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### Dysphoria Ballet: A Morning Routine

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# RIT

## Dysphoria Ballet A Morning Routine

by

Andrew Sonntag

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film and Animation  
School of Film and Animation  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

December 6, 2020

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## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Review of Research.....	7
III. Process.....	16
IV. Evaluation.....	83
V. Conclusion.....	91
VI. Appendix.....	94
VII. Bibliography.....	103



## Abstract

Dysphoria Ballet is a short, stop-motion film that portrays the internal morning routine of a particular trans woman. It is based on a series of interviews with a woman early in transition, and is what I consider to be a deconstruction, compression, and expressionist interpretation of these interviews. It was made with her enthusiastic support and approval. In this way, it might be considered a kind of animated documentary, but it is deconstructed to the point of ultimately being shown as a kind of “experimental-narrative” dance film. It is motivated by an exploration and validation of using performative expression as a healthy and necessary way of guiding one’s own personal narrative.

In this film, a woman wakes up and is immediately struck by a kind of “male armor” which attaches itself to her. Through dance, on the empty stage of her bedroom, she removes the armor plates piece by piece, revealing her true self. When completed, she dances in a euphoric way, delighting in having uncovered her truth. Then, confronting a mirror, she sees that her reflection still shows a male figure, which lurches out toward her. Though initially rejecting the figure, she sees that it is in distress, and accepts that this aspect of her humanity is part of who she has become and represents a piece of her personal history that she needs to encounter and resolve. The film ends with these two aspects of the person facing each other as the stage itself fades away. There is no more pressure of performance, simply an encounter with the self.

## Dysphoria Ballet: A Morning Routine

### I. Introduction

“Dysphoria Ballet” is a short, stop-motion film that portrays—in the mode of a kind of dream and performance—an outward expression of the internal morning routine of a particular trans woman. It is based on a series of interviews with my sister Sharen, and is what I consider to be a deconstruction, compression, and expressionist interpretation of these interviews. It was made with her enthusiastic support and approval, and she was in communication with me throughout the entire process of creating the film.

In this film I hoped to achieve an effective use of juxtaposition in order to force the viewer to acknowledge traditionally conflicting ideas and themes regarding performative expression, authenticity, privacy, and exhibition as working cohesively at a critical moment in the protagonist’s life. So performance becomes something private and intimate, yet the private space of the bedroom itself becomes a stage. The medium itself aids this purpose, as with stop-motion the viewer is aware of something that is at once noticeably artificial yet undeniably alive and authentic. Everything is at odds with each other. Existing at the center of that tension is the protagonist, forced to confront an apparent contradiction within herself, yet finding she is naturally capable of resolving it.

The main goals of this project were: (1) To practice dance-in-animation in such a way as to explore private, performative expression as healthy and necessary; (2) To make something meaningful for my sister and to understand her perspective better; and (3) To challenge myself to create something more serious in tone which did not rely on dialogue and humor. To that end, I will explore personal and artistic motivations for completing the film, discuss various iterations of the story as production progressed, explain various production processes and decisions, to

review the background and research that informed the creation of this film, and to reflect and evaluate its successes and failings, including audience reception, what I learned throughout this process, and where I aim to grow as an artist.

### A Brief Note on Language

Since Sharen, the subject of this film, came out to me as trans, I have spent much of my time deep in various trans groups—including but certainly not limited to—active, crowded, and thriving online forums. As noted in Susan Stryker’s book *Transgender History*, and as witnessed myself, the language surrounding this topic is *rapidly* evolving.<sup>1</sup> By the time you are reading this, terms that I use—and how I use them—will likely have fallen out of favor, been revealed as harboring some unconscious bias, been recontextualized or reappropriated by various groups within and outside of the trans\* sphere, and better, more inclusive, or more accurate terms will have come into use. Being aware of this, and being aware of the real power of language, it is necessary to make note here of the scope of both this film and this document. It is also necessary to state that I will simply do my best to be aware of my own shortcomings—there are many—and that it is my loving intention to be led in this regard, wherever possible, by the trans community in general, but especially by the subject of this entire work, Sharen herself.

Regarding my use of the word “Dysphoria” in the title and throughout this document: It is used in its broadest possible sense. It is not my intention to comment on nor to make judgements about anything whatsoever regarding various debates within the trans community at large, but only to be honest about how the subject of this film describes her experience. For the

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<sup>1</sup> Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History, Second Edition: the Roots of Today’s Revolution*. Boulder: Seal Press, 2018.

reader unfamiliar with why I would need to state this, all I will say is that *how* this word is used can itself be a source of conflict. It is far beyond the scope of this work to delve into, and beyond the bounds of what I can rightly speak to. It would not be appropriate for me to attempt to offer a working definition. In this respect I write only of Sharen, her individual experience as a trans woman, and what she describes suffering from, which indeed includes various kinds of dysphoria relating to gender, be it physical, cultural, internal, and many other ways of describing it. It is simply her way of relating a tension or conflict between who she really is versus the identity that was ascribed to her at birth. I write only of a very personal, individual experience, conscious of Sharen's personal, individual perspective, attempting to respect her understanding and use of language regarding this topic.

## Motivations

My motivation for making this film can be summarized succinctly: I wanted to make a dance film, and I wanted my sister to be involved. It is basically a deconstruction of a series of interviews I had with her.. In reality, the “series of interviews” referenced here—while it does contain an hours-long formal interview—is of course the culmination of many years of personal communications. In the end though, it is so extrapolated that while I can personally think of it as a kind of animated-documentary, I expect it will generally be received simply as an animated dance-film.

To help contextualize the dance, I have added the title into the film itself, and ended with a quote from Sharen. The subtitle, “A Morning Routine,” serves both as a play on words (i.e. a ‘dance routine’) and sets the time and place (as in, a ‘morning routine,’ hopefully indicating a bedroom). It also serves my hope that if only the audience knew from the start that it was

someone with apparent gender dysphoria just waking up, it might all fall into place. The title and subtitle really do contain the entire film. The quote from Sharen I chose is: “Every morning I look directly at myself... and remind myself... by myself... that I’m allowed to be myself.”<sup>2</sup> In my opinion it clarifies what the final visual is about. While I initially did not want to rely on text for this project, I made this decision based on my belief that it is important for Sharen to have the last word.

There are two primary reasons for making this a dance film: First and foremost is Sharen’s background as a professional dancer, as well as my own. We are both used to communicating through dance, and have performed together our entire lives. My initial aim, especially with the introduction of the “blue man” or “Male Aspect” was to show various dance styles, blending, confusing, and reimagining various gender stereotypes within the dance community. This ultimately proved to be too ambitious, and the film was better served by remaining focused and simpler, saying more with less.

The second reason for choosing dance has to do with the notion of performance itself, shown in a literal sense, and reflective of an internal and societal sense. Sharen grew up on the stage, and as she describes in interviews, felt—especially early-on in transition—that she was on stage again, this time on the proverbial stage of life, from the very moment she woke up. My understanding of her perspective is that she had to grapple, daily, with unlearning every “male” habit that had been imprinted onto her from birth by society, which from the start were always at odds with her natural inclinations of self-expression. What to replace them with?

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<sup>2</sup> Sharen, interview by Andrew Sonntag, transcript and recording, October 2019.

I have often seen trans women facing both accusations of, but also *expectations* of “performative femininity,” a phrase and concept almost exclusively used in harmful ways. There is a pervasive anxiety surrounding an apparent conflict between celebrating nonconforming gender expression on the one hand, but also the real *necessity* for some trans women to meet certain expectations in society just to be seen for who they truly are. Societal expectation and fulfillment is about survival as much as it is about sanity.

We can begin to flip this conflict around though when we interrogate what performance really is. Performative expression is not “mere” play-acting, nor does it need to come along with the usual baggage of its negative connotations. It is how we tell our own stories, even to ourselves. As you learn who you are, you show who you are. That’s all performance is. So my film takes place on a bedroom/stage, a private space where performance comes to life, and where conflicting ideas about gender expression can be explored safely, without the immediate pressure of societal expectations forcing an individual into one mold or another. My point in doing this is to show that performance is not necessarily public-facing, nor is it artificial: Instead it can be celebrated as something that can guide our personal narratives.

All of us engage in performative expression, every single day, as we show ourselves *to* ourselves and each other in a daily effort to indicate who and what we are. Just think of every ritual we engage in regularly: the ‘costumes’ we put on for work, the roles we willingly take on when participating in a status-exchange when talking to say, our assistant versus our boss, our children versus our partner, or adjustments to our performance after making eye-contact with a coworker versus stranger on the subway. All of these interactions involve putting on various sorts of masks, and none of them carry the usual baggage of “merely” performing. Performative expression is simply a tool for navigating the world. There is expectation and fulfillment.

Regardless, it all starts from the origin, from the point of waking, going through our morning rituals to that moment of finally feeling comfortable in one's own skin, then facing the reality of the mirror, where it might be that who you are inside just doesn't quite meet societal expectations of who you "should" be.

I also chose dance for my own personal artistic ambitions as an animator. By stripping away the need for sets, faces, and most props, I was able to focus almost entirely on body movement. My goal as a student of animation was to attempt a kind of excellence regarding one very specific type of movement. I loved the challenge of making subtle, slow, fluid motions. I am not yet a stellar fabricator, so I spent a long time developing a simple body to express myself through dance, via animation.

