others justice was to *share* in the story. In some cases this meant collaboration, as demonstrated by Liesel and Leonie sharing in the creation of the solo. In many instances, this meant an emotional collaboration. Nidaa writes of her development:

I felt a responsibility when telling other people's stories—a responsibility to relay the story with dignity—to know what was important and what could be changed, to empathize and perform with this honesty—Nobody will ever be able to replicate another's memory. The challenge was to find a way to relate to that memory and move towards it, seeing it with clarity even though it will not be the same as it is in the owner's mind. I made their memories mine.

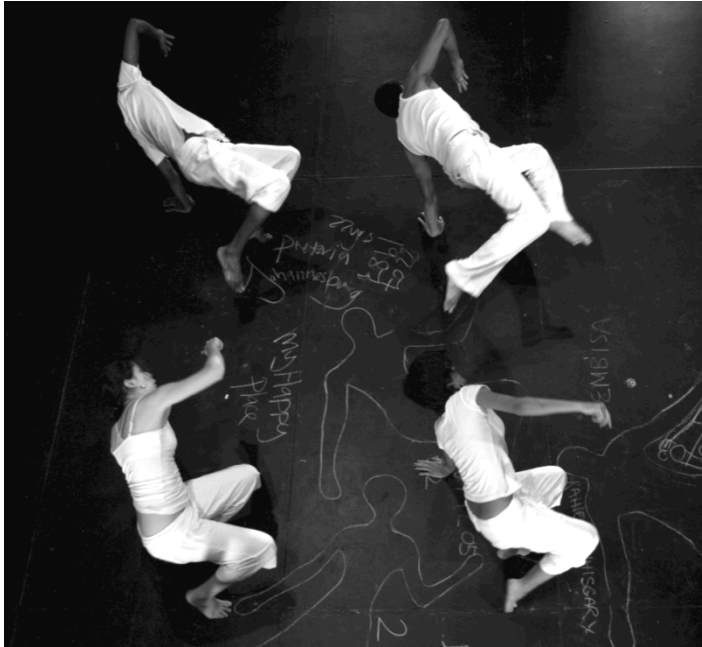
Nidaa's reflection expresses the deep-rooted commitment to understanding everyone else's work so that she could personally relate and then perform honestly. She found a way to personalize another's experience, but rather than playing her own personalization, Nidaa and all of the performers worked to bring their private associations whilst honouring the original story onstage. In this way, the plurality of experiences fused in the one performance.

The performer's methods of including themselves varied, and for some, time was the only imperative. But the performers noted that when they brought themselves, they felt proud and connected to the work and to the ensemble. After the run, Liesel mentioned, "Later on in the process I became proud of what I created for others and invested in embodying others' stories. Yes, maybe that's it. It's the investment of embodying other people's stories." From observing Liesel's private runs of choreography and her scrutinizing attention to the technique, it is clear that she, as I imagine a number of performers, felt more invested when the focus was no longer on creation or on remembering. Once the performers could run their movement and the piece as a whole, we were able to shift focus to explore the beats, meaning, and moments of the piece. At this stage, we could return to "Searching" to develop intention and relationship to better characterize Nidaa's narrative. We also were able to revisit birth phrases as well as the short phrases in "Map" to reinvigorate the different sensibilities and attitudes of each individual as well as to distinguish the different locations in "Map."

One problematic section, "Fugitive," started to come together once the cast became confident about the structure. The piece, developed from Rahiem's narrative which expressed the tension between the rawness of experience and the sterility of fact, had lacked clarity—the opposition was not clear and performers never found their way into representing Rahiem's passion. Late in the process we revisited the segment with the task of performing the choreography like something full of deep positive feeling. I suggested things such as "the warmest snuggle" or "the best sex of your life." The personal investment immediately showed in their performances. Moreover, each performer was accessing the rawness and passion that Rahiem's narrative expressed, but each performer evoked it in a different way. Liesel's gentleness and kind smile expressed a childlike joy, while Nidaa's roughness demonstrated a more animalistic understanding of Rahiem's passion. As a further step, the four performers of the "raw" choreography ran through the sequence a number of times using breath both as expression and as a means to unify their movement. They found the moments of unified release, struggle and celebration within the rawness while also incorporating their own associations to both enhance and access Rahiem's narrative.

