CUL-DE-SAC: SOCIAL CONVERSATION THROUGH RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE

Peter J. Bennett

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Peter J. Bennett  
Candidate  

Department of Theatre and Dance  
Department  

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:  

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:  

Donna Jewell, Chairperson  

Mary Anne Santos Newhall, PhD  

Vladimir Conde Reche  

Kirsten Pai Buick, PhD
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The men’s duet in *cul-de-sac* is my love letter to you.

- Peter J. Bennett, (March 2014)
CUL-DE-SAC: SOCIAL CONVERSATION THROUGH RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE

by

Peter J. Bennett

B.F.A., Theatre Studies, Niagara University, 2003
M.F.A., Dance, University of New Mexico, 2014

ABSTRACT

Cul-De-Sac: Social Conversation Through the Lens of Jazz Dance, discusses the rise of the suburbs following the Second World War, the homophobic society of the 1950s forcing homosexual men to hide in the closet, and the role of women within the suburban community, and how the research into these social issues evolved into an evening’s length piece of dance theatre told through the language of jazz dance. Jazz dance is a distinctly American art form, often overlooked on the concert stage. In this dissertation, I endeavor to prove that jazz is a style of dance capable of carrying social messages to audiences. I will investigate the lives and roles of gay men and domestic women in 1950s America, identifying the gaps of knowledge that house potential for future research. Finally, I will discuss these roles and subsequently describe my choreographic process in reinterpreting these roles on the concert stage for my MFA concert, cul-de-sac.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*cul-de-sac, Social Research, and Performance*

Being a choreographer means having an outlet for my voice in the form of dance. In the seven-month period from August 2013 until mid-February 2014, I embarked on the enormous and, at times, overwhelming task of creating a story and the movement vocabulary that would express it and structured that vocabulary into an evening’s length performance. This work developed into my MFA thesis concert, *cul-de-sac*. The process of choreographing this work revolved around two central tasks: researching mid-century America and finding a movement vocabulary that was invocative of the time, yet felt fresh and new. I spent hours rehearsing with dancers of different abilities and personalities. In presenting *cul-de-sac*, I sought to spark conversations about social injustice during the 1950s, including those related to gay men and domestic women.

In developing *cul-de-sac*, I sought to construct my impression of 1950s suburbia.¹ My notions of this period stemmed mostly from popular culture, television, movies, and novels. This vision included the picture perfect nuclear family, rows of neat houses with manicured lawns, friendly neighbors who typify the stereotype, and the universal craving for an escape to an outside world, ever present, yet seemingly unattainable. My aim in choreographing *cul-de-sac* was to create this imaginary suburb using theatrical conventions of implementing a narrative to tell a story of a community, a set design that suggested the location of the work, and common characters my audience would relate

¹ See Appendices A, B, C, and D for information regarding a concert recording, the concert program, cast and crew credits.
with. The characters were of utmost importance, because the audience must be able to relate to the dancers on stage, in order for them to have a cathartic experience.

I have a personal connection to the suburbs. My childhood was spent in Niagara Falls, New York. We lived downtown on 18th street, a part of town that was racially and socio-economically diverse. There was a sense of community on the street where I grew up complete with friendly neighbors sitting on their porches, drinking cans of Coors Light while their children played in the yard. However, this section of town began to experience a rise in gang violence and drug trafficking on street corners. As a result of this shift, my parents decided to search for a new family home.

When I was fifteen, my parents found their “dream house” north of Niagara Falls, in the suburb of Youngstown. In 1996, Youngstown, New York was a haven of Caucasian, upper middle class protestants. My parents chose this spacious quarter acre of land as an investment property. This two-story home housed three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms; it was one of many such houses in the neighborhood, all similar in style and construction. Neighbors here did not speak to each other; they judgmentally kept to themselves. A landscaping company immaculately groomed each lawn on the block. This house was my parent’s asylum from the riff-raff of the city.

At fifteen, I was flamboyant and obviously did not fit into this homogenous community of football and soccer players. My family and I lived in this community, yet there was no doubt that I did not belong there. I experienced how anything out of the norm became a general subject of ridicule. In time, I was shocked to find that this seemingly average suburb was not the picturesque world of Leave it to Beaver. The idyllic life of the suburbs was not reality. The manicured lawns and white picket fences
hid the ugly side of the suburbs. The isolation of the suburbs from the perils of the city world became my personal prison.

I was constantly pressured to behave in a “normal” fashion: from neighbors, teachers, and my fellow students. In an effort to avoid harassment from others, I was trapped trying to fit in as best I could. I tried to speak like everybody else. Concealing the natural sway of my hips, I physically altered the way I walked. Despite my façade, I was bullied, called a “faggot,” slammed into lockers. I was punished for being different.

These memories of my time in suburbia served as inspiration for cul-de-sac. I began to think about the American suburban sprawl in the 1950s and the stereotypical images that came to mind. The women who wore strings of pearls, fitted bodices and full skirts and the men in grey flannel suits served as my inspiration. I wondered, what was hidden underneath these images? Could these idealized forms have been trapped in their own respective personal prisons as I had been?

During the creation of cul-de-sac, I also thought about the life of the homosexual population in the 1950s. My life in the suburbs as a closeted gay man in the 1990s was challenging, which I knew only too well, having been ostracized myself. What about the lives of gay men in the conformist times of the 1950s where there was not only the Red Scare, but the Lavender Scare as well? Being openly gay was dangerous. One could lose their job and go to jail labeled as a sexual deviant if their true orientation was discovered, or if they were even thought to be a homosexual. I imagined men who married women to keep up appearances living in ranch houses and having affairs with men on the side, desperate to keep the secret from the conformists that surrounded them. I also thought about the role of the woman as the happy homemaker in the 1950s. Less than a decade
before, during the Second World War, women were out in the work force and then put back in the domestic sphere. How did that affect women? How do ambitious women survive in the domestic sphere?

As I set to work on cul-de sac, I began to develop a unique movement vocabulary. As a performer, I fell into jazz dancing. Jazz was and remains the mandatory language required for fluency in musical theater. Diana Laurenson who was the dance captain on the show Big Deal and on the National Tour of Dancin’, introduced me to the technique of jazz master Bob Fosse. In New York City, I studied with the great Sheila Barker and Ginger Cox. At Niagara University, I studied jazz, tap, and musical theater under choreographer Terri Filips Vaughan. At the La Commedia Dinner Theater, I spent months dancing the role of Bobby in Michael Bennett’s A Chorus Line. I danced in the National Tour of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, choreographed by Paula Sloan in the style of Michael Kidd. Recently, while spending time with the American Dance Legacy Initiative in West Palm Beach, Florida, I learned the Danny Buraczeski Étude.

As a recipient of these aforementioned gifts, I have had the privilege and responsibility to carry jazz dance into the future. All of these incredible connections to the world of jazz dance have given me a unique perspective. I have learned that it is a viable artistic means of expression that represents the melting pot of the United States: jazz dance represents the wealthy, the poor, the gay, and the straight. For my usage in cul-de-sac, the vocabulary of jazz dance served as a universal language, able to be widely understood.

Movement vocabulary is how the dancers conveyed the meaning of the piece. I wanted a movement vocabulary that was peppy, exciting, and flirty. It was also important
to me that all of the dancers could execute my vocabulary well. Jazz music was the popular form in the 1950s. The relationship between the dance and the music called for cohesion of the dancers, in sync, eventually developing a symbiotic relationship where dance is the expression of the music. To me, that harmony signifies the ideal of the suburbs, the idea that family, place, and society all function in harmony. I gave my ten dancers phrases of movement material from the jazz vernacular canon, including camel walks, isolations, pirouettes, and double attitude leaps. Elements from 1950s movie musicals are referenced throughout cul-de-sac. For instance, I referenced the sensual image of Gene Kelly lifting Cyd Charisse from Singin’ in the Rain’s iconic “The Broadway Melody” (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Gene Kelly lifting Cyd Charisse in the 1952 “The Broadway Melody” sequence. (Singin’ in the Rain)

Figure 2: cul-de-sac Episode One: Ty Redding lifting Jacqueline Garcia (foreground) and Thien The Le lifting Ashley Quintana (background). (Berrett)
Dissertation and MFA Concert Goals

Jazz dance is a distinctly American art form, often overlooked on the concert stage. In this dissertation, my endeavor was to prove that jazz is a style of dance capable of carrying social messages to audiences. I investigated the lives and roles of gay men and housewives in 1950s America, and was able to identify the gaps of knowledge that house potential for future research. Lastly, I discussed these roles and described my choreographic process in reinterpreting these roles on the concert stage for my MFA concert, cul-de-sac.

The issues I raised in cul-de-sac and this dissertation are as follows: the rise of the suburbs following the Second World War, the homophobic society of the 1950s forcing homosexual men to hide in the closet, and the role of women within the suburban community. These subjects were dramatic in nature and represented part of our nation’s history. The image projected of the suburbs by the United States government, television, and marketing as a utopic place to escape the hazards of the city, where families could live in comfort with like-minded people set against the social discord of the time made for great dramatic tension. Representing these issues on the stage, not only showcases these issues in our nation’s history, but it also reflected these issues as they stand today. Today, the LGBT community is still fighting for equal rights. Since the 1950s, the suburban housewife’s role in society has expanded further than wife and mother; however, on average, women still do not make as much money as men, and there is still the ever-present glass ceiling.²

² For more information on the 1950’s suburban housewife and their role in society please see, Glenna Matthews’ book Just a Housewife.
This concert and dissertation have entered the queer and feminist conversation. The goal of the concert was to present the plight of the homosexual male and women’s limited role in 1950s suburban society in an entertaining manner. My hope was that by engaging the audience, it would elicit an emotional response by casting a sympathetic light on these issues.

Furthermore, the social and creative research that went into creating cul-de-sac is breaking new ground in jazz dance on the concert stage. Jazz dance is not often seen on the concert stage and there is little concert jazz dealing with queer themes, which gives evidence that queer issues are in need of creative and scholarly research in regards to the genre of jazz dance.

**Review of Literature**

In researching this topic for my MFA concert and dissertation, I looked to multiple sources ranging from non-fiction books, articles, websites, and novels to television shows and movies. The creation of cul-de-sac and this dissertation would not have been possible without reviewing the following primary and secondary source materials.

One of the primary sources used to conduct this research was William H. Whyte’s 1956 groundbreaking sociological book, *The Organization Man*. Whyte’s writing established the type of man who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s, the type of work he performed, and how he functioned in society. The movie musicals, *An American in Paris*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and *The Band Wagon* were viewed to establish a movement vocabulary that would be reminiscent of the 1950s aesthetics. The 1958 film of
Tennessee Williams’ *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* provided a pertinent example of the treatment of women, specifically through the role of Maggie the Cat. A large portion of the research into the idealized world of the suburbs, and the rigid gender roles of the time came from viewing situation comedies that aired during the 1950s, specifically the shows, *Leave it to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, The Honeymooners,* and *I Love Lucy*. In reviewing queer dance on the stage the following pieces were exceptionally beneficial; Bill T. Jones’ *Still/Here*, Mark Morris’ *Dido and Aeneas*, Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake*, and Danny Buraczeski’s *Scene Unseen*. Jones’ *Still/Here*, while bringing up queer issues, it did not actually present homosexual pairings. Morris’ *Dido and Aeneas* queered the roles of Dido and the Witch by having a man dance these roles traditionally played by women (in the original production Morris danced both roles). Bourne’s interpretation of the classical ballet *Swan Lake* was by far the best representation of men partnering one another on the stage. Buraczeski’s *Scene Unseen* is the primary source in queer concert jazz dancing.