A final motivation for choosing this topic that might be worth considering—or else might be a self-indulgent bit of reflection but is nonetheless true—comes from an internal tension I experience from my own background, namely a tension between my proclivity for creating joyful nonsense, as well as my degrees in both theatre and human rights. As a theatre student, I felt myself drawn to the absurd and postmodern playwrights. As a creator, I am most comfortable with humor. In contrast I also have a master's degree in human rights and social justice, which was a very severe and serious course of study. I hoped to begin converging these conflicting vocations in this project.

I was sorely tempted to make my thesis film an outrageous joke, an experimental playground. I also considered making an "issue film," but it felt impersonal. Who am I, so privileged, to assert my perspective onto some pressing matter? I wondered, endlessly, how to combine these things. But one thing I learned as a student of human rights is simply that as someone who is privileged in so many ways, it is not my voice that needs to be heard nor my

story that needs to be told. This is seen in my original proposal—a quasi-absurdist-leaning short that was “generally” about a sort of inner-oppression. In my opinion it lacked the specificity needed to give it salient meaning. It needed a personal focus. I ended up talking with Sharen for a long time about what to make of it, and I dared to ask if she would help me make her the focus, and, albeit in an abstracted way, tell her story. She excitedly agreed, and has been at the heart of every decision regarding this piece. In the end, you could say my personal motivation for making this film is that it is basically a gift to her, because I have nothing else to offer, as words fall short and I have no way of offering formal or financial support.

To summarize, making this film in this way allowed me to explore artistic goals in terms of creating fluid body movements (attempting to grow a kind of “micro-mastery” in terms of animating), exploring the idea performative expression, making something more serious in tone, and it allowed me to dig into my roots as a theatre artist, a space where I am most comfortable and miss dearly. Through all of the challenges, revelations, mistakes, regrets, and successes, in the end I am satisfied with what I created and with what I learned throughout this process.

## II. Review of Research

I will reflect briefly on various pieces that influenced this project. They are listed in no particular order.

[Transgender History, Second Edition: the Roots of Today’s Revolution \(Susan Stryker, 2018\)](#)

Susan Stryker’s book, *Transgender History* was naturally my first consideration for research. I picked it up the day Sharen came out to me, long before I knew I would be making this film. I found Stryker’s work to be influential in not only how I came to understand the topic,



but also in how I talk about it. In putting words into dance, it is important to know what one is talking about, hence this book being at my side throughout pre-production and fabrication.

One material way in which this influenced my film is the question of how the character *starts* the film, i.e. whether she is shown first as a male figure who “becomes” female, or starts as someone who is presented as truly being female ‘underneath’ a veneer of ‘maleness.’ In short, I came to realize that the common parlance “MTF” (meaning “male to female”)—though a popular and convenient phrase—is considered by some in the trans community to be offensively inaccurate, and it is easy to see why. It functions primarily as a quick and easy indicator for cisgender<sup>3</sup> people, but the truth, at least from the perspective of most trans people I’ve talked to, is that the phrase is rather inaccurate and might even do harm to the trans community. As Susan Stryker puts it:

Some transgender people resent and resist these “directional” labels, claiming they make about as much sense as calling someone a “heterosexual-to-gay” man or “heterosexual-to-lesbian” woman, and that they serve only to marginalize transmen and transwomen within the larger populations of other men and women.<sup>4</sup>

As I have observed in trans forums, there is lingering disagreement about the use of this language, but for me it was important to think of it this way: Sharen is simply revealing who she always really was. So this answered my film’s first question: Since the figure’s essence is truly

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<sup>3</sup> People whose gender identity aligns with what was assigned to them at birth

<sup>4</sup> Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History, Second Edition: the Roots of Today’s Revolution*. Loc 265.

female, she must be removing maleness to reveal her true self, rather than starting as a male figure *putting on* femininity or transforming, as though it were something outside herself.

### Interviews with Sharen (2019)

Naturally, the core of my research and the most important part of anything that influenced this project is Sharen, in her own words. I don't want to give the impression that I had to "run everything by" her, or wait for her approval before experimenting with a creative decision—she is not that way at all. What I *do* want to emphasize however, is the importance of these interviews, and the personal importance of her ultimate approval, which came not as some sort of final binary judgement, but always through dialogue and open communication. If I made an artistic decision, I did indeed discuss it with her, to make sure that I was understanding things correctly from her perspective and being fair in my portrayal of her experience. "What if I mess it up? What if nobody understands it?" I asked. "You can't mess it up, because I am here, and I will understand it" she said.<sup>5</sup> Good enough for me. Good enough for a wider audience?

Does it matter?

One part of our interview that was particularly influential is when Sharen described looking in the mirror. This informed what has become the latter half of the film. She described "internalized transphobia" and how she has been "taught to see ugliness in the mirror." She said she needed to learn how to "detangle" it. For her, this meant a long road, as she described starting with only a "broken toolbox" to deal with it. And indeed she described an initial and complete rejection of her "past self."

She further describes that moment, that initial encounter-with-the-self, in it this way:

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<sup>5</sup> Sharen, interview by Andrew Sonntag, transcript and recording, October 2019.

So many trans people can't look in the mirror and see who they really are. For me, thinking back on it, it's like.. It's been about the stories and myths I told myself about my body, and only now starting to release internalized transphobia, that is to say, my fear of myself as a woman and loving my heart and my mind and my body enough to change. It's never been about hating my body, it's more about being brave enough to understand that I was just scared of being the beautiful human that I really am. The thing that can make looking at your old self a horror is that... you see decades of your life being forced to live as the incorrect gender while not having the space in your head to understand what is wrong. And that's a very harmful place to be because it causes tons of shame. Shame is taught. Shame kills. It's like it comes out after me and tells me, no, you're not allowed to be who you really are.<sup>6</sup>

But ultimately, as she describes it, she learned to see that figure out of the mirror, as more than a mere reflection, and in a different light altogether. It is no longer as a "horror," but instead as a "very scared little girl trapped in a lie and not understanding," one that needed love more than rejection. Since coming out to herself and to family, she describes just the beginning of being able to face herself, which is precisely where my film ends: "Every morning I look directly at myself, and remind myself, by myself, that I'm allowed to be myself."<sup>7</sup>

### Film: *The Red Shoes* (1948) (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger)

I was well into production when *The Red Shoes* was brought to my attention by a peer. The ballet sequence in this film was of particular interest to me, naturally. While I did not directly base any of what I created on it, it was influential in its way. I loosely used it as inspiration for how to film a dance sequence, including what sort of shots were "acceptable,"

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<sup>6</sup> Sharen, interview by Andrew Sonntag, transcript and recording, October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Sharen, interview by Andrew Sonntag, transcript and recording, October 2019.

was there precedence for cutting a certain way, how ought dissolves be used, and was there anything to learn from how they moved, etc. There is, in this film, as in mine, a certain dreamlike quality, or at least some sense of the surreal, and it too begins on a stage. In *The Red Shoes*, for instance, the ballerina dances with a paper man who then becomes an actual man. This was vaguely similar to something I wanted to achieve, and helped inform how to make the “blue man” in my film, or in other words, the “Male Aspect” of the protagonist. As I will describe in more detail below, he was meant to be shown as made of harder material than the female aspect, with edges and crinkles, as if made of hardened paper or a kind of armor. This in contrast to the female aspect, who is soft and more flexible (and much stronger, able to hold poses easier, less weighed down, etc).

*The Red Shoes* is not something I used for direct influence regarding character design or choreography, but it was indeed something I found myself watching when I was feeling uninspired. I do not know the premise of this film as I could only find the ballet sequence my friend showed me, but it involved a very large ensemble with elaborate, vivid sets. It was epic and grandiose, having the protagonist travel to magical realms visiting crowds of other dancers in vivid costumes, whereas I wanted to create something more gentle and intimate. Still, it sometimes helped propel me into the right mindset, and I often wrote and imagined my next shots after a viewing, so it is noted here.

#### Film: *The Hand* (1965) (Jiří Trnka)

*The Hand*, by Jiří Trnka was particularly influential in coming up with the initial idea for my film, though its intended implementation never came to fruition. I wanted to create a kind of modern reimagining of the use of an actual hand as seen in *The Hand*. For my purposes, it was

meant to, as in the original film, be a symbolic representation of a kind of oppression. But in my case, rather than representing various political entities or fascism, it was supposed to be about the oppression of societal gender norms, expectations, and the *inner* oppressions of one's own mind. Originally, my film was not supposed to end where it does. Instead, the protagonist was meant to leave the apartment, travel through a city street, and end up in the surreal impression of an office space. A hand would enter the scene, visibly manipulating the puppet, ultimately pounding on the table and tilting it, as the protagonist slid back through a cacophony of noise and cultural images back into the sanctuary of her bedroom.

Originally, the protagonist was even supposed to first end up exploding through the table and into the "lair" of the hand, complete with its tools of animation, exposed armatures, and a real confrontation was to take place. This ended up being too ambitious in the end, and I believe the film is better for it. Nevertheless, *The Hand* was influential in developing how to visualize the major antagonizing force throughout the film, even as it exists, and was always on my mind as I couldn't avoid thinking about my own manipulation of the scene, the unavoidable influences of my own perspective mixing with that of Sharen's, etc.