The members of the ensemble used material from their own emotional landscapes to find their way through the maze of each other's experiences. I have never asked any one of the performers to

expound on what he actually used or to expose that involuntarily, but there was a clear indication in the moments when performers found this material and a number of the performers reflected on this in their journals. Liesel also observes, “I think that I also contributed by being honest with initial impulses and being honest with the image (or whatever) associations that came to mind.” Not only



was the personal material important, but the act of trusting one's instinct or initial relation to another's story. That honesty and instinctual work, which includes trusting the body, brought more of the performers into the piece. “The simple fact that my body was telling another's story put more of me in the piece,” writes Nidaa. “The emotion behind every movement was recalled from my

own emotional landscape. This goes for every person in the group. One had to access one's own emotions to represent someone else's.”

Nidaa's observation that what she offered necessarily came from her own experience is essential to understanding the empathic process of the ensemble: by investing personal material each performer enhanced the narrative and forged a new inclusive expression. During the course of rehearsal, each performer had to accept that only her own experience was primordial (Stein 1967,

Husserl 1931). No one can ever experience another's reality while remaining oneself. However, our process of embodiment evaded imitation or a myth of possession. We worked

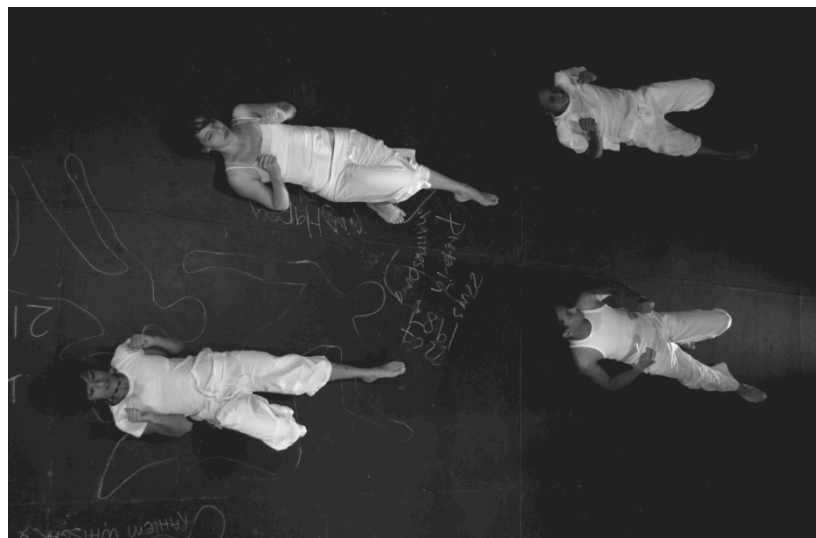


Fig. 14012. Two raw moments from “Fugitive.”

toward creating a new sense of embodiment. From one experience, we developed many threads in each performer's personal identification. By sharing these identifications and infusing the threads into the original experience, a new narrative is created that is made of the many voices, as when in empathizing, many sides of joy are fused through the understanding that each person's joy is slightly different (Stein 1967:17). The understanding of difference allows one to fill in one's experience with another and another to enhance his joy with one's own. The new narrative becomes not simply a better expression of the initiator, but because it is composed of a collective's self-reflection and meaning-making (Ricoeur 1984, 1991b) and because it encompasses a group's feelings and interpretation (Bruner 1986a), the new experience stands as an expression of the collective identity.

With regard to *Flight*, Rahiem writes:

In terms of the content of the piece I think the piece was entirely ours, not belonging to one specific individual. We all understood each other's birth stories, saw each other's solos and went through the process of recreating and reconstructing each other's pieces. It became a piece about us, our stories.

And in the story that belongs to everyone exists six sides to each layered one expressed to the audience, as muddled and fused as Nidaa's explanation that the piece is "My feelings used to show your feelings as I tell your story which has become mine."