The secondary sources provided information on the development of the suburbs after World War II, the role of the suburban housewife, and the political climate homosexuals faced in the 1950s. Laura J. Miller’s article “Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal,” detailed the history of the suburbs and how the suburbs were presented as the ideal location to foster family togetherness. Peter Bacon Hales website “Levittown: Documents of an Ideal American Suburb” provided superb images of the construction of Levittown, construction methods, and how they were marketed. Alan J. Levine’s *Bad Old Days: The Myth of the 1950s* and Michael Lewyn’s “Suburban Sprawl: Not Just an Environmental Issue” provided statistics on the development of the suburbs. Mary Beth
Haralovich’s article “Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” and Patricia Mellencamps’s “Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy” illustrates the how the situation comedy worked to portray an idealistic representation of the suburbs, and how they enforced staunch gender roles. David K. Johnson’s The Lavender Scare and Robert J. Corber’s Homosexuality in Cold War America provided insight into the persecution of homosexuals during the 1950s.

There is a significant amount of research conducted into the rise of the suburbs, television and the gender roles of the 1950s. Where there needs to be considerable research done is in the field of queer studies. There is very little work done in regard to the homosexual and the suburbs. Furthermore there is very little research looking into the men and women living in the closet at this time. This research is very hard to conduct seeing as these were people in hiding. However it is important to track down people who have since come out of the closet. These men and women are entering into their seventies and eighties and it is necessary to document their stories before these resources are gone forever.

**Inspiration and Research Collide**

The result of this inspiration and ensuing research into the rise of the suburbs in 1950s America gave way to the creation of *cul-de-sac*. From the French for “bottom of bag,” a cul-de-sac is a circular row of houses that surround a dead-end street.

In the simplest of terms, *cul-de-sac* examined the lives of five couples residing on an imaginary cul-de-sac. The work is comprised of four sections, which I have called “episodes” as a nod to the 1950s sitcom as well as the television, then rising in
popularity. Episode One entitled “cul-de-sac,” is set to the music of Red Norvo Trio, Charlie Parker, and Chet Baker. The opening establishes the picture perfect 1950s suburban life as seen in *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*.

Episode Two, “Close(t),” broke down the happy image established in the first episode. This episode featured two couples that have grown increasingly frustrated with their partners and themselves. The first section was set to Miles Davis’ “All Blues,” which established the tone for the melancholy lovers. The movement vocabulary was bound and repetitive to show the monotonous day in and day out of these couples’ lives. As “All Blues” ended, the women exited the stage. John Coltrane’s “Slow Dance” began to play, and the men entered a lush and romantic *pas de deux*, which revealed their lust, desire, and love for one another in a culture that would not be willing to accept or acknowledge the presence of such connections between men.

Episode three, “Tethered,” featured the women of this community. Set to the music of John Cage, “Tethered” looked at the role of the women in this society and their frustration and rage from being kept in the home. The movement vocabulary and the score were strikingly different from previous episodes. The choreography was sharp, percussive, and angular. Cage’s score featured polyrhythmic tempo and was played on a prepared piano creating a dissonant and eerie tone.

Episode four, “cul-de-sac Redux” looked back to the first episode, “cul-de-sac.” The opening music “Little White Lies” by Red Norvo Trio played again, but it quickly became distorted with many layers of sound added on top of it. The movement vocabulary also changed; the happy poses seen at the beginning are now violent, the movement became sharp and percussive. This episode showed the cracks that have begun
to show in the façade of the 1950s suburban ideal, and exposed the audience to the building tensions that developed into the rebellion of the 1960s.

These thoughts, images, and questions are what guided me through my research while choreographing my MFA Concert- *cul-de-sac*. The goal of my choreography was to effectively communicate with my audience, not only the themes and narrative of a *cul-de-sac*, but to bring to life the research into these specific social issues that went into creating my art. By successfully recreating the world of the 1950s on stage, I hoped to show the world both the progress that has been made in regards to women’s and gay rights and the work that still must be done.

Each scene in the concert I called an “episode.” Every episode was introduced with a short film that incorporated period sitcoms and television advertisements. Calling each scene an episode and using television images in the short films were direct references to television’s influence on this time-period, and the research that went into developing *cul-de-sac*. I chose to organize this dissertation into five chapters: “Introduction”; “The Rise of the Suburbs and Creating Episode One ‘cul-de-sac’”; “Life in the Closet, Choreographing Episode Two ‘Close(t)’”; “Tethered”: Fighting the Woman’s Role in the 1950s; and “Conclusion.” Each episode deals with a specific social issue of the 1950s suburban community. As a result, I chose to discuss the research and the choreography of each episode of the concert in the same chapter, as opposed to the traditional dissertation format of introductory chapter, research chapter, choreography chapter, and conclusion. I made this decision with the reader in mind, so they may better understand how the research into these specific social issues in each episode is established and portrayed in its resultant choreography.
CHAPTER TWO

The Rise of the Suburbs and Creating Episode One “cul-de-sac”

Research: Examination of American Suburbs in the 1950s

The years following World War II saw an unprecedented growth of the suburbs in the United States. Alan J. Levine cited in his book “Bad Old Days”: The Myth of the 1950s that between 1945 and 1954 nine million people moved to the suburbs from the cities, and from 1948-1958 eleven of the thirteen million new homes built in America were in the suburbs (123). This was due to returning soldiers receiving the GI Bill, more affordable housing in new developments due to new production techniques as well as growing highways.

Suburban life was the answer to the “American Dream” for millions of Americans looking for home ownership and a place to raise their children away from the squalor of the city. According to Robert J. Corber in Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity:

In the five years following the end of World War II, expenditures on household furnishings and appliances rose 240%. By 1949, Americans had purchased 21.4 million automobiles, 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 11.6 televisions. Housing starts [developments] grew from 14,000 in 1944 to an all-time high of 1,692,000 in 1950. By the mid-1950s, the increase in the Gross
National Product was due almost entirely to consumer spending on durable goods and residential construction. (6)

This quote clearly demonstrates the increase in suburban American consumerism. These communities appeared to offer a homogenous haven, filled with people of the same class, race and sexual orientation who consumed the same products. However, the white picket fences and the isolation from neighbors helped to keep an unknown number of people’s sexual orientation hidden in the closet.

The United States government paved the way for the growth of the suburbs by giving incentives to those who moved to the suburbs. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) founded during the New Deal era, substantially changed how Americans bought property. Prior to 1934, a prospective home-buyer would need about 33% of the cost as a down payment, and the length of the loan was between five and ten years (Lewyn 305). However, because of the high monthly cost of these loans most of them defaulted during the depression. To combat this, the FHA began offering long-term, low down payment mortgages: 10% down with a repayment period between twenty-five or thirty years (Lewyn 306). This tied with the home loan guarantee from the GI Bill, which between “1944 to 1952, VA backed nearly 2.4 million home loans for World War II Veterans” (“Education and Training”). According to Levine, “half of all new houses were FHA or VA supported and virtually all were built to FHA standards” (Levine 128).

Along with the GI Bill and mortgage guarantees from the FHA, Michael E. Lewyn also presents another reason for the move to the suburbs from the cities: the FHA approving mortgages in “low risk” areas only (Lewyn 306). Lewyn details the FHA’s guidelines as of low-risk areas as:
...areas that were thinly populated, dominated by newer homes, and without African-American or immigrant enclaves nearby-areas that disproportionately tended to be suburban. For example, one FHA underwriting manual taught that the FHA should concentrate its efforts on newer, lower-density areas because ‘crowded neighborhoods lessen desirability,’ and 'older properties in a neighborhood have a tendency to accelerate the transition to lower class occupancy.’ (306)

These government guidelines made it next to impossible for people to get a mortgage in the city. This essentially took the middle classes out of the city and created urban ghettos for the minorities and the poor. Eventually, this shift added fuel to the suburban ideal of getting away from urban squalor. The government regulations contributed to the rise of and the homogeneity within the suburbs by not allowing multifamily homes and not approving loans for “older properties,” which made properties inaccessible to the lower class occupancy, including African Americans and immigrant populations³.

The government further subsidized the suburbs by constructing new highways and interstates, meanwhile neglected mass transportation such as subways and buses systems. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 saw the expansion of forty-one thousand miles of the interstate system with twenty-five billion going to pave the roads (National Interstate). The result of this legislation was the growth of the suburbs and the reliance on the automobile to get to and from the city. This further alienated the “lower classes” from the joys of the suburbs since one had to have a car for transportation within the

³ Please see Lewyn, pg. 305-310
community and to urban areas. This is further evidence of the government’s neglect of the lower classes in the 1950s.4

Besides the government’s subsidies, new developments in housing construction expedited the building of new homes. Developers such as the Levitts used new power tools, plywood instead of heavier traditional wood and prefabricated parts, and non-union workers to build the homes making the houses quick and cheap to construct (Levine 129). In fact, in 1948, Levine cites as many as “150 houses were completed every week” in Levittown, New York. The Levitts built two styles of homes. The first was the Cape Cod style. In 1949, they expanded to build the ranch house, which was more expensive and fashionable (Levine 129-130).

The Cape Cod model was simplistic in its design. It featured a living room and kitchen in the front of the house, looking out on the street and two bedrooms and a bathroom in the rear of the house. The biggest draw of this style of house was its low cost: under eight thousand dollars, which was easily affordable with the FHA and VA housing loans.

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4 Please see Lewyn, pg 305-310
The design of this house ensured that the family shared time and space together. The Ranch model possessed a more modern look to it and featured a carport in the entryway. The set up was very similar to the Cape Cod. It still featured two bedrooms, one bath, living room, and kitchen, however, the set up flipped. The living room looked out on to the backyard, and featured picture windows linking the family to the outdoors. Hales cites this design as:

…”the embodiment of suburban living ideals: the house closed itself off from the street, and turned instead back toward the family “garden” and, beyond it, the commons. This was a vision of a house that could be appropriate to the conditions of suburban life, in which work (in the city) was sequestered from life, leisure, nurturance, in the home. It reflected and reinflcted long-held American theories about the ideal house. (Hales)

The Levittown model became popular with the Levitts who developed Levittowns in Long Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Levittown became the ideal living situation for middle class white Americans. The identical rows of housing along with the white, mostly Protestant families living in these houses created homogenous suburbs, separated from other communities by color and class.

**Research: The Situation Comedy and the Suburbs in the 1950s**

My vision of the 1950s stemmed from afternoon reruns of classic television sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet,* and *Father Knows Best* that I watched as a child. These programs were all set in the suburbs and featured happy nuclear families. These situational comedies each presented families for whom any conflict found
resolution in half an hour’s time with help from the firm but fair father. These “family friendly” sitcoms did more than just entertain the family: they mirrored the lives of millions of suburbanites. Simultaneously the sitcom mirrored the suburbanites while reinforcing gender roles. Sitcoms in the 1950s placed women in the domestic sphere, and displayed men as the breadwinners. This was especially important in the years following World War II. When the war ended, women left the work force, returned to the home, consequently opening up space in the work force for returning male veterans.