### Lee Mokobe, "What It's Like to be Transgender" (2015)

Lee Mokobe's poem deserves to be quoted at length, but more than that it deserves to be experienced, as it is a spoken-word poem meant to be performed. For my purposes here, I will share the lines that influenced me most. First:

"It had nothing to do with hating my body,  
I just love it enough to let it go."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mokobe, Lee. "A Powerful Poem About What it Feels Like to be Transgender." TED 2015.

I heard Sharen echo similar sentiments many times throughout our talks. There was, in the original treatment of my film, a serious tension between the two “aspects” of the character, one that played out in a *pas de deux*<sup>9</sup>, where partway through they would switch who leads, who lifts, etc. While this did not come to pass, what I was able to accomplish was the gentle removal of the “male armor” throughout, the “letting go” of given aspects of her body.

Second, again from Lee Mokobe’s poem:

Can you see how easy it is to talk people into coffins,  
to misspell their names on gravestones.  
and people still wonder why there are boys rotting,  
they go away in high school hallways  
they are afraid of becoming another hashtag in a second  
afraid of classroom discussions becoming like judgement day  
and now oncoming traffic is embracing more transgender children than parents.<sup>10</sup>

This again reflects realities as told to me by Sharen, and addresses certain aspects of this project that deserved special consideration. It is particularly important to me because I have personally known trans friends and coworkers who have died by suicide or who have been met with hatred and violence. The point is that words matter, intention matters, and clarity matters. It is one of many reasons I wanted to be clear at the start of this document that my entire project is specifically about one person’s experience, not any sort of intentional commentary on broader issues. That said, it is of course unavoidable, and it is not my intention to put blinders on here. It is simply that it is too important to mess up—you have to be deliberate.

Additionally, and in acknowledgement of everything I was learning about the larger community generally, it was important to have in mind the perspective of a trans man in Lee. I

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<sup>9</sup> Basically a “dance duet” in ballet, not too dissimilar from how you might imagine waltz, which is probably more familiar

<sup>10</sup> Mokobe, Lee. “A Powerful Poem About What it Feels Like to be Transgender.” TED 2015.

have found, anecdotally, that they are often extremely underrepresented in the usual discourse, whether in popular media or in smaller, trans communities.

## Trans Forums

Many of my decisions in creating this project were influenced, however unconsciously, by the online trans community, and I am indebted to these anonymous individuals for sharing their stories and experiences. They were always willing to answer my questions, offer loving corrections, and happy to suggest further reading or viewing materials. Reflecting on watching these online communities grow, split over certain issues, come together over others, is like witnessing a part of history develop in a time-lapse. As I have stated now many times, my film is ultimately about one person, not the community at-large, and not about particular political challenges facing (and often threatening) the community. However, what immersing myself in these communities allowed me to do was to contextualize Sharen's place among them, and most importantly, helped me begin to understand and communicate with Sharen in appropriate, thoughtful ways.

## Dance and Theatre Background

In terms of the actual animation, my own history in dance and theatre were research enough. It's really very simple choreography, and when I was unable to create reference video myself, which is the majority of it, I referenced any number of online videos—not for choreography, but for mechanics and weight distribution in common moves. For example, I pulled out probably a dozen or so instances of people doing aerial flips, or grand jetes, etc, blocked a shot, then animated. I also referenced some of my own dance recitals from years past.

Sharen and I have been on stage together since we were little kids, went to the same college for theatre, and began our professional lives in the theatre. In undergrad we were in many of the same ballet, tap, and jazz classes. Though we have since both branched out into different professional fields, you must understand that the goal in this film was to get back to the most private, personal place for the protagonist. I was going back to the roots of her identity. A stage then, because it has always been our home, our safest place, where we started everything.

### Film: *Balance* (1989) (Christoph and Wolfgang Lauenstein)

This film shows a group of men standing on a floating platform in a grey void, probably the sky, and presumably very high up. They do not speak, only showing us their intentions and emotions through body movement. In short, they appear to fight for dominance over the platform: Whenever one moves, the platform tilts, and the rest must run to compensate. They fail to maintain balance, one by one sliding off.<sup>11</sup> Interpretations of the meaning behind this film are endless, but for my purposes what influenced me was the simplicity of the set, which influenced how I made and shot my bare stage set against a dark void. I loved the sense of isolation, and the sense that something extremely important was happening in such an intimate, basically private space. In my original animatic my set was going to tilt in a similar way as in *Balance*, and I had worked out how to create this illusion without actually moving the stage. This entire section, along with the Hand, was cut, as we focused and clarified the message of the film.

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<sup>11</sup> *Balance*, directed and produced by Christoph Lauenstein and Wolfgang Lauenstein. Material-Verlag, 1989.



### III. Process

#### Why Stop-Motion

Before describing the production timeline, I will first address the question of “why stop-motion,” because it is always asked, and because I see this question addressed in other stop-motion thesis papers. My short answer is, why not? It is what I enjoy doing, it is the most analogous to my background in theatre, and I like sharing the space with my characters. Being physically engaged is important to me. The smell of sawdust and seeing the motes in real shafts of light excite me. The light-without-heat rendered in Maya is cold to me on a deep level. I thoroughly enjoy the process of animating in stop-motion. I enjoy its unique challenges and the immense satisfaction of laboring over, say, a camera move, then having to spend eight or more hours doing it again because it wasn’t quite right. It brings me sincere joy— time seems to stop and I am transported some other place.

Furthermore, the issues tackled in this film deal with very real, very physical realities which are important to the subject, and so stop-motion is the only way to create it authentically. The texture of the felt, constantly in motion, soft and impossibly strong, is not something I could personally recreate in another medium. The delicate touch and intimate connection to the material itself is necessary to really get at what I’m trying to show in this film.

To be perfectly honest, I feel like a pretentious imposter using any sort of “artspeak,” and what matters is that I chose stop-motion for my thesis film because it is what I came here to do. This film would not work in 3D or 2D, as I am far less skilled in those areas and also because stop-motion is really the only kind of animation (in my opinion) that can even begin to approach

anything Brechtian<sup>12</sup> which, in a film that is in-part a commentary on the nature of performance and artifice itself, is extremely relevant. I want the audience to know they are looking at something they could touch. I want them to know that they are looking at something that *was* touched, every single frame. I want the viewer to have to reconcile seeing something rough and handmade with constant, fluid motion and undeniable life. My film is about performance in a private space, so this intimacy is necessary and only achievable in stop-motion.

In the end though, for my purposes, stop-motion simply brings me joy. The absolute thrill of seeing something impossible come to life still amazes me. There is a wisdom in “wow,” and it’s one I hesitate to dissect. I like it, and that is reason enough.

## Pre-Production

My film went through many, many iterations in pre-production before I settled on a true plan of action, and continued to evolve throughout production in response to changes in my timeline, simplifying and sharpening the action through weekly discussions with my thesis chair.. As you will see in the appendix, my official, approved proposal seems radically different than the film I ended up making. But it is only so on the surface. In essence, thematically, and “what it’s really about” basically stays the same, being that my modified, ‘unofficial’ proposal of deconstruction and expressionism in regards to the *accepted* proposal seen below was similar enough *in essence* to be an acceptable revision on its own merits by my thesis chair.

It is a pretty simple deconstruction really. My original proposal involved a vast desert. A desert journey always involves rejecting the noise of the normal world, allowing for the solitude

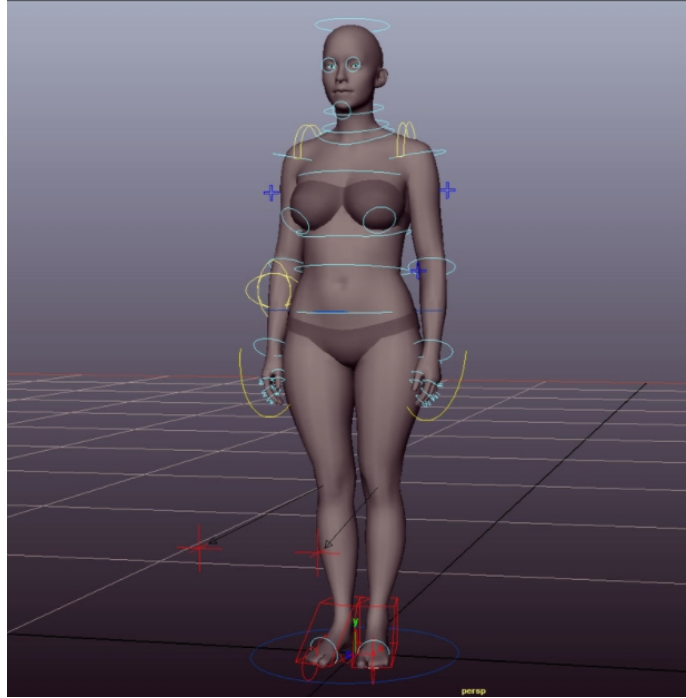
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<sup>12</sup> In short, it’s a kind of theatre style started by Bertolt Brecht that emphasizes a kind of detachment, alienation, and especially an *awareness* of the production *being a production*. If I were to attempt this in stop-motion, I might expose the armature, leave the rigs in, show my hands sometimes, etc. I wanted a sort of “lite” version of this, which, in my opinion, every single stop-motion film is.

necessary for either finding oneself or giving oneself to others, even giving oneself *to* oneself. One need not even leave the bedroom to find this solitude. I still made my desert, but did so with what the desert represented, a void surrounding an intimate space of the self. As for the Hand character and all that it represented, all I have done is keep that hand in between the frames— it is literally there between every shot. And though invisible, the specter of its oppression is seen immediately in the cloud of blue wool that materializes as ‘male armor’ weighing the character down. The explicitly Brechtian elements from the original (exposure of the armature, for example) are basically gone, but I would argue that the fact that it is literally a dance performance fulfills that meaning and intention easily. Any story can be told through dance, and all I have done is give my film a personal focus and strip it down to its most basic essential elements, for both practical and artistic considerations.