RACHIS AND BARBS: DESTABILIZING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE THROUGH ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCE

Thematic Layering through Reflection

The shifts into and from each other's pieces aligns *Flight* with a particularly Derridean structure of meaning, precise spacing and *dissemination*. Though it risks reducing the ambiguities of Derrida's work, the simplest explanation of the notion of *différance* (for "it is neither a word nor a concept" [Derrida 1982:7]) is that it produces temporization and spacing between words. In language, "there is only difference" (Derrida 1982:11), which is to say that the system of concepts, words, and ideas exist only as a series of plays of difference. Understood meaning comes from differing, from

being discernible. Additionally, a word defers meaning because it can never reach that to which it refers, or the “thing itself” (Derrida 1982:9). There is no fulfilment of meaning, only deferment and temporization. *Différance* encompasses these two operations. The play of language—or of *différance*—allows the system of meaning to avoid finitude and formalization. A plurality of meanings must not be enclosed in a term but rather the term must, in its deferment and *dissemination*, be open and generative (Derrida 1981:45). Our syncretic approach exhibits a Derridean plurality in its multiple meanings represented but never closed or restricted. The differences within a single “text” result from play with empathy and understanding, the layering of voices into one story. Our rigorous feedback when creating material was crucial to this process, as was thorough reflection and discussion at key moments.

The intensive process of reflection offered opportunities for the voices to interact from the very beginning. Our early discussions around the narratives gave the company material to which they could later return as well as identified and promoted links among the stories. At each stage of creating work, a discussion was organized, in addition to the physical and written tasks that encouraged a different kind of reflection. Discussions, which occurred immediately after each telling or performance, challenged the ensemble to respond with their impulses. Response activities structured themselves as fill-in the blanks such as “This is a story about _____,” or directly asked for one word answers to what stood out to the respondents. By asking for answers that were not thought out, I hoped to access what the other performers had identified with in the piece rather than what they had analyzed in their reception of it. Once the instinctual response had been assessed, further discussion led us to more eloquent interpretations.

Because we thoroughly dissected each step of the process, performers often returned to the group’s thematic interpretations when constructing the next step or later when crafting nuances into a piece, which meant including the collective voice from an early stage. Much of Rahiem’s major contribution to *Flight* was developed in this way. During the first rehearsal, I had the actors casually walk around the room while talking about everything they knew of the day of their birth—the catch was that they could not stop talking. Rahiem’s recurring topic that day was the tension between his passion for life and his family’s expectations. We as a group picked up on this and articulated as

much to Rahiem. This helped Rahiem frame the narration of his birth, when each performer shared his or her respective birth story at the end of the first week, and when he later turned into a solo performance. His narrative contrasted memory and fact, which the group paralleled to his focus during the earlier stream-of-consciousness exercise. The group conveyed to him that both pieces thematically distilled to a tension between rawness and sterility. “When it came to developing my piece,” Rahiem confessed, “I didn’t know where to start. So I went back to the little piece that I’d written.” He decided to focus on “the rawness, the earth[iness], the desire for passion” in his solo piece. While the group did not give him his own experience, we articulated it for him. In returning to the theme we identified in the piece, there was interplay between what the group read and identified with in his work and the initial impetus for the work. His narrative grew with the company’s understanding of it, and it expanded even more with group suggestions as we developed the “Fugitive” section.

Nidaa similarly returned to her initial narration. Even after we began expanding it, Nidaa was really unhappy with the performance she had created. She allowed the group to direct her back to the searching theme she had shared. Even though we reflected a great deal and contributed to each other’s narratives it is important to remember when examining the process that one can only feedback to what has been offered. Though we know what is “hidden behind” expressions (Stein 1967:6), the expression must be offered first. Even if explanation helps to understand, we must first hear that explanation. Thus we could offer Nidaa alternatives only by drawing out what was already within her offering. Fortunately, this related to the overall theme, and Nidaa found resonance in the narrative.

In both cases, returning to early ideas was not a return to an original idea but functioned rather as an inclusion of other readings. The ensemble’s understanding modified the idea, which was then reincorporated into the iteration of the narrative. There was no attempt to reassemble what had been present, but rather an allowance for difference, for play with(in) the idea. In each stage of development, the new difference enters discourse while the thing itself—the singular narrative introduced by the performer—is deferred. Only the plurality persists.