Sitcoms played an important role in this transition, as they ideally displayed the suburban world with happily married couples in “traditional” gender roles and promoted that woman’s natural place as being in the home (Haralovich 71). Sitcoms also enforced the middle class’ role in consumerism, promoting racial segregation and the image that the suburbs were the ideal place for a white nuclear family to live out their own version of the “American Dream” (Miller 407; Garnett 283; Haralovich 72). In her article “Family togetherness and the Suburban Ideal,” Laura J. Miller defines the suburban ideal as “finding a homogenous community of like-minded people... living in a home that provides comfort and diversion, and quite centrally, about finding an environment in which family ties can be strengthened” (395). Leave it to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, and Father Knows Best promoted the suburban ideal through images, and setting (the family home). These shows revolved around everyday situations and portray the family spending leisure time together (Morreale 4). The viewers saw Ward coming home from work with his briefcase in hand, greeting June with a peck on the cheek. The family home was set on a suburban street with nicely manicured lawns and neighbors who look similar to the Cleavers and the children are playing ball outside on the front yard. These images
presented the suburbs and the suburban home as escapes from the realities of work and city life and a forced or false harmony within the home, where women and men played specific roles. This superficial image of harmony in the home was about to be challenged by the cultural revolutions of the following decades.

**Performance: Designing Episode One**

The design of a show significantly affects the end-result of a production. As choreographer and artistic director of *cul-de-sac*, it was up to me to clearly describe the look I was going for as well as the intention of each episode and the concert as a whole to my designers. I was fortunate to collaborate with a brilliant team, each of them worked to the top of their abilities to bring my vision of 1950s suburbia to life. Sets, costumes, and lights alike, each element supported one another and the aesthetic of the show. The design team was crucial to bringing the setting and the mood of the concert to fruition.

The set for *cul-de-sac* was born out of a desire to represent the suburbs in an abstract manner. Set designer Lydia Lopez and I created a world based on a bird’s eye view of Levittown, New York circa 1948. The high contrast of black and white is reminiscent of the black and white television shows and photos of the period. The set consisted of five flats (one in each corner of the stage and one upstage center). Each flat was in the shape of a house. However, they were abstractly painted using the bird’s eye images of the suburbs, featuring the shape of a cul-de-sac, off ramps of the highway, and design of the neighborhood. Running across the top of the stage were two borders, one downstage and one mid-stage. The borders were also in black and white with abstract designs based on the shapes and pattern seen in suburban planning. Figures 5 and 6
illustrate how Lopez and I incorporated the bird’s eye view into the set. The aerial shot of Levittown was painted on the downstage left flat, and the bird's eye shape of the cul-de-sac was visible in the downstage right set. The set design served multiple purposes: first it created the suburban setting with an abstract twist, and informed the audience of the world they are entering. Secondly, the set design worked to frame and isolate the space, drawing on Miller’s assertion, “suburban families are isolated from different classes and races, and the individual family is isolated from everyone else” (405). The set physically limits the space of the stage, as it framed the space for the audience the way a picture or television frames, and it isolated the dancers from the outside world, the way the suburbs isolated its residents from life outside their homes.⁵

Costume design was an important element in constructing a concert set in a specific time and location such as the suburban environment of the 1950s. The cut and

⁵ American suburbs appeared as early as the late 19th century. With the urbanization of the 1900s, families were crowded into apartment-style homes in larger city centers. After WWI, the popularity of tenement houses and company towns declined; the 1920s gave rise a focus on constructing single family homes. For a more in-depth discussion of this housing shift and post-WWII suburban boom, see J.B. Mason’s History of Housing in the US and Laura Miller’s “Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal.”
silhouette of 1950s fashions are iconic. The men wore conservative attire, mostly suits, and the women wore synched waists and full skirts (DiSalvo, Goodrich, and Waltos). The original concept for the men’s’ costume came from the novel and subsequent film The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit. The men were to be in suits (preferably in shades of grey, blue, and black), however, budget restrictions forced the men into casual attire. The men wore dress pants and varied short sleeve button down shirts reminiscent of the shirts worn by Desi Arnaz on I Love Lucy. The women wore dresses with form fitting bodices and full skirts with petticoats. The women’s color scheme consisted of bright primary colors. The costumes for the women help to illustrate the women as seen in the 1950s sitcoms, with coiffed hair and layers of make-up displaying them as sexualized objects of the men. The costumes established the dancers/characters as upper middle class.

The lighting design by Amaris Puzak played a large role in setting the tone and mood of this episode. Puzak used bright-saturated colors seen in the Technicolor films of the day like the 1953 classic Singin’ in the Rain. In “cul-de-sac,” Puzak saturated the whole stage with light leaving no shadows in this world. It is radiant and harmonious. The bright colors warmed the black and white set pieces and complemented the dancers’ costumes. The designs for this section illustrated an ideal world: a world filled with color and light, where everyone has a lovely house, and everyone lived the “American Dream.”

**Performance: Choreographing Episode One**

“cul-de-sac” incorporated popular images associated with the 1950s. The history and nature of the suburbs influenced movement and spatial themes, where as the sitcom became an important role in developing the aesthetic and structure of the concert.
I consciously wavered from the research of the 1950s suburbs in casting *cul-de-sac*. Historical accuracy would demand an all white cast, however, this was not possible for *cul-de-sac*. I envisioned a large cast to signify the growing population of the suburbs. Finding a group of five proficient male dancers in Albuquerque, New Mexico proved to be difficult, thus I decided to cast based on talent rather than skin color.

While initially not finding an all-white cast was a hindrance, not finding a historically accurate cast broadened the overall reflection of society portrayed in *cul-de-sac*. I made it a point then to show the homogenous nature of the suburbs through unison movement. I displayed a group of ten people performing the same steps in the same time and space without any discrepancies or divergence illustrated the conformist nature of the suburbs. Using a multiethnic cast of Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, I was able to present a reflection of society as a whole and the melting pot that America claims itself to be for the benefit of my 21st century audience. With such a diverse cast, everyone in the audience was able to find someone with whom they could racially identify and perhaps even empathize.

The first of the film segments introduced the audience to the setting and time-period. Edited by Anna Peralta, the film incorporated images from 1950s newsreels. The images included happy families outside their pristine homes, automobiles driving down a sunny street lined with trees, a line of blissful brides tossing their bouquets, and husbands returning home from work with subservient wives waiting at the door to greet their spouse. This segment established the time-period, the locale, and gender roles of the 1950s America.
Jazz dance and music have been two of my biggest passions in life. Jazz dance began as and continues to be a bodily expression of the music in space and time, creating a beautiful harmony between music and dance, and it supported my intention of creating an idyllic and harmonious world in the first episode. Episode One, “cul-de-sac,” featured three pieces of jazz: Red Norvo Trio’s “Little White Lies,” Charlie Parker’s “Bluebird,” and Chet Baker’s “Street of Dreams.” These pieces of music were chosen for several reasons: they were released either in the 1950s or prior, the music itself emulates a happy and blissful mode, jazz music and dance were a popular forms in the era, and lastly because jazz is an indigenous American art form. In the 1950s, jazz dance was the popular form of movement, seen on Broadway and on the silver screen in movie musicals such as *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), and *The Band Wagon* (1953). These movies and the choreography in them are iconic. They featured not only jazz dancing, but ballroom, tap, and ballet as well. These movies highly influenced the movement vocabulary used in “cul-de-sac.”

This episode opened with the couples in silhouette. I distributed the dancers evenly across the stage with one couple per corner and the fifth couple occupying center stage. The opening positions represented each couple’s “home” (Figure 7). Throughout the concert, the couples returned to the same location.
The full cast remained on stage throughout “cul-de-sac.” Having ten dancers taking up the stage highlighted the growing population in the suburbs of this time. The ten bodies consumed the space, just as the Levitt family consumed farmland in Long Island, New York to create their suburb Levittown. The lights come up on the dancers as they performed a series of poses: ladies sitting on the knee of their man, the woman with her arm entwined in the arm of the man, and the head of the women resting on the shoulder of the man. In all of these positions, every face on stage displayed an exaggeratedly wide smile. These poses represented the gender roles of the 1950s and the performativity of the happy couple.

The opening positions, also inspired by popular sitcom husband and wives such as June and Ward Cleaver from Leave it to Beaver (Figures 8 and 9), seek to emulate the gender roles prescribed in these television shows.
Examine the pose of June and Ward in Figure 8. June is small, she is fixing Ward’s tie, implying the domestic role she happily serves. She is gussied up with fully coiffed hair and makeup indicating her desire to please her man and turning her into a sexual object. Ward is taller displaying dominance, and is kissing June on the forehead the way one would kiss a child indicating his superior intelligence and role as the decision maker. Ward’s suit highlights their middleclass status and his role as the money earner. This image displays the stereotypical gender roles seen in this era. The women are subservient to the men and are objects of their sexual desire.

The couple from cul-de-sac is pictured in one of their opening poses from Episode One in Figure 9. This pose is similar to that of Ward and June in the positioning of the bodies. The man’s body is dominant over the woman’s. He wraps his strong arms completely around her in a tight embrace, displaying his control and that she is his object. Much like June, the woman from cul-de-sac appears contented in her role of housewife. Her arms wrap lovingly over the arms that hold her in. She is happily kept and taken care of.
When the couples began to move, they stayed in their homes and danced in unison. Having each couple dance in an isolated space and in unison represented the isolation and hegemony of the suburbs. When the dancers congregated together, it is in a social manner, indicative of a block party or backyard barbeque. The group briefly ceased to move in unison when I introduced a canon where one couple or two couples begin a movement phrase and the others followed. This was the dance equivalent of keeping up with the Jones. When the couples partner each other, it features traditional roles: men displaying, lifting, and turning their female partner. Again, the women were highlighted as sexualized objects to be taken out and shown off for the community. Episode One ended with the couples returning to their “homes” and reverting to one of their original poses. The piece ended with the performative happy couples still intact.

“cul-de-sac” sought to recreate the happy remembrances of the 1950s, a prosperous time with cheerful nuclear families. The economy was strong and supported by a growing middle class who could escape the hassles of city life and work by escaping to their own homes in the suburbs, a world where everyone is similar and there is no worry of the outside world and its dangers of nuclear war, depressions, and overpopulation. This episode was critical to the piece, as it established the dominant culture of the 1950s and its conventions. In her article “Queer Swans: Those Fabulous Avians in the Swan Lakes of Les Ballets Trocadero and Matthew Bourne,” Suzanne Juhasz stated, “to alter the conventional, one needs some kind of reference to those conventions in order to communicate the idea that changes are taking place” (55). Episode One serves this purpose, as it established the collective images of suburban 1950s seen through the lens of popular culture.
CHAPTER THREE

Life in the Closet, Choreographing Episode Two “Close(t)"

Research: Review of Queer Choreography

As a twenty-first century choreographer, I seek to present jazz dance on the concert stage that presents queer themes, the status of gay men in history, and reflect the present state of homosexual civil rights. AIDS is no longer a stigma due to advances in medicating this disease. Political protests by the Act Up group and performance artists such as Ron Atley, plays such as Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, and television shows such as *Glee, Will and Grace*, and *Modern Family* have brought the plight of the homosexual male into mainstream American attention. As a result of these protests and the outward presence of the gay population, the American homosexual has a stronger foothold in mainstream American society. In the post-onset of AIDS society, there are various examples of queer dance, theatre, and performance pieces. Three examples of those making queer concert dances today and who have influenced my work are Bill T. Jones, Mark Morris, Matthew Bourne, and Danny Buraczeski.

