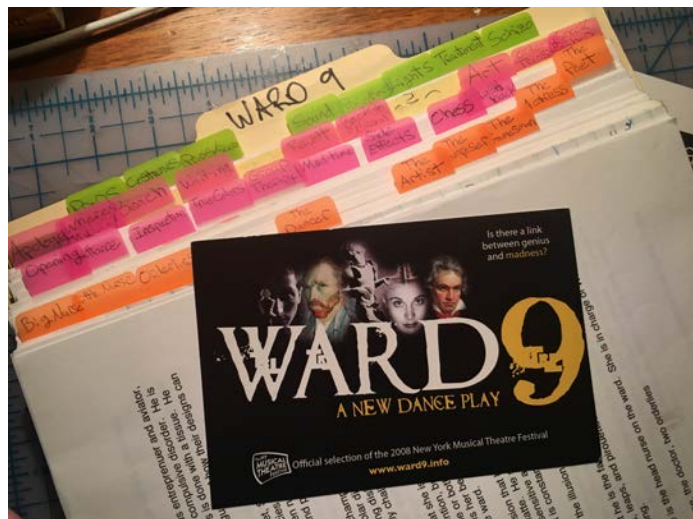


Matthew C. Williams
Statement of Research
10/19/19

I see American theater as something that must continue to evolve with the shifting social and cultural climate of this country. New stories should be told as new faces enter the realm of theater making. New concepts of old stories should also be presented to expand our existing perspectives. My primary research interests are in the creation of new narratives through multi-disciplined performance modes, the exploration of new methods in interpreting pre-existing theater work, and the unearthing and dramatizing of new ideas motivated and inspired by existing historical texts and stories.

My passion to create stories with the aid of music, dance and a narrative structure began with my undergraduate work in 1996 at the University of California at Irvine. UCI was a tremendously supportive environment that both nourished and propagated my artistic impulses. Under the guidance of instructors such as modern dance pioneer Donald McKayle and David Allan of the National Ballet of Canada, I was encouraged to fully explore my choreographic aesthetic and find new ways to tell stories through movement and dance. I discovered in those formative years that I loved the research aspect of theatrical creation. Discovering the work of master composers, writers and visual artists expanded my desire to emulate them and to disseminate their work. I choreographed many small pieces utilizing the compositions of classical composers, early American folk music and original, faculty-generated compositions. My work focused specifically on the correspondence of story and character-gesture to musical composition with the aid of prop and costume design. I was often told that my work appealed to a much broader audience than to just that of the immediate dance community.

After graduating from UC Irvine, I moved to New York City and began a more decisive quest to create larger, full-length works that maintained a clear narrative. Between and between my professional performing and choreographic career, I began a 10-year exploration of comedic theater-dance work set to the work of classical composers such as Beethoven, Vivaldi and Bach. In 2002, I conceived a 30-minute story ballet in four movements set to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Titled, *Four Seasons*, the work dealt with conflicts arising from troublesome personal encounters in New York City's Central Park. The creation of these vignettes required extensive research into 1) the behaviors, activities and clothing styles of Central Park occupants, 2) the geography and structure of the park itself, and 3) the psychology behind human confrontations. The project had a successful run of performances as part of the 2002 International Dance Festival sponsored by Broadway Dance Center.



After several more years of continued exploration of smaller works and professional theater gigs, I upgraded the scope of my research in 2008 into a full-length dance play called *Ward 9*,



set to an all Beethoven score. The development process included combing through the 722 works of Beethoven in the selection of appropriate material on which to set the movement. I also co-wrote an original story. The play, based on a fictitious mental institution housing several of the most creative and emotionally damaged icons in history, required a comprehensive analysis and investigation into both mid-20th century mental asylums and the professional and personal lives of each historical character. The magnitude of the project also called for a collaboration with design and production teams. The project went on to win the Best of Festival Award for Choreography at the 2008 New York Musical Festival. I hope to revive this project in the near future with revisions and added dialogue inspired by new ideas and inspirations.

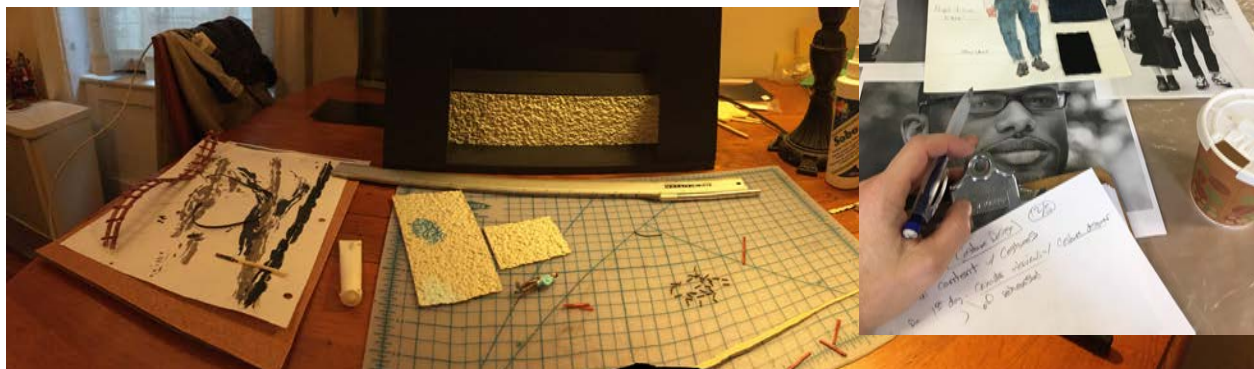
As I have matured as an artist and have developed numerous professional relationships, my creative interests have branched out well beyond dance and enveloped the world of spoken text, sung narrative and musical book-writing. I began my theatrical training as an actor performing in both plays and musicals and, as a result, much of my research interest lived in the world of musical theater. I was curious as to what new combinations of dramatic tools I could bring to the stage and what unexplored territory I could explore in my search for new musical ideas. Prompted by my production of *Ward 9*, I was approached by Broadway producer Jeffery Richards in 2009 to develop a dance-play based on a popular French gangster film called *Borsalino* and set to the music of French jazz composer, Claude Bolling. I elicited the co-writing help of my colleague, Gregory Victor, a historian, dramaturg and Broadway stage manager. After Gregory and I adapted a synopsis of a dance-play from the film, Mr. Richards and I flew to Paris and successfully gained permission from Mr. Bolling to go ahead with the development of the project. Gregory and I spent the next 6 months fleshing out the story which culminated in a presentation of several fully choreographed numbers with a 20 page, detailed synopsis of the story. Gregory and I also spent several months researching the 23 recorded albums of Mr. Bolling's work and selecting and editing a score for the play. Many hours were occupied with the study of the film and its source location and characters as we created our adaptation. While the project was never commercially produced, I hope to revisit the piece, possibly doing so in a university setting.