While early reflections offered direction and uncovered links, reflection and discussion later in the process allowed us to acknowledge and exploit the differences in each performer’s

understanding of the pieces. Once the piece had taken shape, we paused work on the material and broke to evaluate where we were and to unify our stories. I asked a series of questions and had the performers respond in their journals so they could express themselves without censorship. In discussion, everyone was invited to share their responses. In contemplating thematic and emotional issues, we often referred back to the person who had initiated the narrative of that segment, but we were at this point no longer identifying the different sections with the performer who had created the solo on which the piece was based. Though we sought the inventor's insight, the places of "contradiction" were really variations on that segment's theme. This variation (within a variation) allowed for the complexity of meaning, particularly in "Map." Each performer seemed to have a slightly different sense of what "Map" revealed about belonging, which is natural because every person can relate to memory, life and death as they are what make humans human. However, the slightly different understandings brought equally different energies into the piece, even as the ensemble performed seamlessly as a whole. The varying qualities of the performance brought diverse perspectives making the piece a true meditation rather than a sermon. To adapt Husserl, the thematic reality could only have been constituted by acknowledging and appreciating the variety of "sides" brought to the piece.

Since we intended the piece to be ours and not any one person's, I encouraged all of the performers to allow each of their different comprehensions of any given moment to exist in the performance of it. "Play your part but be aware of what the larger scene is communicating." The "diagnostic reflection," as the performers decided to title their pages, shows why and how we had really ended up with the theme and variations structure. We started with each variation existing as one voice expressing a different side of the central theme. Through the collaborative process we allowed all of the diverse voices to layer into each section. But because the performers understood each other's experiences so well and because everyone's understanding was influenced by different comments throughout the process, the layering did not create dissonance but rather harmonic complexity. Even the way in which people wrote in their books reflected the layered and polyphonic method. Nidaa and Liesel in particular wrote their responses in one color and then scribbled over, around and in their own responses with notes from others' comments in another color. Parts that

others identified with or iterated as well are circled to highlight the points of focus without erasing the other elements they are communicating. In the very ink there is interplay, layering and complement. The layering evidences *dissemination*, as the structures of meaning always remained open to the ensemble. Each allowed the other to generate new differences and communicate more. This could only have arisen out of the deeply personal relationship each performer nurtured with the others' stories.

Multiplicity of Meaning in the Aesthetics & Structure

Whereas many treat ensemble as a single entity and ensemble performances as singular communications, the syncretic ensemble of *Flight* embodies an “irreducible and *generative* multiplicity” (Derrida 1981:45, emphasis original), both through its process, as described above, and in the structure of the performance. Previous attempts to build an ensemble that speaks together resulted in groups that communicate in one aesthetic and with one central idea. Grotowski's work, though admirable, unifies the performers in sameness through neutrality. The performances then convey Grotowski's ideas and style because he took a strong leadership position as a director. Even intercultural works that seek to present a hybrid version of culture only serve to present one view of these cultures (Bharucha 1984a, 1984b, 1988). Unlike this work, *Flight's* collective identity subverts the structure of a single narrative or reassembled sum because each moment contains and expresses the different interpretations of each member of the ensemble and allows the communication of the piece to live beyond the performance.

The aesthetic and structure of the performance also evade the trap of a dominant narrative. The cast was chosen for its openness and its ability to straddle different modes of expression. Even when these skills were weak, the process developed them through exercises or catalyzed a personal investment from the performer that drove each of them to find strength and ability, as with Liesel's mastering of an entirely new genre. Additionally, the content of the piece came from many sources and therefore cannot be ascribed to one experience; its “origin” is irretrievable. Beyond the personal stories which came from six different human beings, the texts scattered throughout were sourced from diverse material including the traditional British stage, African poetry, popular American songs, and



published essays. The piece was built from disparate material and thus avoided a univocal expression in that sense as well.

The idea of many voices speaking one story in the ensemble was often reinforced structurally and

visually in *Flight* to allow conflicting meanings to coexist. The “Flat in Grey Street/Duet” section displayed the different voices and their positions through separate actions. The central double duet performed by Nidaa, Rahiem, Leonie and Ikalafeng both created a barrier and expounded on the theme of belonging as a trap. The contrasting simultaneous solo performances of Liesel and Rethabile represented opposing responses to entrapment. In the arrangement of the piece, performers spoke in voices that were not only varied but were sometimes not their personal expressions, calling



Fig 13. Top. The first moment of the double duet. **Fig 14. Above.** Chalking the floor in “Ostrich Pt. 2: Aporia.”