### Storyboards, Animatics, and Evolving Iterations

RIT has made me a better draftsman than I ever thought possible, but I saw no compelling reason not to do basically all of my previsualization in Maya. For me, it was the most efficient way of getting through pre-production. For my main character, I used the free “Woman Maya Rig” by cvbtruong, shown here:

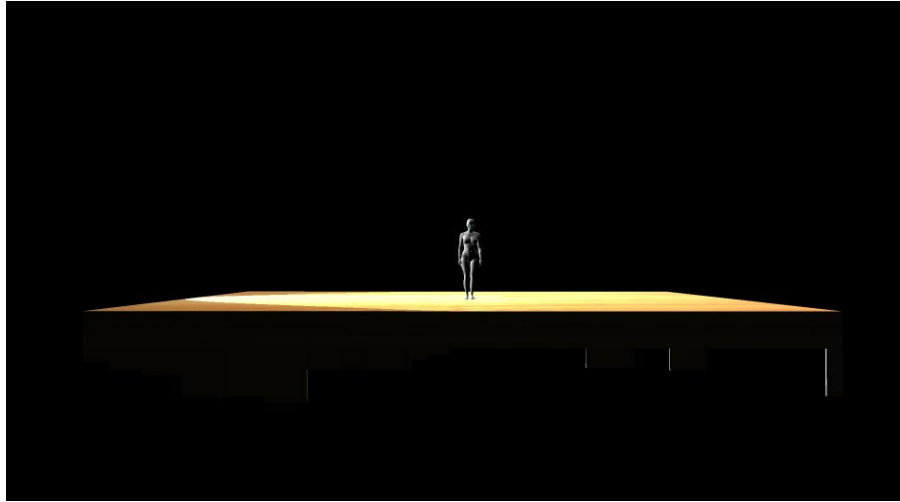


*Figure 1: Woman Maya Rig*

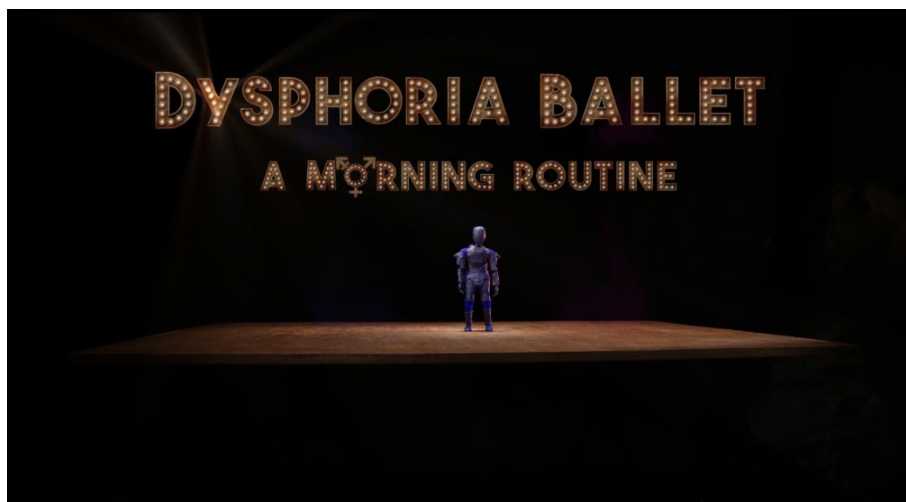
Other props and figures for the animatic were either modeled by myself, found within the base Maya software, or downloaded for free from various sites like TurboSquid. Shortly, I will show the some of the shots from storyboards and animatics, perhaps noting significant changes and why they were made. This will by no means be a comprehensive presentation of every visual iteration of my film, instead showing only significant changes and whatever is necessary to give you an idea of my process.

It also seems important to note that, thanks to the excellent education I got from RIT in even just an introductory Maya course, I was able to fully animate some of my film for the final animatic. Again I saw no reason not to—it was pretty quick work, and it allowed me to time things out with precision. It helped me to prepare in this way, being able to make careful note of, for instance, whether a “soft” landing of a pose required say, 15 or 19 eases depending on a shot. I was able to be very particular about these sorts of things. When it came time to animate for

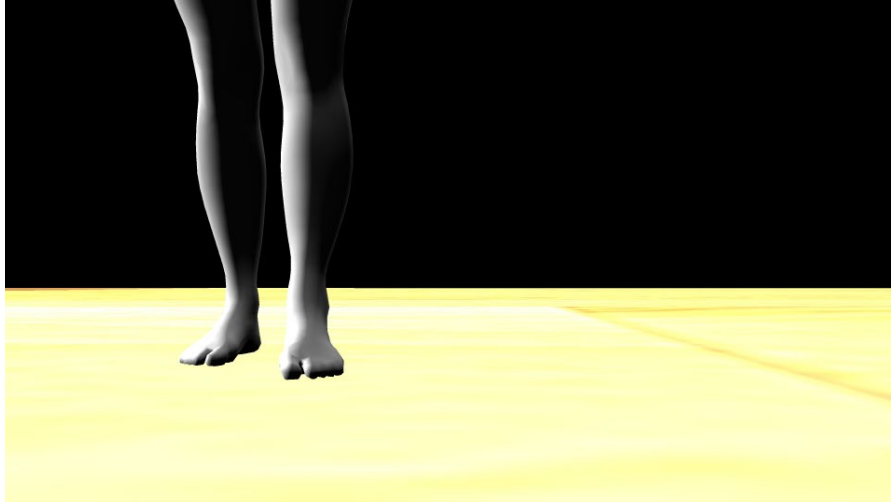
real, much of this had to be adjusted of course, but I was prepared for anything. Following each Maya render shown below, I will show the final shot for comparison.