Bill T. Jones’ works *Still/Here* (1994) and *Untitled* (1989) are two examples of his choreographies that dealt with his experiences with death and the AIDS epidemic and death in general. *Still/Here* premiered in New York City in 1994 amidst the AIDS Crisis. It was a product of Jones’ workshops with terminally ill people, those quickly approaching the ends of their respective lives. Jones and members of his company hosted workshops in Austin, Texas; Iowa City, Iowa; New York, New York; and Boston, Massachusetts (Cunningham, Piontek 79). He videotaped the workshops where he had
the participants create different gestures out of what they were feeling or leaving behind (Cunningham, Piontek 80). Some of these people were AIDS patients, while others had cancer or other terminal diseases. Jones himself is openly HIV positive. From these workshops, Jones would take these gestures and manipulate them, along with his company, transforming these gestures into his movement vocabulary. Gretchen Bender, a media artist and Jones’ collaborator on the piece, filmed the workshops and made a multi-media presentation that aired on stage simultaneously with Jones and his dancers as they performed *Still/Here*.

Upon its premiere, *Still/Here* became a lightning rod for controversy surrounding the conversation around those inflicted with HIV/AIDS. Arlene Croce, the dance critic for *The New Yorker Magazine* at the time, refused to review *Still/Here*, calling it “victim art” in her article “Discussing the Undiscussable.” At this point, AIDS was viewed as a “gay” disease; this controversy brought new attention and light to this major homosexual issue. Although Jones identifies as a gay man and queer artist, this piece is not overtly sexual in either a hetero or homoerotic nature. What this piece accomplished was a conversation amongst critics and artists as to the nature of art and how to critique taboo subjects that deal with death and homosexuality.

Mark Morris’ *Dido and Aeneas*, set to Henry Purcell’s opera from 1689, and premiered at the *Théâtre Varia* in Brussels, Belgium on March 11, 1989 (“Mark Morris Dance Group: Dido and Aeneas”). Purcell’s opera told the tale of Dido, the Queen of Carthage, and her lover Aeneas, the Trojan warrior and the Sorceress who plotted their demise. When Aeneas abandoned Dido on the Sorceress’ biddings to go to battle, Dido was unable to cope with her broken heart and killed herself. Morris queered this work by
casting himself as both Dido and the Sorceress. The cast, male and female alike, were clad in sarongs and black crew neck sleeveless shirts, with red lipstick and gold earrings. These costumes skewed the gender lines, as did Morris’ choreography. In her article “Bad Languages: Transpositions in Mark Morris’s Dido and Aeneas,” Selby Wynn Schwartz stated:

*Dido and Aeneas* is a drag dance… Morris’s [sic] choreography of gender expression presents masculinity and femininity as a set of behaviors, postures, and gestures that play across male and female bodies alike. Not only does Morris appropriate conventional elements of gendered movement, heighten and stylize them, and use them to convey meaning in his narrative dance, but he also asks his dancers to perform gestural speech-acts that are arbitrary—and possibly transformative—with regard to their own identities as speakers. (74-75)

By queering the gender roles, Morris created a homosexual pairing between his Dido and Aeneas, danced by Guillermo Resto. The gestural nature of Morris’ choreography limited the physical interaction between the two male dancers. Their love story was communicated through the lyrics of the opera and Morris’ gestures, which were physical interpretations of the libretto. Here, Morris presented a visual queering of the central love figures; however, in limiting their physical relationship to gestures and only one lift in the Grove scene, Morris limited the scope of their sexuality.

*Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake* inspired me to choreograph unapologetic queer male dancing in my MFA concert *cul-de-sac*. Bourne’s reimagining of the classical ballet *Swan Lake* features an all-male *corps de ballet* of swans instead of the tradition female
swans. The queering of the gender roles created a homosexual pairing between the Prince and the Lead Swan. Bourne twisted the traditional conventions established by classical ballet. Suzanne Juhasz stated in her article “Queer Swans: Those Fabulous Avian in the Swan Lakes of Les Ballet Trockadero and Matthew Bourne”:

As an art form, classical ballet is based upon time-honored and rigorous conventions, involving everything from the steps performed to the basic clothing and shoes worn to the postures that dancers may take. Gender roles are an integral part of these conventions: there are accepted ways for women to dance and for men to dance; there are ranks in a company to be occupied by women and by men. Ballet as an art form is, in fact, a superb site for observing Western rules for gendered and sexed behavior. Because art arises from the culture in which it is developed, seeing the links between artistic conventions and cultural conventions—and vice versa—is informative. (55)

Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov’s 1895 classical version of Swan Lake has been one of the most recognizable works in the ballet canon. Swan Lake’s notoriety in large part was due to the iconic image of the Swan Queen in her white tutu, pointe shoes, and feathers in her hair. The swan was and continues to be the ballet symbol of feminine beauty, an image engrained of the psyche of western culture. Bourne’s choice of an all-male cast of swans supplanted the cultural image of the swan as the ideal feminine beauty. His shirtless swans wore feathered pants with corseted waists, which presented a new, queer image of the swan. They were powerful predators, exotic, and masculine.

6 For examples of the swan being used to typify beauty, see Jennifer Fisher’s The Swan Brand: Reframing the Legacy of Anna Pavlova” and Lynn Garafola’s “Why A Swan? A Seminar on Swan Lake.”
Bourne’s homosexual pairing of the Prince and Lead Swan in the second act of his version of *Swan Lake* presented a large rift in the traditional gender roles of the classical *pas de deux*. In the classical version, the Prince lifted, turned, and presented the Swan Queen Odette to the audience. She was an object of beauty meant to be displayed. In Bourne’s interpretation, the Prince and the Lead Swan were presented as equals. Their *pas de deux* featured them dancing in unison, and highlighted their connection to one another. The Prince and the Lead Swan alternated lifting each other and sharing each other’s weight, which displayed a relationship of equals. Compared to the partnering in the classical version, Bourne’s homoerotic duet of a man dancing with a male swan presented a homosexual relationship as a metaphor of the shifting of gender roles in contemporary society.

Since its premiere in 1995, *Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake* received both critical and commercial success. Bourne won the 1999 Tony award for best choreography for the Broadway production of his *Swan Lake*. Almost twenty years later, this work is still finding success on tour. Widely recognized as the “gay *Swan Lake,*” Bourne himself did not promote the show in this manner (Juhasz 58). Bourne points to the fact that the swans are animals and figment’s of the Prince’s imagination, negating and silencing the homosexual aspect of the piece, placing the homosexuality of the show back in the closet. In his book *Mathew Bourne and His Adventures in Motion Pictures*, dance critic Alastair Macaulay quotes Bourne, who states: “That was something that probably interested me from the first: the sexual issues within it. Because our production was so big and so much of a gamble (financially), I probably have played that down to some extent, in terms of the way I talk about it” (194).
On the one hand, Bourne created a dual coming of age/coming out story with his *Swan Lake*, creating a tragic hero in his Prince who cannot survive as a homosexual in the real world of the royal court. Bourne’s production highlighted the persecution of gay men and how they were at odds with the heteronormative world. On the other hand, Bourne willfully downplayed the homosexual factor of the show. Apparently, he did this so he would not offend or draw political lines, so that he could hopefully assure a greater number of audience members. Thus, he effectively silenced the homosexual subtext of the piece, enforcing the straight paradigm and pushing the homosexual nature of the piece back in the closet.

More than the works of Jones and Morris, Bourne’s *Swan Lake* significantly impacted my choreography. Displaying a homosexual relationship on stage, using men partnering one another, and his eventual denial of the show’s homosexual nature spurred my desire to create an unapologetic romantic love affair between two men. The movement between the Swan and the Prince mixed ballet and modern vocabularies by incorporating and altering classical lines with grounded weight, the use of contractions, and parallel legs. Bourne’s nod to classical partnering, featured both men as support and flyer, and markedly presented both of the men as object and objectifier. Essentially, through his use of partnering, Bourne created a relationship of mutual attraction, desire, will, and power. These elements of Bourne’s choreography significantly affected the structure and movement vocabulary of my men’s duet in the second episode of my concert (Figures 10 and 11).
Research: Queer Concert Jazz Dance and Danny Buraczeski’s *Scene Unseen*

Jazz dance is rarely seen on the concert stage. Generally, it lives in the world of popular entertainment: Broadway and movie musicals, music videos, and television (e.g. *Fame* or *So You Think You Can Dance*). Jazz dance is part of popular culture and therefore, it is not high art;\(^7\) it is often overlooked in the concert dance world. There are exceptions of course to this: Giordano Dance Chicago, Matt Mattox’s company Jazzart, and Danny Buraczeski’s troupe Jazzdance. The only of one of these three companies still in existence is Giordano Dance Chicago, leaving a significant void on the jazz concert stage.

One account of jazz dance representing queer themes is Danny Buraczeski’s *Scene Unseen*, a piece choreographed for Jazzdance, his former company. *Scene Unseen* premiered on December 6, 1998 at the O’Shaughnessy Auditorium at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota (Buraczeski, “Re:”). The work was presented in honor

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\(^7\) For a discussion of Jazz and popular entertainment as low art, see David Savran’s *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, And The Making Of The New Middle Class*. 
of the One Hundredth anniversary of Duke Ellington’s birth and featured Buraczeski playing the role of Ellington. Buraczeski built *Scene Unseen* around the real life relationship of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn and their rumored affair. Buraczeski stated:

Ellington and Strayhorn were often talked about as ‘soulmates.’ The title “Scene Unseen” says it all. The dance presents suggestions of the relationship. The audience gets to come to its own conclusions.

The men are in white tie and tails. They take off the jackets at certain points. It is very glamorous, which is what I wanted. The women (four of them) are in beaded gowns. I got them from a guy in Minneapolis who sold old pageant gowns - mainly to drag queens. They were spectacular. One of the four women is in a beautiful velvet suit. It was a specific choice about gender roles. They all have fans, at times large feather vaudeville-like fans and at times smaller fans. They are used in lots of ways, some times to cover up what is happening. The women also represent the music, the music was the bond between the two men - very important.

(Buraczeski, “Re.”)\(^8\)

In the opening duet, Buraczeski created the picture of two like-minded men who move together in synchronized unison. The low lighting in this first scene, which subsequently remained throughout the piece, obscured the lower bodies on stage. The only clues to the movements taking place in the lower body were the echoing reactions in the torso. Told through simple series of gestures, this scene established the men getting

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\(^8\) For the complete transcript of this 2014 Email Interview between Peter Bennett and Danny Buraczeski, please see Appendix E.
dressed in tuxedos for a night on the town. Buraczeski's use of unison established these characters as having similar mentalities and habits. They possessed duplicate rhythms of movement, creating a bond between the two men and inferring that a deeper level exists in their relationship.

The entrance of the women separated the men, displaying Ellington as a ladies’ man. He partnered each woman on stage, all of whom were clad in sparkling evening gowns. He continually avoided physical contact with the woman wearing the blue suit. This suit suggested an obvious queering of the gender roles, which established Ellington's aversion to being associated with things queer. When the women approached the Strayhorn character, he pulled each one in and quickly spins them away. This was a deliberate refusal to act the part of a straight man. The women flew away from Strayhorn, and take Ellington off the stage.

The next section featured Strayhorn. The woman in the blue velvet suit entered with a large feathered fan, concealing behind it a man in a similar suit to Strayhorn's and Ellington's. However, this man was dressed in a black tie and vest. Strayhorn and the third man began to move together; their partnering consistently transitioned seamlessly from the floor to soaring in the air in lifts and leaps. They partnered one another tenderly. Each touch was taken with care.