the role of authorship and thereby meaning into question. The different elements worked harmoniously: they blended beautifully but were separate tones. In this way a multiplicity of meanings was allowed. The chalk on the floor materialized this multiplicity. The many layers of writing that built over the course of each performance included different interpretations of belonging. Each person's associations to the idea of belonging were inscribed. Bodies were outlined to express the sense that one belongs (or does not) in one's skin or the shape of the body. Numbers and identifying information denoted the institutionalization of belonging. And finally, places of birth and home were marked in chalk representing both geographic belonging and, in "Map," the memories and familiarity that create belonging. The plurality of meanings embodied in writing necessarily destabilized the idea of definition. It also plays with idea of authors because the chalk remains after the performance, thus a sense of ensemble lingers in the space. The author's "signature" (Derrida 1982:328), a repeatable code of numbers, lines, and words leaves the text to be (re)interpreted and thus its meaning left open. In various ways, the structure of the piece seeks syncretism and multiplicity in the unified performance.

The way *Flight* developed demonstrates that our sense of ensemble becomes the embodiment of the struggle against singularity and containment. The idea of syncretism and the shift from unison to unified, from univocity to plurivocity destabilizes the idea of a dominant narrative or a reunification of polysemia. The polyphonic voicing of narrative and theme opens space between meanings, allowing for a generative and linked multiplicity. Little in the piece is resolved and no thematic exploration privileged. If we accept that subjectivity is itself a product of *différance* (Derrida 1981:28) and that deconstruction "does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated" (Derrida 1982:329), then *Flight* itself functions as a deconstruction of the idea of belonging. By acknowledging the productive differences among the performers and allowing those to feed and create its own mode of expression, the piece destabilizes the normative method of articulation of the collective and belonging. The various themes presented, built and stripped expose the constructive element of iteration. Even the final moment of the piece, which depicts an ostrich, a bird native to southern Africa and more importantly a bird that cannot fly,

is not an answer but a question in the shape of an aporia that undermines the notion of absolutely belonging in the first place. The ostrich is meant to belong to the bird family but lacks the defining quality of the species: flight. The theme and variations structure allows plurality but in *Flight*, the coda does not resolve the theme but anticipates further shift, deferring meaning and transforming concepts.

LANDING: A FEW CONCISE CONCLUSIONS

This interrogation focused on how empathic understanding could contribute to the creation of a syncretic ensemble. Instead of unifying the group by imposing an aesthetic, we sought to embody each other's stories as a way to build understanding and link the ensemble. Our primary means of accessing each other's stories was through physical means such as associative choreography and through explanation and reflection. Coming together in this way created a deeper investment and thus a tight ensemble of discrete individuals.

Fig. 15. "I just can't fly": The final moment.



Early in the process, we allowed ourselves to be guided away from “hypernaturalistic mimesis,” which is admired in the documentary work of Anna Deavere Smith, and discovered that

shift was essential to the idea of syncretism. We did not seek to switch mannerisms or performance identities but rather to create a collective identity that included each individual within the ensemble. Approaching embodiment through associative choreography opened the possibility for each performer's interpretation of another's experience to find its way into the group narrative. This manifested in the performance of another's choreographed phrase, a many-phased process of creation and feedback from another's memory or associations, and lastly, the investment of oneself in another's story through personalization. Every individual story was filtered through six other minds and bodies into the performance of *Flight*, yet a univocity was avoided because each person retained their own understanding even as communally, the ensemble understood the layers and the central communication.

The plurivocity of the performance allows us to draw the conclusion that syncretism, which was clear through the expressed sense of ensemble simultaneous to the maintenance of individual markings, aligns itself with a structure of meaning that aims to transform the hierarchies inherent in language, or other modes of communication. The layering within process produces a polysemia, already destabilizing any notion of a singular or dominant narrative. Moreover, the active reflection included in the process promotes the mentality that productive difference is welcome; no one interpretation is correct and meaning is never closed. In that way, the multiplicity of meanings present onstage refuse reassembling into a single totality that *contains* plurality and becomes generative and irreducible, open to further play.

The move we offer in relation to ensemble and syncretism then is the collaborative and generative approach that build a "we" from each individual "I" rather than bringing everyone down to a predetermined "we." Associative choreography has served the development of syncretism and is already influencing the field of physical theatre, having been used in the creation of Kieron Jina's *Facing Shadows*, presented in March at the 2010 FNB Dance Umbrella. Our reading of empathy allows performers to engage with an other's story, enhance it, and fuse their own experience so that the expression becomes inextricable from individual and from ensemble. In this way we have woven our experiences together into a syncretic, more-than-polysemic performance which speaks from each and all of us.