Later that same year, Gregory and I completed a revised book for the 1955 Cole Porter musical, *Silk Stockings*. Earlier in 2009, Gregory and I had been working on the revision as an informal exercise until we realized one afternoon that it had great potential. We presented the finished revision to Mr. Richards which included a comprehensive restructuring of scenes, several song replacements and revised dialogue to better reflect a post millennial sensibility. Mr. Richards felt our revision was superior to the existing version and immediately arranged a meeting with the Cole Porter estate to discuss approval and a potential commercial run. In the end, our revision

was not produced, yet it served as an invaluable experience for me as a writer, director and researcher and bolstered my professional relationship with Mr. Richards.

My association with Gregory Victor continued in 2010, as we embarked on a mission to create a new musical utilizing the catalogue of songs from the 1980's platinum-selling band, Violent Femmes. Gregory and I successfully gained the endorsement and necessary legal permission from songwriter and lead singer, Gordon Gano and then proceeded to write a full-length book-musical incorporating Violent Femmes music. The musical, titled *Hitting the Ground* was about a fading rock star whose tour plane crash-lands in the remote Appalachian mountains and is rescued by an isolated community of devout mountain Shakers. We self-produced a reading two years later and gained an enthusiastic "thumbs up" to continue the project. Gregory had to withdraw from the project and I developed a new writing partnership with Debra Barsha, a musical theater composer, arranger, book-writer and Broadway musical director. Debra and I started from scratch and wrote an entirely new book for the musical, entitled *In Tongues*, based on a escaped slave in 19th century who finds sanctuary in a Shaker Village. In 2014, we partnered with PCPA Theaterfest in California to produce another successful reading. I've now set out on my own in a solo book-writing effort on yet another new book of a Violent Femmes musical. Mr. Gano's investment in the project and his trust in me as a collaborator continues. He stated that the beginning of this third effort to be the most promising yet. I have learned a great deal about writing dialogue, the infusion of song into story, and in addition, become a competent dramaturg throughout the evolution of this project.

Graduate school has pushed my creative interests into yet another level of theatrical exploration by way of playwriting, puppetry, stage and costume design. In-depth study and analysis of the history of theater has also been a springboard for many new ideas. I've taken courses in the development of the New York City theater district, Ancient theater histories of Greek, Roman, Japanese, and Indian cultures and a survey of the Russian and American movement of Dramatic Naturalism involving pioneering institutions such as the Moscow Art Theater, The Group Theater and the Actor's studio.



There are a number of areas of my research that I envision developing into useful and invigorating course study. I have a great diversity of theatrical work experience which, combined with my current investigations, point toward hybrid type theater classes that utilize movement, design and writing to more fully explore play texts and musical theater reparatory. As a director, choreographer and writer, I find great value in the act of creating art work, as a form of learning.

I imagine acting courses that utilize student-composed work as a springboard for learning. I believe that an effective actor must gain a broad experience of world culture and traditions. Theater and dance courses that excavate material from all of the humanities is of great interest to me. My work choreographing for musical theater has inspired my interest in group devised theater that is rooted in music, dance and poetry. I also envision a class in the Philosophy of Acting inspired by the writings of authors, Peter Brooke, Ann Bogart, William Ball and Michel Saint-Denis. It is through the thoughts and musings of these great artists, that I've formed my directorial sensibilities.

I predict that my research will continue to drive me forward into a future full of new discoveries in theater. I plan to conceive and write new stories told through the use of music, dance and spoken dialogue. I will continue to develop my skills as a playwright, musical book-writer and story adapter. I will continue to approach theater making in a wholistic manner incorporating set, costume, sound and lighting design as the inspiration for the development of material. Within the next year, I plan to complete the book for my Violent Femmes Musical, *Shaker House*, and begin workshopping the material with the objective of a commercial run.

There are legions of obstacles that can potentially block the creation of new work in the theater. The deficit of time, money, space and energy are some obvious hurdles that I've repeatedly encountered. Over time, and through the experience of self-producing in New York City, I have developed skills to confront these obstacles and succeed in spite of them. I have found that the challenges often turn into meaningful lessons. I have used those lessons to become a better problem solver and a more patient observer and I embrace future challenges. Furthermore, I have built up the level of mental stamina required to relentlessly pursue elusive answers to difficult questions. I know my curiosity will continue to push me deeper into new ideas and discoveries of academic and professional theater.