The fourth scene commenced with Ellington's return to the stage with his women, and created tension between the Ellington and Strayhorn characters. Their bodies, which were once at ease with one another, are now tight and bound highlighting the discord between the two. This developed into a sweeping movement phrase with the whole cast. The lights were dimmed and one has to fight to see who is dancing with whom.
The chorus exited, leaving the two male leads and they dance a variation of their opening duet. They circled around each other dancing in unison, but this time they avoided each other’s gaze. They separated; Ellington goes to his women, and Strayhorn goes to his man and the women in the blue suit. They retreated to two different worlds: the straight world and the queer one, and removed their tuxedo jackets with tails: their respective armors. Ellington and Strayhorn have a brief revival of their opening gestural phrase, and it ended with a gentle kiss exchanged on the cheek and each retreating back to his own world.

The use of ambiguity in Buraczeski’s *Scene Unseen* highlights the closet. In her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines the closet by silence. She states, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence- not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it’” (3). The ambiguity Buraczeski creates by only suggesting a relationship is in fact an act of silence. Buraczeski does not out Ellington by having him dance a full a *pas de deux* that incorporates lifts and partnering with the Strayhorn character. Instead, he has them perform the same steps in the same time. They touch only twice in the opening duet and when they do they are standing face to face with distance between them and they clasp hands and push their bodies away from one another to find balance on the one leg they are standing on. This act of silence illustrates the world in which Ellington and Strayhorn lived. From Buraczeski’s choreographic view, the two had to hide their love from the world of jazz, a world they both lived in and was a bond they shared.
Buraczeski’s choreography is important to my work because it is one of the few examples I have been able to find of concert jazz dancing dealing with queer issues. The other aspect that relates to my concert is the idea of the closet. Buraczeski’s closet stems from his use of ambiguity, which creates an act of silencing. In my piece, there is no ambiguity about the two male lovers. They are unabashedly depicted as such, where the act of the silencing occurs is in regards to their relationships with their wives and their community. Both of these pieces deal with the aspect of hiding one’s sexuality “…in relation to the discourses that surrounds and differentially constitutes it [the silence]” (Sedgwick 3). In Buraczeski’s case, the discourse is the homophobia of the jazz community and in my case it is the homogenous world of the suburbs.

**Research: Queer in the 1950s**

The choreography also came out of the research into the culture of the 1950s. This was not a tranquil time for homosexuals. The common belief at the time was homosexuality was a pathological disease. In his book, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present*, Neil Miller states, “In 1952, when the American Psychiatric Association issued its first official catalog of mental disorders, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders* (DSMI-I), homosexuality was listed among the sociopathic personality disturbances” (249). Listing homosexuality as a “sociopathic” disorder equates homosexuals as antisocial criminals, who lack morals and a social conscience. Homosexuals were listed as deviants, perverts, and subversives, who were a threat to the national security.
Adding to this was the Lavender Scare, a witch-hunt led by Congress and specifically by Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy. In February of 1950, Peurifoy revealed a threat facing the State Department. David K. Johnson credited Peurifoy with leading the homosexual witch-hunt in his book *The Lavender Scare*. Peurifoy denied the existence of communists in the state department when he appeared before a congressional committee, however “…he revealed that a number of persons considered to be security risks had been forced out, and that among these were ninety-one homosexuals” (Johnson 1). Johnson further claimed, “In 1950, many politicians, journalists, and citizens thought that homosexuals posed more of a threat to national security than Communists” (2).

Thousands of people lost their jobs within the State Department for being suspected of homosexuality. Often the evidence was circumstantial at best (Johnson 5).

In 1953, President Eisenhower signed into law Executive Order 10,450, which banned “sexual perverts” from working in the federal government or any private contractors, and lists homosexuals as security risks (Executive Order 10,450). “Sexual perverts” was the commonly used code for homosexuals at the time. This law nationally codified discrimination against homosexuals. Miller states Executive Order 10,450 resulted in the following:

… [An] average of forty homosexuals were ousted from government positions every month…The civilian purge was reflected in the armed forces as well. In the late 1940s, the U.S. Military was discharging homosexuals at the rate of about a thousand a year. By the early 1950s, the number had jumped to two thousand a year. (262)

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9 For more information on the Lavender Scare, see David K. Johnson’s *The Lavender Scare*. 
The effect of this law was institutionalized bigotry, which paved the way for contractors with the U.S. government and private businesses to discriminate against homosexuals. Aiding the federal government was the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who screened the workers of the federal government, the Postal Service whom tracked mail dealing with homosexual themes, and local police who raided local gay bars arresting dozens of people at a time for merely having drinks or dancing all aided the federal government’s discriminatory practices. The homosexual population faced legal discrimination in the 1950s, forcing an unknown amount of people to hide their sexual preferences.

The climate of the 1950s homophobia made it next to impossible for any man or woman to live openly homosexual lives. They had no protection under the law, were vilified as “perverts” or “deviants” in society, and as such, were scorned by society. It is no surprise that an unknown many stayed hidden in the closet, and conformed to the social norms to keep up appearances. One famous example is the choreographer Jerome Robbins, who named names before the House on Un-American Activities Committee (an act which haunted Robbins for the rest of his life) in order to keep his homosexuality a secret (Lawrence).  

The homophobic environment of the 1950s made it extremely prohibitive for the LGBT community to live open lives. Of course, there were those who were brave enough to standup against the discrimination. The 1950s was the beginning of the gay rights movement with the start of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, California in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco, California in 1955. These societies

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10 See Greg Lawrence’s biography *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins* for more information regarding Robbins’ life.

operated in secrecy and discussed “who and what they were; debated whether they were indeed sick, as psychiatrists claimed; sought the advice of experts; and argued amongst themselves what, if anything, they should-or-could- do to improve their standing in American Life” (Marcus 2).

There is very little research on closeted homosexuals living in the suburbs during the 1950s, as they seem to have been doing just that: hiding in the closet. More research is needed in regards to those who were not able to live an “out” life. Who were these people and what were there stories? How were they able to cope with denying a huge aspect of their lives? These questions and the research into the homophobic society that was the 1950s led my creative investigation in Episode Two “Close(t).”

**Performance: Choreographing Episode Two “Close(t)”**

“Close(t)” was an examination of the lives of two closeted men living in the suburbs and their wives. The men in were representations of the “organization man.” In his 1956 book *The Organization Man*, William Whyte theorized the bold entrepreneurial, individualist of American folklore had been replaced by:

… the modest aspirations of organization men who lower their sights to achieve a good job with adequate pay and proper pension and a nice house in a pleasant community populated with people as nearly like themselves as possible. (67)

These are the types of men I concerned myself with in the process of creating “Close(t).” How did individuals balance a desire to lead a comfortable life with the longing to express their sexuality, all the while being threatened with the loss of the social status
they had previously built? How would it be possible for men, as chief bread winners, to break from the identification of what it means to be a man when that identification was so clearly defined by society? In my mind, they found nice women and got married. They lived life in the closet.

The first section of this Episode is set to Davis’ “All Blues.” I chose this music to augment the feeling of loneliness and alienation the couples feel from their heterosexual partners. The piece began by establishing the characters in their day in and day out lives. The dance commenced with the silhouettes of two couples (figure 12). The duos turned in to face their partner and out to face away, which represented the monotony of everyday life and their general boredom.

Spatially, “All Blues” was designed for the couples to remain equidistant from the other. The couples started with one upstage right and one down stage left; each couple was facing center stage, creating a mirroring effect when they moved. They essentially divided the stage in quadrants; if one couple was in the downstage left corner, then the other couple is in the upstage right corner. This remained true as the dancers moved through the space. The spatial arrangement of the couples accentuated their similar circumstances, as they are constantly mirroring one another. They are stuck in the rut of life, and are also pinned in space and time.
The movement vocabulary in this section definitively demonstrated the plight of these two couples. Designed to showcase quotidian monotony, I used theme and variation in crafting the movement, repeating invariable actions. The turning in to face one another represented how each partner does acknowledge the other, but when they make the sharp turn away, it was to deny aspects of their relationship.

Although they do not occupy the same space, the couples danced in unison. The only time they were not all in unison is when each character breaks off from the group and danced a solo. The solo was a look into the heart of each character. The first male (man one) character was conflicted between his love and duty to his wife and his desire for another man. His movement was sharp and angular. His pathway through space consisted of the diagonal between upstage right and down stage left, the space separating...
the couples. Man one undulated between grasping for the man and reaching toward his wife.

Wife One’s solo consisted of large, pleading gestures in her attempt to gain attention from her distracted husband. Her movement vocabulary contained percussive hip isolations, layouts, and tilts. These movements were crafted in an effort to flaunt her bodily assets and to entice. She moved from stage right to left and back again. Her primary audience was her husband. When she could not communicate with him, she outwardly demonstrated her frustration to the audience, strongly lifting her arms on the high diagonal and bringing them into her body with a double contraction of the torso.

Like Man One’s solo, Male Two’s solo phrase also dealt with coming to terms with one’s sexuality. He moved on the same diagonal line, as did the previous male solo; however, his movement vocabulary was more percussive and rhythmically pronounced. He stomped his feet and threw himself onto the floor. On two occasions, he gestured taking off a mask: once while he is alone, once to his wife. This gesture represented an act of coming out to his wife and the audience. His character knew who and what he was, and his character’s conflict stemmed from not being free to embrace his affinities openly.

The solo of the second wife was directed entirely to her husband. Of the four solos presented in this episode, her movements were the most sharp and percussive. She appeared angry and frustrated. Like Wife One before her, Wife Two unsuccessfully attempted to obtain her husband’s full attention. Unlike the first wife, however, she was not trying to entice her husband; she was physically raging at him. At the end of her solo, Wife Two threw her hands in the air as if to say, “The jig is up!”; this powerful gesture
signifies that Wife Two knew what was going on in her husband’s (Man Two) head and heart, and she was furious by his betrayal of their wedding vows.

The piece ended as it started with the couples facing in and out to one another. The start of yet another day, as the music faded out the women moved in to kiss their husband’s cheek. Wife One landed a kiss on her husband’s cheek, where as Man Two pushed his wife’s embrace away. The women exited the stage. Choreographically, the women served several purposes. First, they solidify the heteronormative society and conventions established in Episode One. Second, they served as the men’s ticket into that acceptable society. Like the housewives on the 1950s sitcoms, the women were merely objects to be shown off. The women were possessions of their husband, used as tools to hide the men’s homosexuality. The wives served as the men’s closet, as the men are able to perform their professed heterosexuality to the community.

As the women exited the stage, John Coltrane’s jazzy “Slow Dance” begins to play. Coltrane’s music was romantic, sweeping, and lush, setting the mood for the passionate duet between the men. The men slowly moved across the stage, checking the wings to see if any of their neighbors or wives was looking on. The lights faded from a deep blue to a very dark stage, bringing the focus solely on the two men. The lights represent the closet and the “love that dare not speak its name,” just as they did in Buraczeski’s Scene Unseen.

The movement vocabulary was derived from several sources: Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake, the choreography revisited phrases from Episode One, and ballroom. Bourne’s use of partnering featured both men lifting and sharing one another’s weight and how he mixed classical ballet and modern vocabulary heavily influenced my staging
of this *pas de deux*. I wanted to recreate Bourne’s use partnering to establish a relationship of equals by having each man lift and share one another’s weight. Instead of mixing classical ballet and modern, the way Bourne did, I mixed classic jazz vocabulary as seen in such films as *Singin’ in the Rain* and *The Bandwagon* with some classical ballet lines and partnering (*attitudes, promenades*, and supported *grand jetés*), and last but not least the Foxtrot. The mixing of these different aesthetics established the characters desire to break with the “normal” conventions of the society they were living in. At one point, the men danced a phrase from the opening of the show, queering the original choreography and skewering the traditional gender roles established in the opening section. The men were creating their new language together, meant only for one another.