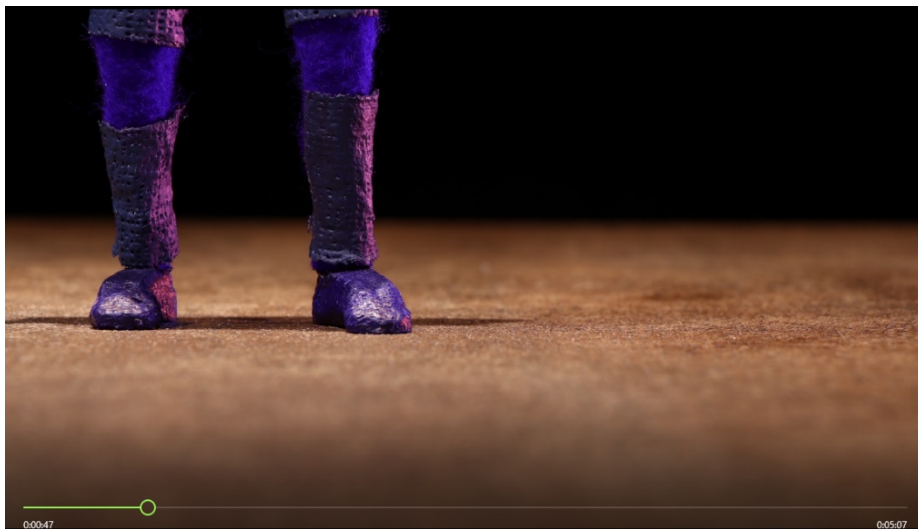
*Figure 2: Title shot (Maya)*



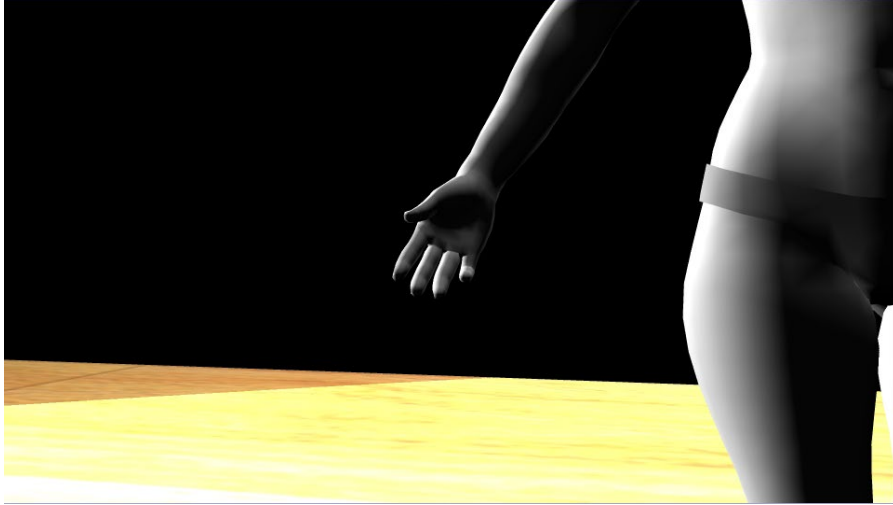
*Figure 3: Title shot (Final)*



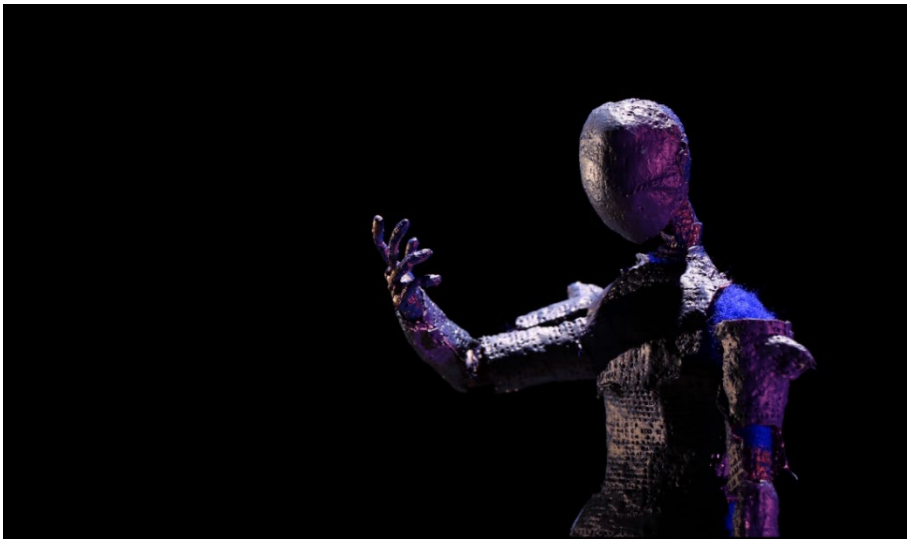
*Figure 4: First camera move, showing the feet as preparing for the dance, as if just coming to life and “testing the waters”*



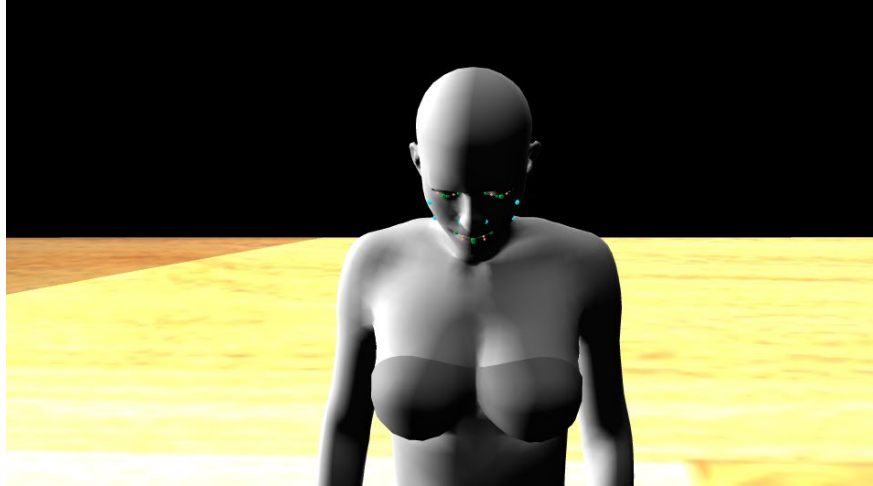
*Figure 5: Feet, final shot*



*Figure 6: CU of hand. This shot was changed to include the face looking at the hand.*



*Figure 7: Hand, final shot*

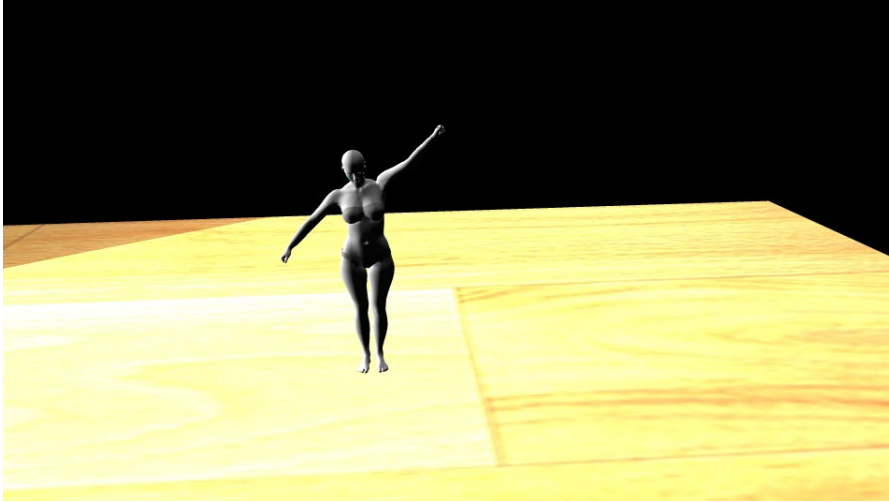


*Figure 8: Shoulder roll, warming up for the dance*



*Figure 9: Shoulder roll, final shot*

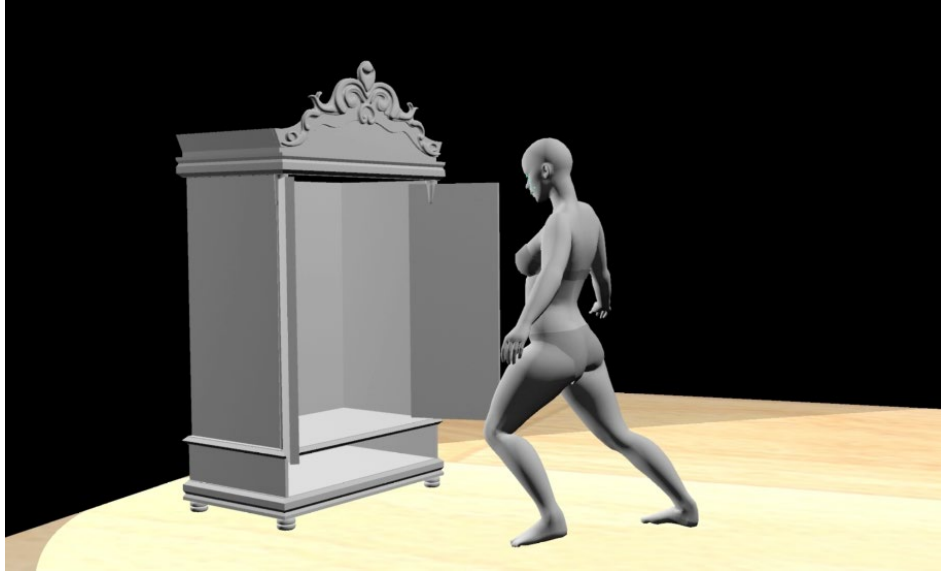




*Figure 10: Stretching sequence. This was condensed to be only the initial action right at the start, as if waking up*



*Figure 11: Stretching, final shot*



*Figure 12: At the Wardrobe*



*Figure 13: Wardrobe, final shot*



*Figure 14: Facing the "Male Aspect" in the mirror*

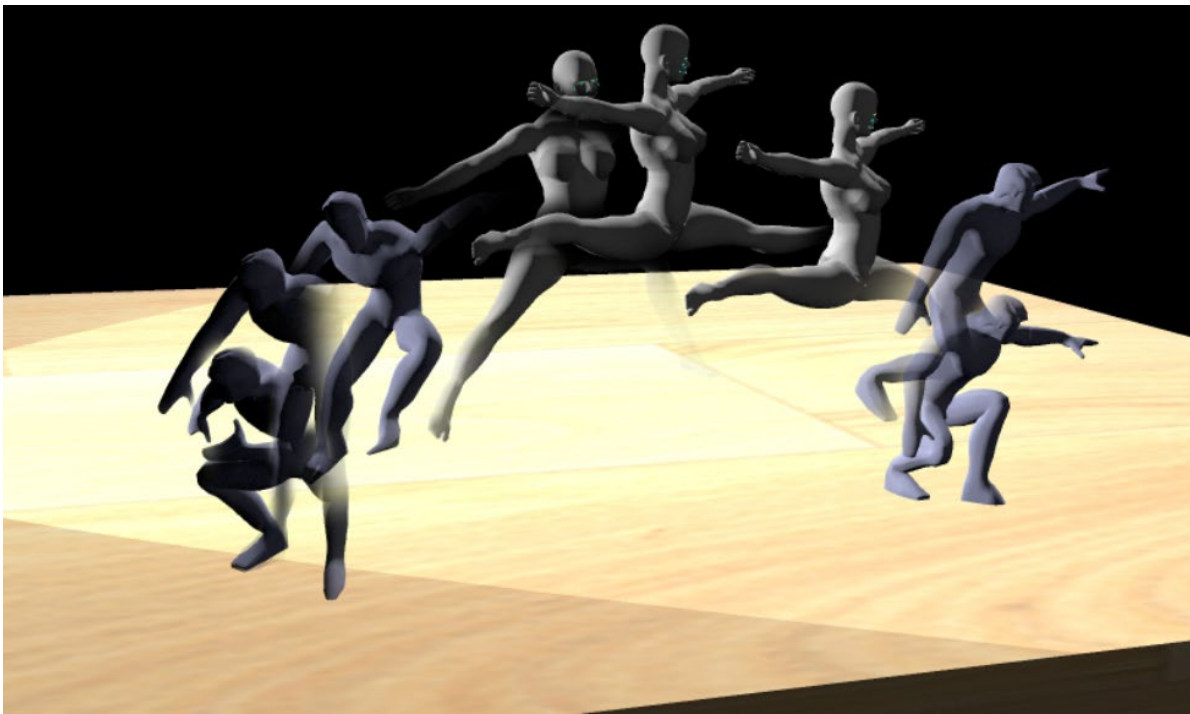


*Figure 15: Mirror, final shot, before illumination*

It is my hope that the above images are sufficient in showing you how my previsualization process worked. Note how similar the final shots are. In stop-motion, just setting

up a shot properly can take hours if you are not prepared. It still took a significant amount of time, but with the shots planned out in this fashion, I was able to simply put the camera where it was needed and adjust accordingly, which saved me many hours of labor.