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APPENDIX A

Working Script for *Flight*

This script is provided merely to evidence the structure of the performance not as a complete guide. The script is a *working* text. It was compiled as a reference for the performers and as an aid for the stage crew during performances. Please note: shorthand and private language are used; the occurrence of movement is noted in the text but not scored; a number of small changes made during final rehearsals have not been noted (e.g. order of crosses); and borrowed text is demarcated with footnotes. Please refer to the enclosed DVD for greater specificity.

flight

variations on the theme of belonging

WORKING SCRIPT

compiled by Sarah Schwartz

from work by
Nidaa Husain
Rethabile Mothobi
Leonie Ogle
Liesel Retief
Ikalafeng Tigelo
Rahiem Whisgary

As performed 10-13 February 2010
Wits Downstairs Theatre

Opening

Whispering birth rhythms.
When house lights go down, get chalk from mantelpiece and return to your spot.
Birthdates in number form in chalk on the floor.
Birth phrases begin. Staggered.
Music fades in after first switch. No more whispering
 OLSEN OLSEN – SIGUR ROS
Switches. People performing each other's phrases.
Liesel returns to CS. Does her cycle once. Begins second time. Arms drop.

Ostrich Part 1

Each responds to the following questions as if being interviewed. Questions are not asked.
After last person finishes each response, wait two beats before next response.

- *Your name?*
- *We're going to send you to Earth. . . . [Birthplace] to be specific.*
- *And do you have any siblings we should send along?*
- *Since we're sending you to South Africa, we need to prepare an ID number. Is there something you can remember?*
- *Great. And what time would you like to go?*
- *Thank you. Have a nice journey.*

Reach for door handle. Everyone clumps to Ika.

Fugitive

IKA, NIDAA, LIESEL, RAHIEM whisper.
THABI & LEONIE speak numbers.
 T & L: 5 / 12 / 1 / 9 / 8 / 7 / 8712055011086
Break 1 – Clump is SR IKA goes SL
Break 2 – Clump moving DS in SL IKA and NIDAA break arc to CS(L)
Break 3 – IKA, NIDAA, LIESEL, RAHIEM break to DSR; Clump moves diagonally from USR to DSL.
Break 4 – IKA, NIDAA, LIESEL, RAHIEM four break to DSL. Clump is CS.

Choice

RAHIEM struggles; bursts open the clump into the choice tableau.
RAHIEM breaks tableau; he contracts; THABI & LIESEL to SR, IKA & NIDAA to SL;
LEONIE to chalk US.

6-2-3

LIESEL & THABI do right side choreography.
IKA & NIDAA do left side choreography.
LEONIE writes equations.

RAHIEM: *If I look at the numbers six two three, I think six is two times three
 Or Five Seven Nine. Five plus two hypothetical equals seven. Plus another
 hypothetical two equals nine.*

*They all have a common link.
There is always an angle or a pattern. It doesn't have to mean something or
have cosmological significance. It just is. And the most important part of that is
that everything fits.
Or—yes—everything can be perceived as fitting.
Or needing to fit
Or fitting but with ulterior implications. Or maybe what does fit is a paradox
to how it should fit or would fit. Or the paradox is that nothing fits but perception,
relativity, attitude, convenience and balance.*

A Flat in Grey Street (Duet)

TEXT w/ LIESEL slow cross

T,L,I,N,R: *A flat in grey street*

TLIR: *drenched* T,L,R: *in* T,R: *bustling* T; *poverty*

L,R: *seeing only coloureds and blacks*

L: *her hair only half done*

L, N: *up down* N: *she breaks like the waves*

R, I, T EXHALE ON 'SH' -----> CARRY UNTIL SPEAK AGAIN

T: *trapped between*

sea and sand

R: *history and dream*

I: *past and future*

L: *her life and mine*

N: *her body and mine*

T: *she rushes through illegality*

RAHIEM & NIDAA TO DS DUET MARK

R, N THREE QUICK BREATHS

the exhaustion, T,L: the weight T, L, I: *of genesis pushing* T, L: *through her* T: *body*

R, LIE, N TAKE LONG EXHALE OVER THE LINE (AFTER FOURTH INHALE)

there I was

IKA & LEONIE TO US DUET MARK

linking the end and the beginning

RAHIEM/NIDAA; IKA/LEONIE: Double duet begins with music.