Choreographing this section was incredibly important to me. It represents where I want to go not only as a queer choreographer, but also how I want to develop jazz dancing for the concert stage. Jazz dance generally is presentational. I seek to bring in postmodern influences in regards to spacing. Similar to Merce Cunningham, I believe there are no fixed points in space. Each area of the stage and each possible facing of the dancer is not only appropriate to use, but is essential in designing the space. However, I want to use the space not only to design it, but also as a means to communicate a narrative to the audience.

The jazz dance genre was the perfect percussive vehicle for carrying a common man narrative in “Close(t). Jazz dance is in grave need of research. There are more jazz works with queer themes that have been produced, however, so little is written about jazz and its canon that finding these pieces has proved to be an extremely challenging task.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Tethered”: Fighting the Woman’s Role in the 1950s

Research: Lucy Ricardo’s Domestic Rebellion

The women played a huge role in *cul-de-sac*. As discussed in previous sections of this dissertation, the woman’s role in the 1950’s suburbs was limited to the domestic sphere. The first two episodes of my concert defined the women by their relationships to their men. They did not stand-alone, and thus, they had no voice of their own. They were presented, lifted, and shown off to the audience as objects belonging to the men. Episode Three “Tethered” was my feminist response to the treatment of women living before the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1960s, from the perspective of a homosexual man after the Women’s Rights Movement. The result was a harsh, jagged, and grounded aesthetic drastically different from the first two episodes of *cul-de-sac*.

A prime example of female rebellion during the 1950s was the iconic character of Lucy Ricardo, played by Lucille Ball on the classic situation comedy *I Love Lucy*. The comedic antics of Lucy Ricardo masked the basic narrative of the show: Lucy’s unhappy role as housewife and her desire to work and be famous. Comedy ensued when she tried to break in to Ricky’s act, and in the end she is back in the home and happy to be there. In her article “Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,” scholar Patricia Mellencamp noted:

…neither audiences nor critics noticed Lucy’s feminist strain is curious, suggesting that comedy is a powerful and unexamined weapon of subjugation. In most of the episodes’ endings, the narrative policy was one
of twofold containment: every week for seven years, she was wrong and
duly apologetic; and while repeating discontent, her masquerades and
escapades made Monday nights and marriage pleasurable. (51)

The adventures of Lucy Ricardo may have been a mirror to the women who watched the
original run. They may have seen their disillusionment in being the “happy homemaker”
and they could dream of a life outside the home. With each plot to break into Ricky’s act,
Lucy thwarted the feminine role as merely wife and mother, and established a precursor
to the feminist movement of the 1960s. With each failure to launch, where Lucy admitted
defeat, the show supported the idea that women can, and should, only be happy in the
home.

On the one hand, *I Love Lucy* presented a pro-woman discourse. Every week,
Lucy broke out of the house and into Ricky’s act, always upstaging him and getting all
the laughs. While on the other hand, Lucy reinforced the social conventions of the time
and created a paradox. While Lucy broke out of the house every week, every week she
was put back in the house by Ricky, which enforced the role of the woman as a
subservient homemaker. Lucy may return to the kitchen, but the viewer knew that the
next week Lucy would be up to her old antics. Lucy would invariably capitulate to Ricky
who each week basically said to Lucy “see, you know you should not be out there in the
world, you see you are happier in the home because I am happier when you stay home.”

In the end, it was Ricky who was getting his way, reinforcing the patriarchal society of
the 1950s. During its original run, *I Love Lucy* presented women with an escape from
their domestic duties and were rewarded with a woman who was not content just to sit at
home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her husband and child.
Research: Maggie the Cat and the Women of “Tethered”

The slips the women wore in “Tethered” was a nod to the iconic 1950s movie star and sex symbol Elizabeth Taylor in her role as Maggie the Cat in the 1958 movie adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Maggie was a sexually frustrated woman seeking attention from her closeted homosexual husband Brick, played by Paul Newman. Maggie was the type of woman I presented on stage. A woman whose worth was measured by her role as a wife and her ability to bear children, as well as a woman who is need of love and passion from her ever distant husband.

The women in “Tethered” were clad in silken undergarments, simultaneously representing the objectification of the female body and how they were literally stripped down of their societal costume of the fitted bodice and full skirt. With no men on stage with them, my dancers owned their sexuality, and they were no longer the objects of their spouse. They became their own person: sexy, angry, and vulnerable, which was in direct opposition to the image of June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson who were presented as the ideal suburban housewives. June and Harriet are poised, composed, and eternally happy with their role as wife and mother and the luxury it affords them to buy things and tend to the needs of her family¹². The women have abandoned their performance of the blissful wife in Episode One for the frustrated, sex starved, and angry woman represented by Taylor in her role as Maggie.

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¹² Please see Mary Beth Haralovich’s “Sitcom and the Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker.”
Lucy Ricardo and her portrayer Lucille Ball were ambitious women. Ricardo sought out fame week after week in her husband’s act, while Ball was the most successful female on television. My inspiration for “Tethered” was the idea of the ambitious woman trapped in a solely domestic role. How does she cope? What would Lucille Ball do if she were a homemaker stuck in a kitchen in Orange County? This was the situation I imagined when I began to create “Tethered.” This episode of the concert looked at the women and how they were tied to the house and their quiet desperation to escape it.

I approached this piece in a different manner than the rest of this concert. “Tethered” represented the anger and the frustration of ambitious women who have no outlet for their desire to make something out of their lives besides being a wife and mother. Their actual lives were not in harmony with the ones they displayed in Episode One “cul-de-sac.” With this in mind, I diverged from the dance form, jazz, and sound score used in the previous sections of this concert.
Jazz dance and music go hand in hand with one another. My perspective of jazz
dance is that it is a physical representation of the music, which I used as a symbol
representing the happy community in Episode One and in the men’s duet. These women
were not in harmony with their surroundings. I chose to use modern dance vocabulary.
With this in mind, I made a conscious effort to choreograph the movement first and place
the music over the dancing, which created a tension between dance and music that is
symbolic of the tension between the desire of the women on stage and their reality.

The inspiration and look of the vocabulary was an amalgamation of several
sources. One source of inspiration was the iconic work of Martha Graham. Graham’s
influence came in the use of contraction and spiral with all the movement emanating from
the core of the body. A contemporary influence was the work of Robert Battle. Having
the opportunity to dance the American Dance Legacy Initiative’s Battleworks Étude, I
was familiar with his vocabulary. Some examples of the Battle’s vocabulary that were
used in the choreography are: Battle stomps (a stylized stomping of the foot on the
ground, the dancer stands in parallel position with their knees slightly bent, the force of
the stomp comes from the hinging of the knee joints and thrusting one’s ball of the foot
into the ground all without letting the body bounce); the Battle fall (the dancer starts with
their feet in fourth position, turned out, pliés and jumps bringing the foot in back to the
front while in the air and landing on the ground in fourth position); and the Battle claw (a
gesture using a splayed hand with the distal ends of the fingers bent and a flexed wrist to
create the image of a claw). This aesthetic was vastly different from the previous section.
“Tethered” was grounded, percussive, filled with sharp angles, and moves from the core,
not the pelvis. The shift in movement quality was to fulfill the choreographic intention of
communicating the isolation, rage, and desperation these characters were dealing with living in the repressive culture of 1950s suburbia.

The music for “Tethered” included “First Interlude” and “Sonata No. 9,” both of which were composed by John Cage the prepared piano. Cage’s music was a post-modern rebellion against the notions of structural harmony and emotive music. In “An Autobiographical Statement,” Cage pronounced,

I discovered what I called micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure. The large parts of a composition had the same proportion as the phrases of a single unit. Thus an entire piece had that number of measures that had a square root. This rhythmic structure could be expressed with any sounds, including noises, or it could be expressed not as sound and silence but as stillness and movement in dance. It was my response to Schoenberg's structural harmony… I could not accept the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication, because I noticed that when I conscientiously wrote something sad, people and critics were often apt to laugh. I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication. I found this answer from Gira Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player: The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences. (Cage)

As a rebellion itself, Cage’s music matched the intention of the piece in several ways. First, its lack of harmony supported the disharmony the women were experiencing in their societal status. As a choreographer, I could not help but imagine women in the
1950s being dissatisfied with their limited role in society. Even if a woman did work, she found limited possibilities in the work force, and unequal pay. Second, the lack of a discernable rhythmic structure created discord mirroring the emotional state of the women on stage.

When I created "Tethered," I imagined the women were filled with rage or despair regarding the lack of connection between what they thought their lives would look like as a married suburban housewife and the reality that followed. Less than a decade before the 1950s, women were out in the work force in huge numbers due to World War II. They made their own money and had independence. Having that autonomy stripped away could only create animosity between genders. “Tethered” deals with the discontentment and hostilities the 1950s housewife surely faced. Cage’s music was the only sound scape created during this era that I could imagine representing the drama of these housewives faced.

The film preceding the dancing featured vintage advertisements from midcentury America, as well as images of the homemaker. The film began with images of the happy homemaker and the images quickly distorted. Peralta edited the original images to deform the representation of women. The beautiful model selling beauty products to attract men morphed into a cartoon like character with big dopey eyes and overstuffed hair. Peralta also warped an image of a housewife taking a roast out of the oven by flipping it on its side and adding a burning effect on to the image, making it hard to tell exactly what was going on. The film introduced the audience to the representations of

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13 For an example of a mid-20th century American woman who was not taken seriously because of her role as a married woman, please see Phyllis Richman’s letter to the Harvard University Graduate Program (Richman).
women as ideal wife and mother, as well as the beauty standards and objectification of the female body, and what the women were raging against as they dance “Tethered.”

“Tethered” began with each woman entering the space performing her own solo movement. This movement represented each character’s individual struggle. As part of the rehearsal process each of the dancers came up with their own monologues that corresponded to the movement. The dancers came up with varied reasons for their character’s despondency: adultery, boredom, isolation, and being ignored. One woman’s solo consisted of smooth and staccato movement, embodying her character’s anger and desire for love. Another solo uses long reaching vocabulary suggesting that her character is seeking something new. She keeps grasping toward something just out of reach. Was it a new career out of the home or was it a new man who is able to give her what she needs?

The third solo movement was gestural, consisting of images of a woman getting made up: checking herself in the mirror, fixing her hair, and putting on lipstick. This character was a woman trying to keep up with the restrictive standards of beauty of the time. The fourth character was struggling to keep her balance. One image from her solo suggests she is walking a tight rope. A balancing act between the life she dreamt about and the life she has, this woman was struggling to keep her grasp on her sanity. The last character danced a sleek solo displaying her bodies in a sexualized manner. Quickly, however, the sleek quality dissolved into a manic movement trying to repeat the same phrase again and again quicker and quicker each time. She was racing to keep her image up as a sexual object for the pleasure of her husband and the more she tried to keep up the further behind she gets.
There was one common factor in all of the solos: the quality of bound movement. The energetic quality of bound flow featured muscular tension restricting the movement potential of the body. Spatially the women were also restricted in their solo movement. The women only inhabited the upper diagonal half of stage right. The limitation of flow and their use of space were indicative of the limited space afforded to them as housewives.