It is at that point however, at the “mirror moment” shown above, that things took a radical turn in my production process. What follows here is, more or less, the original plan with due reflection:



*Figure 16: Fighting for control of the body after the Male Aspect lurches out of the mirror*

The above image, Figure 16, was my original idea for what would happen when the Male Aspect came out of the mirror. He was going to, as at the start of the film, “attach” himself to the protagonist, turning her blue again. From there, in an exciting sort of modern dance (shifting away from ballet), she would attempt to wrest control over ‘the self,’ morphing and shifting back

and forth in a kind of “Jekyll & Hyde” fashion. Shown above, it was to happen (for example), in the middle of a leap, where the male figure, weighing her down, would prepare for the leap, then her true self would emerge at the apex, and finally she would land on the ground as the Male Figure once again.

Following this, the Female Figure would “shake it off” after having rejected the male aspect. A door would appear, and she would go out into the world. This next sequence would have been a Fosse style dance as a flat cityscape either rose out of the void or was lowered by ropes, in a theatrical scene-change:

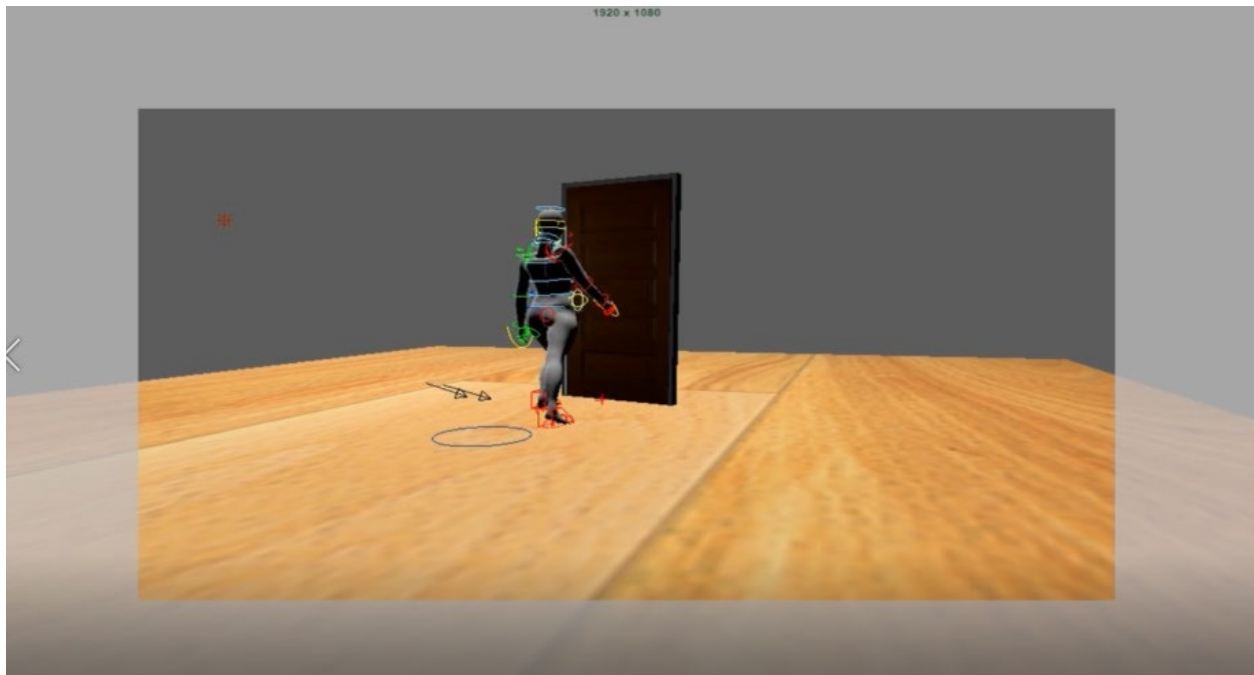
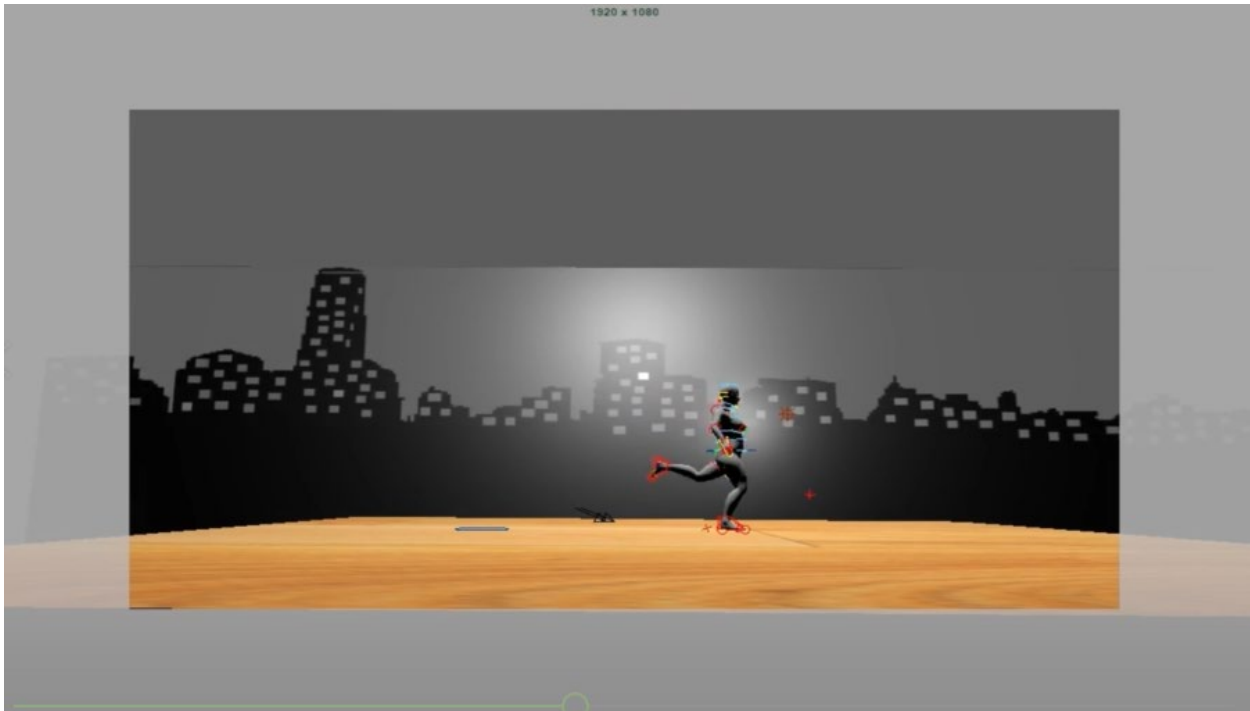


Figure 17: To the Door



*Figure 18: City Rising Up*

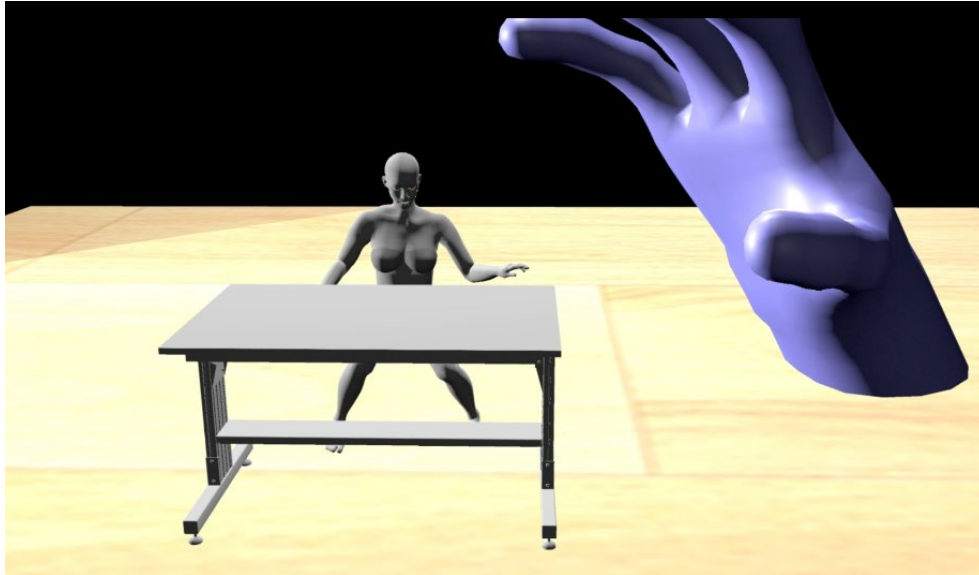
At this point, we were to hear a crowd forming. There were many ways of accomplishing this that I was going to experiment with, including simply using lights and sounds (imagine the edges of light on the floor of the stage closing around the figure as crowd voices were heard in the dark). This was supposed to be representative of a kind of prejudice, real or imagined, as described by Sharen in our interviews. A cacophony of noise and insults would result in our hero retreating from a confident dance into a subtle one, as she made her way into an office scene.