MY ANGEL ROCKS BACK AND FORTH – ROUR TET

LIESEL - Complete solo simultaneous.

Shift to oceanic movement.

CANON: *She said I was so eager to come out her stomach moved like waves.*

RAHIEM, NIDAA, LIESEL, IKA, LEONIE, THABI

Interlude

ALL: Age. Date and place of birth.

Permanent address.

Date of entry into the country.¹

Four

LEONIE chalks 4 equation. Others in cube.

RAHIEM: *Four like any number is simple and beautiful as it is a whole that can be broken up in different ways, but still always equals the same thing.*

Searching

Each performer peels off stage after their last line leaving NIDAA alone.

IKA: The sky is blue black

I & RAHIEM: starlings unfold their wings

THABI & LIESEL: quit their pediments

LEONIE: to write THABI & LEONIE: a letter returned.

RAHIEM: The setting sun fills teeth with gold.

RECORDING & LIESEL: Like a shred of meat

RECORDING: I'm lodged in this town.²

NIDAA: Clowning bit—looking, alone.

Central figure travels between. Jumps/pushes off/tries & rejections.

Cued to DURBAN entrance, music:

INNOCENCE - BJORK

DURBAN	N+ Leonie	USL (1/4)
JOHANNESBURG	N+ Ika	DSC (just right of)
DURBAN	N+ Leonie	USL (1/3)
JUMP	N+ Thabi	USR
SEARCH	Nidaa	
DUBLIN	N+ Liesel	DSL
JUMP	N+ Ika	USR
SEARCH	Nidaa	
JUMP	N+ Rahiem	USL
CROSS	N+ Liesel	DSC (across front)
LICHTENBURG	N+ Thabi	USR (enter on diag.)
DURBAN	N+ Leonie	CSL
PUSH	N+ Liesel	USR
FIETAS	N+ Thabi	DSR
MAYFAIR	N+ Rahiem	CSL (one step DS of C)
CROSSES	N + T	
	N + Leo	
	T	
	Lie +R	
	Th + I	
	Ika +N	
	L +Leo	
	N + Leo & T +Rah	
TWINS START MOVING	Ika	USL to Center
	Leonie	DSR to Center

Twins come to each other back to back; half circle.

¹ From John Berger's *And Our Faces My Heart Brief as Photos*.

² *Ibid.*

THABI enters from USR, RAHIEM enters from USL. Stand just on stage in dark. They speak the text.³

THABI: MEG RAHIEM: PETEY

MEG. *What is it?*

PETEY. *Er—a girl.*

MEG. *Not a boy?*

PETEY. *NO.*

MEG. *Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather have a little boy.*

PETEY. *A little girl's all right.*

MEG. *I'd much rather have a little boy.*

Twins drop, rock foot to sleep. LEONIE is DS, IKA is US.

Map

LIESEL: *I couldn't cry as a baby—it never really came out.*

L,T,R,N: *Stop.*

THABI: *Morningside Medi-Clinic: A young white man.*

L, T, N: *Stop.*

This is her second life.

R: *Stop.*

THABI outlines IKA & LEONIE

NIDAA: *Today I linked crying to birth.*

L, T, R, N: *Stop.*

THABI draws map and cycle begins with choreography.

Tembisa – LEONIE starts.

Olifantsfontein - IKA starts.

New Road – RAHIEM starts

Allandale – IKA starts

Woodmead – NIDAA starts

Grayston – LIESEL starts

Morningside – LEONIE starts.

Text:

LEONIE: *I felt out even though I was inside.* ALL: *Stop.*

THABI: *I didn't want to go back to the place of my birth.* ALL: *Stop.*

LEONIE & NIDAA: *I felt out even though I was inside.* ALL: *Stop.*

(FROM HERE, ONLY THE RECORDING "SPEAKS." "STOP" IS LIVE.)