The solos faded into a group section, which bursts on to the whole stage. The women briefly filled the stage with percussive movement. They stomped their feet and threw their bodies on to the ground and made sound on their bodies using their fists. They moved in and out of unison movement, illuminating their similarities and support of one another when they moved together and their isolation from one another when they dance alone. When the first piece of Cage’s music- “First Interlude”- ended, the ladies retreated into their solos, and end in a pose from their movement vocabulary.

Between the first and second sections of “Tethered” there was a long silence. The women stayed frozen in their last pose as the lights slowly fade out. This interlude was designed to make the audience uncomfortable and build the tension on stage to an explosion. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the ladies broke free and made a run for it. They each ran to a different corner of the stage only to run into the unseen fourth wall. They repeated their attempt at breaking free from the binds of domesticity three times and fail each time. There was no place to go and they were locked in their situation with no means of escape.

The second section of “Tethered” featured the dancers moving in and out of unison movement. In this section, I used canon as an abstract means of representing one
group of women trying to keep up with the other. The movement consisted of reaching gestures both on the high diagonal and reaching behind them in a hinge, dropping to their knees and slapping the floor before coming back on to standing legs. From the canon the ladies came together in the shape of a triangle and danced a section in unison. This movement represented their shared experiences. In this moment they were one unit capable of voicing their frustration through their bodies.

The unison section ended with them running upstage into a straight line from stage left to right, with their backs to the audience. One by one the dancers began to charge downstage, yet another attempt to break free, and yet again they hit another barrier. In this section, the barrier was the light on the stage floor. The light crept from downstage to upstage, slowly closing in on the women. As the women approached the light they were forced to return to their original position upstage. The women kept repeating the charge downstage and retreated upstage until they were frantically circling around themselves. They were trapped without means to escape.

“Tethered” ended as it began, with the women each dancing their solo phrase, only this time it is in retrograde; they began with the last movement of the phrase and worked their way to the beginning. Reversing the movement is the choreographic rewind. Throughout the piece, the ladies struggled with their role in their society. They stomped and pounded the floor and their bodies, a physical embodiment of their rage and frustration at a society that refused to see their true worth. Reverting back to their original solo material and away from moving as a group was a dynamic shift. The women were retreating back into themselves, into the isolation they were raging against. They were too caught up in their own dissatisfaction to unite as a whole and create change.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

**Performance: Choreographing Episode Four**

Episode Four was a distorted revision of the first episode “cul-de-sac.” The distortion indicated the dropping of the idealistic fantasy of suburban life in the 1950s. This warped vision represented the skeletons that had previously been hidden in suburbia’s closet. The suburbs were a haven for Christian, heterosexual, middle, and working class Caucasians. Through subsidies, the government sponsored the white flight out of the nation’s cities, isolating the middle classes from the horrors of city life. This resulted in the downward spiral of downtown city centers as a ghetto for immigrants and African Americans, cementing and increasing lines of segregation.

American 1950s suburbia was not inwardly picture perfect. It may have had cookie cutter homes and beautifully manicured yards, but the underbelly of the suburbs hid an unknown number of men and women hidden in the closet afraid to expose themselves to the loss of their families, jobs, and even freedom. Then, both men and women were limited in their divided roles as bread winners and housewives, mothers, and housekeepers. The last episode of my MFA concert *cul-de-sac* depicted my vision of the suburbs as a place hiding the quiet desperation of its inhabitants, a place where the saccharine sweetness of its façade hid the sour truth that is within.

The final film segment was a distorted look at the first film segment with images of happy couples, bird’s eye views of the suburbs, and beautiful yards of the neighborhood. However, these images were quickly twisted literally and figuratively.
Peralta turned some images on its side, others she used the burning effect on, or made the people in the film look they just stepped out of a Picasso painting with their nose on the side of their face. Warping these nostalgic and idealistic images indicated how even though these were the images presented, they are a performance and did not represent what happened behind the closed doors of the happy suburban family’s Cape Cod style home. In this altered world, there was no ideal way of living, no cookie cutter method for raising a family. The film and ensuing dance took the opening pictures of the nostalgic 1950s and warped them in order to show there was no time when everything was perfect.

The scene opened with the sound of the Red Norvo Trio’s “Little White Lies,” just as it did in the opening of the concert. With the help of the sound editor Liz Rincon, the music intensified: there are extra layers added on to it, creating a menacing and antagonistic effect, which mirrors the rage and frustration of the couples on stage.

![Figure 15: Dancers in their poses from “cul-de-sac Redux.” (Berrett)](image)
Just like the opening of the show, this section started with the dancers in a series of poses. However, these were not the happy poses of the beginning. They became confrontational, pleading, and, in some cases, violent. No longer were the characters on stage performing the roles of the happy couple. They were revealing their flaws and frustrations as well as the flaws with the suburban lifestyle.

After the first section of poses, the dancers performed different movement themes from each episode of the concert, beginning with Episode One. The movement material revisited from the first episode is a gestural, featuring the women serving the men. The women nicely swept their arm across the midsection of their bodies as if a tray was on it with that night’s dinner and present it enticingly to their man. The only aspect changed in this movement for the show’s finale is the quality. The movement was no longer light, sweet, and flowing; now the movement morphed into sharp, bound, and combative quality with the dancers’ weight grounded. What was a serving tray in the opening now resembles a sword or a blade the women use to jab in the direction of their men. The women continued their angry attack, jumping maliciously onto their spouse’s shoulder. The men carry their woman to the downstage left corner of the stage, set them down, and move away. Choreographically, I imagined the men retreating to their place of work, leaving their displeased mates unaccompanied.

With the mob of women huddled downstage left, they danced their movement material from “Tethered.” The ladies performed a canon of reaching out forward diagonal high and backward diagonal low, grasping for something unattainable out of their reach. This personal longing was varied for each woman it could have been the attention of her husband, the career she always dreamed about, or living in the city. Each woman was
longing for something more than the isolation of the suburbs. I saw them as caged animals pounding on the bars of their suburban cage, begging for freedom.

When the men rejoined the women, it is to put them onto their shoulder and place her where he wanted her onstage. The women were, again, the men’s objects to be placed where he saw fit, yet another example of the 1950s woman lack of autonomy.

The men and women formed a circle with their backs to the inside of the circle. The homosexual couple reunited in the center of the circle and revisited the beginning phrase of their *pas de deux*. The only difference was the tempo. This was a rushed meeting between the two men, behind the backs of their wives and neighbors who refused to see what was going on behind their backs. It was a two way street: the men denied their sexual orientation to the community and the community refused to acknowledge it, continuing the act of silencing. This kept these two men trapped in the closet. The men finished their encounter and returned to their wives, and all of the couples returned to their “homes” in the space.

In unison, the couples performed material from the “All Blues” section of “Close(t).” The couples turned sharply in to face one another and out to face away again. The smooth quality of the original quartet has now become sharp and aggressive. The pretense has now been fully dropped between the couples who are no longer performing the roles of happy husband and wife. The couples aggressively jumped and kicked their leg toward their partner, yet another fight depicted between husband and wife. The dancers performed this in unison and were an important aspect to this section, as it showed everyone in the midst of this fight. It was not just about these characters on stage,
this also represented a universal battle of the sexes that evolved into an all-out war in the 1960s.

The show ended with the dancers forming two circles. The inner circle was comprised of the women and the outer circle with the men. The dancers were repeating the same spatial arrangement and movement from Episode One. The dancers were no longer standing up straight. They had hunched shoulders and contracted sternums. The once energetic and spiritedly dance has turned tired and angry. No longer were these couples trying to perform for one another. They were all frustrated with the rigors of life. The men were tired of bearing the sole responsibility of providing for the family and dealing with a job they found no meaning in. The women were angry over their isolated lives, trapped in their homes waiting on husband and children. From the circles, the dancers moved back to their perspective homes. As the music began to fade the couples strike their original happy poses with one another, going back to the idealistic suburban image until there is the sound of a record scratching and the couples poses distorted as the lights fade out. The community was trying to keep up appearances, but the cracks in the façade have already begun to show.

**Conclusion**

Dance is more than a sequence of steps, beyond the mere completion of *pas de bourées*, leaps, and turns. For me, dance is a means of communication and storytelling. I seek to choreograph dances that express my thoughts and ideas, holding up a mirror to examine social issues. The concert dance that I create is rooted in 21st century techniques, including but not limited to jazz, modern, and ballet. While abstract dance with the
emphasis on form and the body in motion is a valid means of expression, it often lacks the ability to clearly communicate meaning to its audience. I create dances that speak through movement. Dance is my art. The empty stage is my blank canvas and for paint, I have movement vocabulary, dancers, costumes, lights, and sound. All of these elements combine to create my moving painting. A painter may work in different forms, oil, watercolor, or acrylic. I tend to use jazz dance vocabulary when I create my art. It is a form for which I have great respect and passion. I use jazz to tackle tough social issues that are not typically represented in the field of jazz dance.

Jazz dance is a distinctly American art form. Like America, jazz dance is a melting pot of cultures, histories, and styles of dance, yet too often, it is overlooked in regards to the world of concert dance and “high art.” Jazz dance deserves and is in great need of research and writings to pass on its rich legacy. In my opinion, it is the Academy’s duty to take up jazz’s mantle and delve into the rich and varied history of jazz dance, its techniques, and varying styles. The benefits of studying jazz dance have not only to do with the history of jazz dance, but the history of America and popular entertainment. This is the story of the Charleston and prohibition in the 1920s, the dance marathons amidst the Great Depression, and the Lindy Hop dancing to the Big Bands during World War II. Jazz dance is the dance, music, and history of America’s people.

Today, we see jazz in mostly popular entertainment: television shows such as So You Think You Can Dance and Glee, Broadway Musicals, music videos, and commercials. Sadly, what we do not see enough of is jazz in the concert setting. Jazz Companies like Hubbard Street and River North are now “contemporary” companies, and Danny Buraczeski’s JazzDance disbanded in 2005 due to lack of funding. With the
company approach to jazz dance fading, who is here to preserve the canon? Great jazz pieces are falling into the ether and are subsequently lost forever. Where will the pieces made by artists such as Jack Cole, Katherine Dunham or Michael Kidd be performed? The best place for these pieces to live is in the Academy since there is benefit to both faculty and student. For faculty, there is a great deal of research that needs to take place. There are books that need to be written on the great concert jazz choreographers and their repertory, so we may catalog their lives and works for future generations of dancers and scholars. Learning the canon of the pioneering jazz choreographers will have a significant impact on students. Students will learn not only the technique of these great artists, but they will experience an embodied history lesson of the choreographers and the time in which these pieces were created.

It is in the best interest of the Academy and its students to study jazz dance technique as well. Some outcomes from studying jazz are furthering students’ dynamic range, rhythmic awareness, and developing stronger, more versatile dancers. Stylistically, jazz has much to offer in regards to technical training.

Jazz appears in many forums; however, its role on the concert stage is limited to only a handful of companies. The research I conducted presents a lack of queer themes and images on the jazz concert stage. More research needs to be conducted into this field. In regards to writing on the subject matter of jazz dance, there is work left to do. The works of master jazz choreographers and dancers such as Jack Cole, Danny Buraczeski, Gus Giordano, and Matt Mattox’s need to be discussed and logged into the vaults of dance history. The presence of jazz dance is essential on the concert stage. There are only a handful of professional jazz companies still in survival today that tour on a national
level, such as, Jump Rhythm Jazz and Giordano Dance Chicago. It is of the utmost importance that jazz’s voice continues to grow, develop, and be heard, in order for this art form to survive. In addition, it is imperative that we represent the queer voices and population with in this American art form.