In short, the sequence of events included: 1) Starting in the bedroom, 2) Venturing into the city on the way to work, 3) At work, and finally 4) Back to the bedroom to confront herself. The idea was basically, as Sharen put it, “you can’t really feel comfortable out in the world until you’re comfortable with yourself. You can’t force it.”<sup>13</sup> This sequence was based on an

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<sup>13</sup> Sharen, interview by Andrew Sonntag, transcript and recording, October 2019.

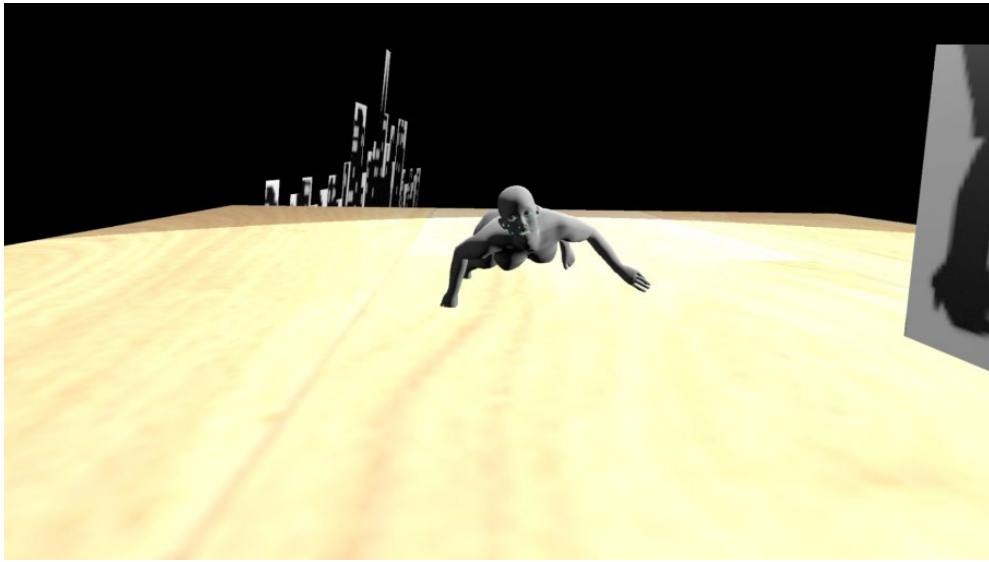
experience she described where she faced real prejudice at work and, at least mentally, found herself retreating back home. So here is the basic sequence, as continued from the cityscape:



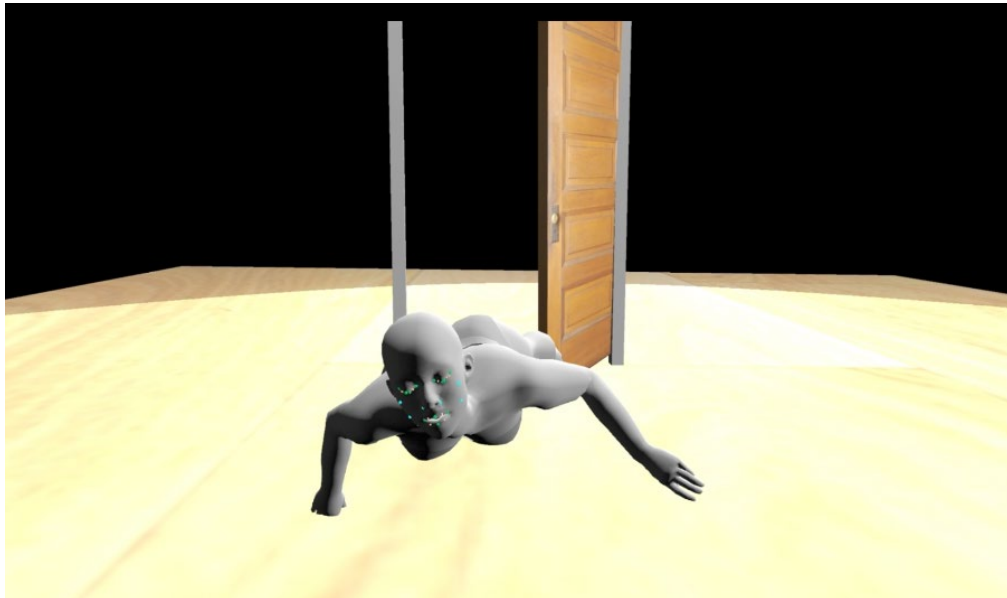
*Figure 19: The Hand, as a boss-type figure at a symbolic workplace*



*Figure 20: The Hand tilts the table*



*Figure 21: City and other figures fly past to simulate sliding back home*



*Figure 22: She slides back through her door, along with the POV. Cut to black and she stands up in the frame, seeing the mirror*



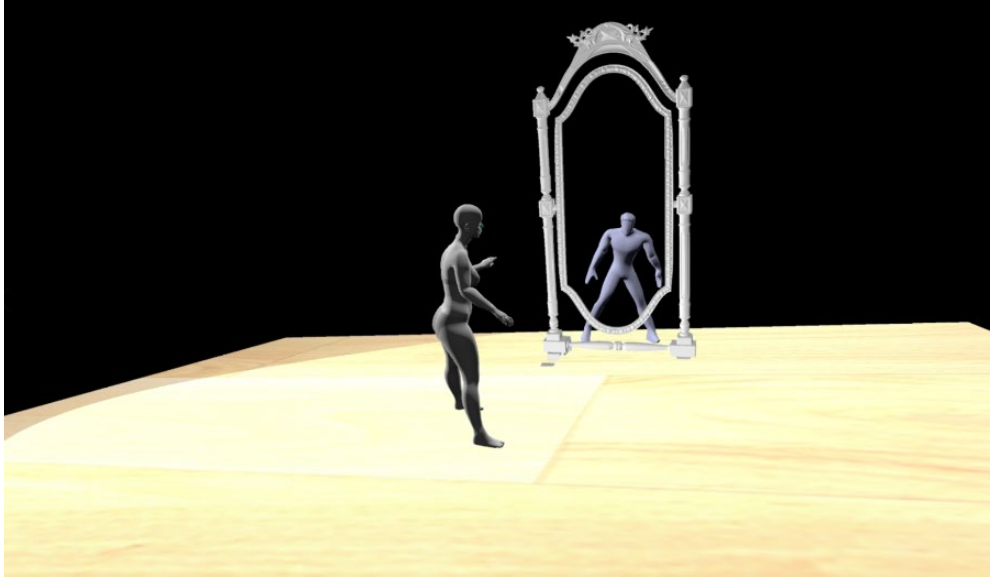


Figure 23: "Mirror Moment" Part 2-- this sequence is more or less what we see in the final film, minus the Pas