THABI & IKA: *I didn't want to go back to the place of my birth.* ALL: *Stop.*

LEONIE, NIDAA, RAHIEM: *I felt out even though I was inside.* ALL: *Stop.*

THABI, IKA, LIESEL: *I didn't want to go back to the place of my birth.* ALL: *Stop.*

NIDAA & LEONIE: *I wasn't inside enough to count.* ALL: *Stop.*

THABI: *Leaking*, LIESEL: *dripping*, RAHIEM: *oozing*, IKA: *twirling*. ALL: *Stop.*

NIDAA: *I wasn't inside enough to count.*

Twelve. Oh One. One Nine Eight Eight.

Something's wrong.

Twelve. Oh One. One Nine Eight Eight.

Something's wrong.

Eighteen. Twelve. One Nine Eight Seven.

Something's wrong.

³From Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

Eighteen Twelve. One Nine Five Four.

Eighteen Twelve. Nineteen Fifty Four.

Music builds underneath text

STILL - LOLCANO CHOIR

Cycle through the places a few times then all breaks out from Tembisa to write age, date and place of birth, permanent address. And "The heart of the real."

Twenty-Two

RAHIEM: *Twenty two. Twenty two is balanced. Two is synechdocal of twenty two. When you break it in half it's not a lonely one but still a two. I'm always negotiating two different states of mind. Twenty-two is equal balanced and somehow benevolent.*

Interlude⁴

LEO & I: What astounds cannot be
the remnant LEO: of what
has been.

LIESEL: Tomorrow still blind
advances slowly.

RAHIEM: Sight and light
race towards each other,
and from their embrace
is born the day
eyes open.

'SIGHT' TO 'OPEN': FIBER ON 'EYES' AS IF MORNING LIGHT

NIDAA: Can something, hope,
wish day come,
not choose not to be.

THABI: these fragments,
random pebbles I pick up from the landscape of my own experience,
T & I: traversing

IKA: the same arid wastes
in a montage of glimpses I allow myself

RAHIEM: or stumble across

IKA & RAHIEM: taking the road
to the pass which leads

RAHIEM: surprisingly
with its own familiarity

NIDAA: to another homeland.

FROM 'STUMBLE' TO 'HOMELAND' FIBER ON 'FLIGHT' LIKE IT'S YOUR OLDEST JERSEY.

THABI: Soon the grass will be warmer
than the cows' horns.

IKA & LIE: The astounding comes

LIE: towards us outrider IKA: of death and birth.

Ostrich Pt. 2 – The Aporia

Enter. Whooshes past.

⁴ Text from John Berger, Dennis Brutus, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

IKA Questioning:
What's happening?
Why is everyone fighting?
Is this Rustenberg? {Li ___?}
What year is it?
Do you know [brother's name]?
Do you know [sister's name]?
Do you know my mother?

Body outlines.

NIDAA (DEAD)	From SL	N exits DSR
LEONIE (DRAW)	To DSR	
LIESEL (D)	From USR	Lie exits SL
RAHIEM (DR)	To DSL	
LEONIE (D)	USR	T enters from SR
THABI (DR)		
RAHIEM (D)	US	R exits USL
NIDAA (DR)		
THABI (D)	DSL	Lie exits
LIESEL (DR)		
LEONIE	USL	tumble
RAHIEM		
NIDAA (D)	DSR	N exit SR
THABI (DR)		
THABI	DSR	collide
RAHIEM		
RAHIEM (D)	DSL	
THABI(DR)		
NIDAA		bump
LIESEL		
THABI		
LEONIE		
RAHIEM		
NIDAA		
NIDAA (D)		
LEONIE (DR)		
LIESEL (D)		
NIDAA(DR)		
LEONIE		
RAHIEM		
LEONIE	DSR	collide
THABI		
THABI (D)		
LIESEL (DR)		
RAHIEM (D)		
NIDAA (DR)		
RAHIEM/LEONIE		collide
LIESEL		
NIDAA		collide
THABI		
NIDAA		trip
RAHIEM		
NIDAA (D)		
LIESEL (DR)		
LEONIE	USR	L catch R, struggle
RAHIEM		

LIESEL, NIDAA
THABI

struggle

IKA's dream of flying.

Outlines hit slow motion on NIDAA's death SL before LIESEL's USR.

IKA does ostrich walk through the action.

I'm flying.

I'm flying so high.

Ostrich.

Something's heavy.

I can't seem to find my feet.

Something wrong.

I can't.

I just can't.

I can't fly.

Ostrich through slow motion.

Everyone hits hands to head. Step with left foot. Lights out.