As a dancing scholar, I plan to conduct further research into master jazz choreographer Danny Buraczeski and his repertory. In his twenty-four years as the artistic director and choreographer of his company Jazzdance, Buraczeski created many works that need to be written about and archived for future generations of dancers and scholars. Appendix E makes available the email interview I conducted with Mr. Buraczeski, a primary resource for future scholars to add to the growing conversation of jazz dance. It is of the utmost importance that information such as this be saved. There are not many jazz choreographers who work in the concert jazz field at this point in history. We must save this work before it is gone forever.

I also plan to pursue more research into the field of queer jazz dance, a topic that has very little representation in the field of dance research. I am sure there are more jazz dances out in the world that deal with queer themes, however there is so little research in this field that there are very little records to be found. Historians such as Thomas F. DeFrantz, Torsten Graff, and Jonathan Weinberg have written about queering modern dance, theatre, and art perspectivey, yet no such writing is present on the subject of jazz dance on the concert stage. There are small companies out there who are choreographing jazz dance with queer themes, and we need to find these companies and write about them to bring more attention to the relevancy of jazz dance as a means to fight social injustice.
The research conducted into the social issues surrounding the suburbs of the 1950s heavily affected the outcome of *cul-de-sac*. The development of the suburbs and the quintessential images of the 1950s suburbs as displayed through television situation comedies highly influenced the aesthetic of the show, specifically in Episode One. Research into the suburbs presented a community that was homogenous and conformist due to the political climate of the time. Researching the rise of suburbs specifically Levittown, New York provided the images used in the set design. Lastly, the research into the gender roles of the time informed not only the costumes, but established the man as the leader and woman as the follower. Research into the role of suburban housewives in the 1950s, produced the result of consciously defining women by their relationships with men, and their objectification in the first two episodes of my concert. It was important to establish these stereotypical images one constantly sees from this time period and its rigid gender roles in order to break free from them in Episode Three, “Tethered,” and illuminate the plight of the suburban housewife.

As a gay man, it is important for me to represent my culture and point of view on the stage and to deal with historical social issues plaguing the real world. With the fight for marriage equality currently being fought, it was my intention to choreograph a piece dealing with social issues regarding the homosexual experience in America. My MFA concert, *cul-de-sac*, examines the experience of gay men living a closeted life in the suburbs in order to illustrate the discrimination homosexuals faced in the 1950s. It also serves to demonstrate the battles the LGBT community is fighting currently to gain full rights under the law. Representing these social issues is of paramount importance to me as a choreographer. As I continue to develop as an artist and choreographer I seek to
make narrative dances with socially relevant themes that give voice to those whom often go unheard.
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March 6 2014.


Young, Robert, Jane Wyatt, Elinor Donahue, Billy Gray, and Lauren Chapin. Father

APPENDIX A

cul-de-sac Concert DVD – February 14, 2014

Submitted as a Supplementary File to LoboVault Repository

In addition to the completion of an admissible dissertation, each UNM candidate for an MFA in Dance is required to create an evening-long presentation of original choreography.

cul-de-sac was performed on February 14 and 15, 2014 in Rodey Theatre at the University of New Mexico Center for the Arts in Albuquerque, New Mexico. An unedited DVD of the February 14th performance has been archived as a “supplementary file” to the LoboVault repository.

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APPENDIX B

cul-de-sac Concert Program Front Cover

Poster Design: Eric Trujillo, 2014
APPENDIX C

cul-de-sac Concert Program Show Order

cul-de-sac

Episode One
“cul-de-sac”
Music: “Little White Lies” Red Norvo Trio
“Bluebird” Charlie Parker
“Street of Dreams” Chet Baker

Episode Two
“Close(t)”
Music: “All Blues” Miles Davis
“Slow Dance” John Coltrane

Episode Three
“Tethered”
Music: “First Interlude” John Cage
“Sonata No. 9” John Cage

Episode Four
“cul-de-sac reDux”
Music: “Little White Lies” Red Norvo Trio
APPENDIX D

cul-de-sac Cast and Crew

CAST

The Company
Larry Martin Burney, Kevin Clark, Jacqueline Garcia, Luz Guillen, Kaitlin Innis, Thien The Le, Ashley Quintana, Ty Redding, Estevan Daniel Velasco-Romero, Tasha Williams
Understudy: Arielle Cole

Artistic Direction and Choreography
Peter J. Bennett, Degree Candidate
MFA in Dance

CREW

Stage Manager: Liz Rincon
Assistant Stage Managers: Andres Moreno, Dominic Perea
Lighting Designer: Amaris Puzak
Master Electrician: Nathan Capriglione
Main Light Board Operator: Ted Gaines
Light Board Operator: Carissa Lewis
Sound Board Operator: Kelly Erickson
Deck Electric: Tamara Farmer
Main Curtain: Miles O’Dowed
Spotlight/Deck Electric: Beth Vaughn
Run Crew: Cheyanne Boggus, Tyler Kennedy, J Marie Duran
Set Design: Lydia Lopez
Sound Design: Peter J. Bennett and Liz Rincon
Sound Editing: Liz Rincon
Film Direction: Peter J. Bennett and Anna Peralta
Film Editing: Anna Peralta
Costume Design: Peter J. Bennett and Eric Trujillo
Costume Supervision: Erik Flores
Set Construction: Lydia Lopez, Peter J. Bennett, Liz Rincon, and Miles O’Dowed
Graphic Design: Eric Trujillo
Performance Photography: Pat Berrett
Performance Videography: Field & Frame
APPENDIX E

Transcript of Email Interview with Danny Buraczeski

Interviewer: Peter Bennett
Narrator: Danny Buraczeski
Dates: 10/3/14
11/3/14
Place: Elizabeth Waters Center for Dance in Carlisle Gym, UNM Main Campus Albuquerque, NM
College: University of New Mexico
Date completed: 20/3/14
The following is a transcript of an e-mail interview with Danny Buraczeski, master jazz choreographer and professor of dance at Southern Methodist University. I e-mailed my questions to him on Monday, March 10. After, we exchanged several e-mails over a two-day period.

**Monday, March 10, 2014**

Persons present: Peter Bennett (interviewer)

BENNETT: Hello Danny,

I hope you are doing well in Dallas. I just want to thank you again, for an incredible experience this summer working with you and ADLI in Florida. Learning and performing your work has given me such new insight into performing jazz, and how to bring jazz dance on to the concert stage.

In September, Amy and I had the chance to revisit your etude here at UNM. In the rehearsal process for that show, I found the ability to stop forcing the movement, and to let go and let the movement happen. It was such a freeing and exhilarating performance and one I will never forget.

I write to you just having finished my MFA concert, *cul-de-sac*. My piece looks at the community of neighbors in the 1950s suburbs. The piece examines the social, gender, and sexual roles of the suburbs. As part of this, I choreographed a male duet to John Coltrane's "Slow Dance." This is a highly romantic piece between two men forced to hide in the closet to maintain their status in the community. I was wondering if you are aware of any concert jazz pieces (including your own), that deal with queer issues? From what I've found online I can't see any from Giordano, Mattox, Hubbard Street, or Fosse.
Tuesday, March 11
Persons present: Danny Buraczeski (interviewee)

BURACZESKI: Hello Peter:

Great hearing from you. I wish I could have seen you and Amy revisit the Etude this past September. It was a joy working with you both. I am smiling just thinking about it. Because my work is so stylized and specific, sometimes it is difficult to find the freedom in it. I'm very happy that you were able to do so. Congrats.

Your MFA concert sounds fantastic - John Coltrane - doesn't get better than that. It could be the film "Far from Heaven" set to music and dance. Maybe you could send me the performance. I would love to see it.

As a matter of fact, I did a work dealing with queer issues. It is a piece called "Scene Unseen" and is about the relationship between Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. It was based upon a book called "Lush Life". It was a biography of Billy Strayhorn by David Hadju (? sp). I can send you the opening duet and you can get a sense of it.

I'll have to see if I can remember how to use my Vimeo account.

Thanks for keeping in touch. What are your plans after graduation?
Tuesday, March 11
Persons present: Peter Bennett (interviewer)

BENNETT: Hi Danny,

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. You are right it does not get better than Coltrane. "Slow Dance" in particular is stunning. Once I receive the video from the videographer I will send you a copy.

I would love to see the opening duet from "Scene Unseen." There is so little in terms of concert jazz, not to mention concert jazz with queer themes. It is great to be able to reference this in my dissertation. You work with your company has done so much for jazz dance, and needs to be written about!

After graduation, I plan on staying here in Albuquerque for a while. My partner has a business here and I'm going to try to find a way to teach dance and choreograph here. I'm hoping to establish a company here. Thank you so much again for your help.
**Tuesday, March 11**  
Persons present: Peter Bennett (interviewer)

BENNETT: Hi Danny,

Sorry to keep pestering you. I'm looking into "Scene Unseen" and have found some great articles about it online. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind sharing with me some information on this piece, and answering a few of my questions.

1) When did you make the piece and where did it premiere?

2) What were the direct themes you explored in the piece? How did you depict the homosexual relationship between Ellington and Strayhorn?

3) Why is it important to show this relationship between two famous male musicians?

Lastly, is it ok if I cite our emails in my dissertation?

Thank you again for your help. I am so excited to write about your work in my thesis. You have contributed so much to jazz dance and its place on the concert stage, and I am thrilled to get to talk about it in my thesis.
Tuesday, March 11
Persons present: Danny Buraczeski (interviewee)

BURACZESKI: Hello Peter:

You are not pestering me. I am, at the moment, uploading the opening duet from "Scene Unseen". It's on a choreography reel with other excerpts. I'll send it to you via Vimeo once it's uploaded.

The work was created and premiered in 1998 in honor of the 100th anniversary of Duke Ellington's birth. I commissioned Cathy Young to create a new Ellington work, the wonderful "Zero Cool" and Zoe Sealy who founded the Minnesota Jazz Dance Company restaged her "New Orleans Suite".

The premiere was in 1998 (I'll have to research the specific date) at the O'Shaughnessy Auditorium at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota.

I will have to look for the full dance and send it to you in order for you to get a sense of what I tried to do.

It wasn't completely successful, but I was happy with the end result. It is a dance I would love to revisit at some point.
There was never any open acknowledgement of a physical relationship between the two men, but there certainly were suggestions of one. Ellington and Strayhorn were often talked about as "soulmates". I found some amazing articles with wonderful photos, one with Billy Strayhorn in his underwear on the bed with Ellington there. I have all this in my office. We are on spring break this week.

The title "Scene Unseen" says it all. The dance presents suggestions of the relationship. The audience gets to come to its own conclusions.

The men are in white tie and tails. They take off the jackets at certain points. It is very glamorous, which is what I wanted. The women (four of them) are in beaded gowns. I got them from a guy in Minneapolis who sold old pageant gowns - mainly to drag queens. They were spectacular. One of the four women is in a beautiful velvet suit. It was a specific choice about gender roles. They all have fans, at times large feather vaudeville-like fans and at times smaller fans. They are used in lots of ways, some times to cover up what is happening.

The women also represent the music, the music was the bond between the two men. - very important.

I have to stop now - haven't thought about this in a long while.