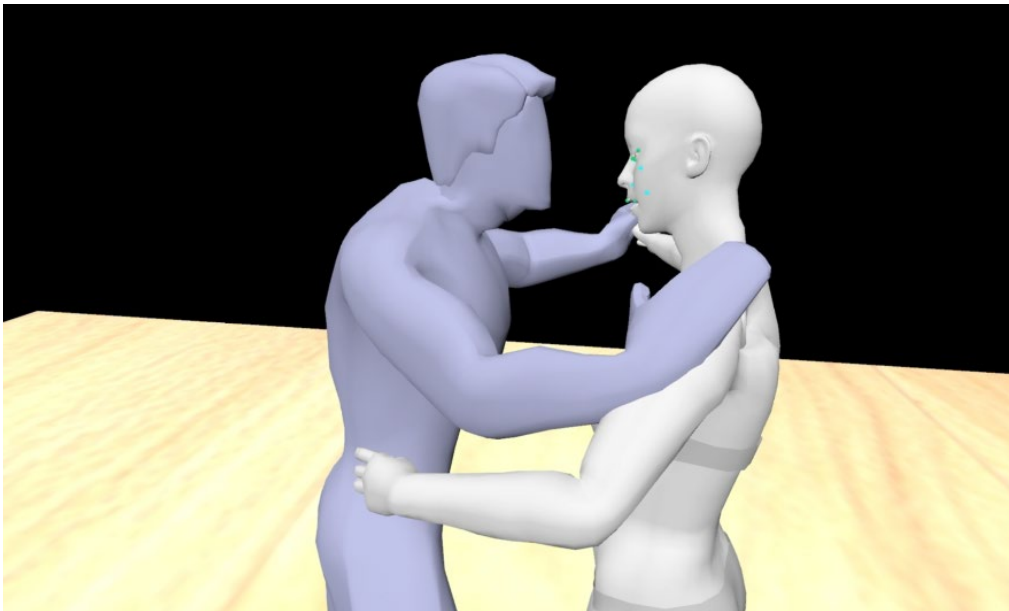
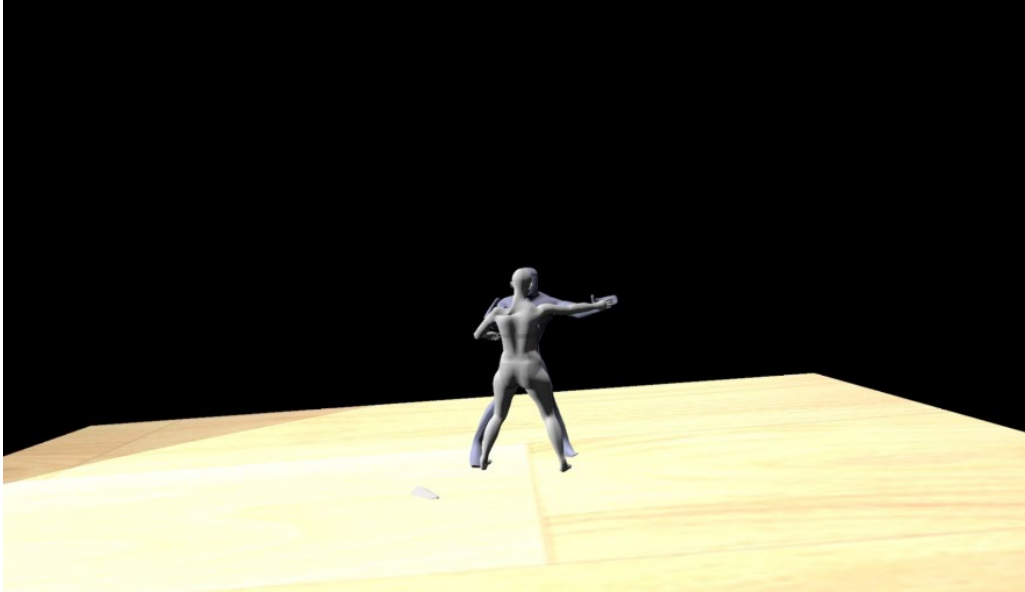
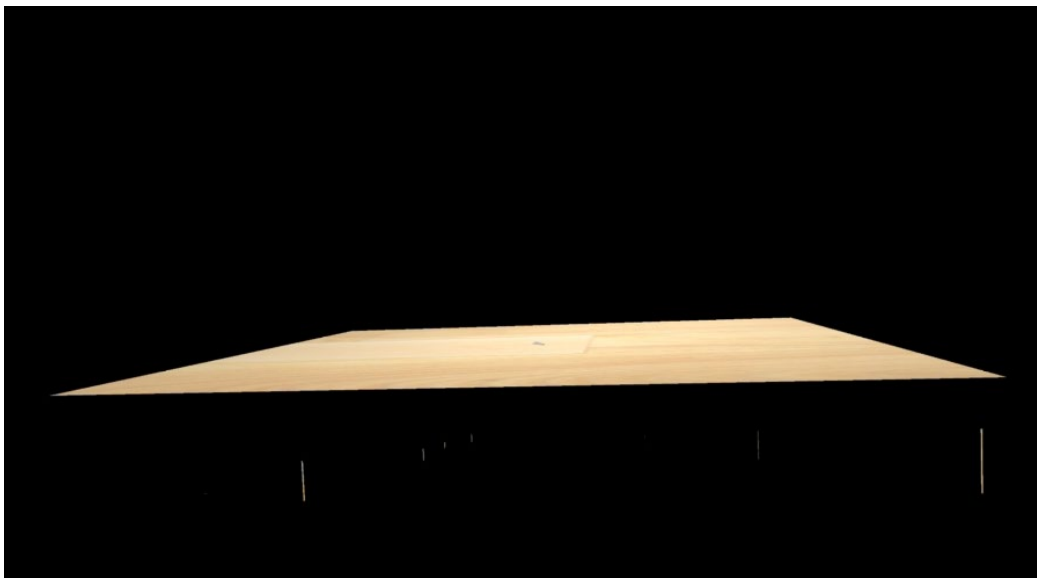


Figure 24: The Pas, including a switch of who leads, shown here



*Figure 25: Pas continued, figures combining*



*Figure 26: They are whisked away in a cloud of wool like at the start, i.e. "Not about hating body, but about loving it enough to let it go." Fade to black*

It all ended up being too ambitious, would have made the narrative too complicated, and most importantly, would have been at odds with the theme of performance in a private space. As

I worked with my thesis chair and committee, I simplified and clarified my goals with this project, and was finally able to focus and articulate my basic thesis: performative expression as a necessary tool for coming to know oneself. Leaving the bedroom wasn't just unnecessary—it would have been thematically contrary to everything I was trying to say. This whole process, especially the reduction and refining of the original plan, was a major learning point for me. With the help of my committee I learned how to say more with less.

As a final note and point of clarification: While I did do much pre-production work in 3D, these quickly-done renders were made mostly to save time because it was faster (for me) than drawing out storyboards. I had no desire to pursue the project in 3D, and am sure it would not look nearly as good in the end. This is not because I have a negative opinion of 3D, but simply because I am much better at stop-motion. I also believe that for this particular project—with a subject so visceral and tangible—the desired textures, unsure and imperfect movements, and overall thematic intentions are better served by a stop-motion aesthetic.

### Character & Set Design, General Fabrication

One of the real-life challenges described by Sharen also posed an interesting challenge in character design for me: namely, how do I resolve the tension caused by societal gender norms without relying on potentially offensive gender stereotypes? No easy task, as in character design and animation generally, it sometimes seems necessary to communicate in a kind of “visual shorthand” to immediately get across certain ideas about who someone is, even basic things like “this character is a woman.” So, I relied on two aspects of my interviews with Sharen: As noted elsewhere, described a kind of “male armor,” cold and jagged, compared to how she felt on the inside, which was, as she put it, “more like a beautiful silk scarf.” Easy enough then: The male figure would be plated, using paper mache, and would have rough edges and corners, while the

female figure would be felted. I was afraid that the colors would be too cliché, like some sort of horrible gender reveal party, so I wanted her to be red more than pink, and for him to be layered in shades of darkness instead of baby blue. With a sense of irony I did end up leaning into the idea of smoke or mist typically seen at gender reveal parties (which were at the height of their infamy while making this film), by adding colored mist (done in After Effects) at various points throughout the film.

I also owe a good deal of thanks to Lara Ippolito, my wife and assistant fabricator, who is credited for teaching me how to needle-felt. It was a great skill to learn and one I look forward to using in the future. What is so wonderful about it is that you can easily cover the screws and joints of the armature, cut away to adjust the tension when necessary, then use the felting needle to cover it back up seamlessly. Clothes on characters can make this very difficult, and since I intentionally wanted the “boiling”<sup>14</sup> of the felt to keep the character in constant motion (as opposed to the “walking dead” of the male figure), I didn’t need to worry about any subtle changes in how the felt ‘landed’ when I was done with a repair or tension adjustment. Here is some of my process in images:

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<sup>14</sup> “Boiling,” or “chattering” is when something like a piece of clothing is unintentionally moved every single frame, causing it to behave in a sort of self-contained frantic way when played back.



*Figure 27: Color Testing the wool. Originally I was going to have a grey stage.*



*Figure 28: Shaping and Building up the wool*



*Figure 29: Another shot of in-process needle-felting*

Shown above is kind of a halfway point in the needle-felting process. I made this puppet over a ball-and-socket armature. The body of the armature is a Julian Clarke armature I purchased online and made many adjustments to. The arms and palms were made from armature pieces I collected out of an Aardman tin<sup>15</sup>. The fingers are double-twisted .5 mm armature wire with Apoxy Sculpt bones. I shot brass tubes through the rig points so I didn't felt over them. What I did in the end was to measure and cut perfect-fit rig pieces and glued felt over the ends so I had little plugs that could easily be removed and replaced when it came time for a leap. You might take particular note of how thin the feet plates are here, an unexpected major issue which will be discussed later in the document. I took a series of pictures like this from all angles to have a reference available for where to cut when adjusting tension was necessary.

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<sup>15</sup> Aardman Animations is a British stop-motion studio that, in addition to making famous films, sells tins of armature parts. You can think of these tins like LEGOs for stop-motion people.





*Figure 30: More hidden rig points and finished fabrication*

The head was Apoxy Sculpt, after the original felted head looked way too big, pictured below. Over the head, hands, and feet, I glued vet wrap, which I then painted. It was a mix of liquid latex with various red and black paints. Once dried, I dusted all painted surfaces with baby powder to prevent the dried liquid-latex from sticking to itself.



*Figure 31: A look at the original, giant head*



*Figure 32: Adjusting tension mid-animation*



As noted, the felt allowed me to adjust tension seamlessly. In the case pictured above, I missed the mark a bit, hence the horrifying wound, but it was fixed up in no time and with no visible scar. That lighter colored material underneath the felt was a basic medical bandage (much thinner than the vetwrap used on the outside). It gave the felt something to grab onto without the added bulk of the typical sort of foam used in a build-up puppet.



*Figure 33: Main character with armor plates*



*Figure 34: Shot with full armor*

The blue plates shown above were made of paper mache ‘just-add-water’ medical bandages. I carefully enclosed the original puppet in plastic wrap then allowed the bandages to dry in the proper shape. I painted them blue and they snapped right on. However, for the body plates in particular, they did not stay in place. I tried several solutions, but the only one that worked with any success was sewing. Keeping them in place was necessary. While the constant movement and “boiling” of the felt was desirable, if the blue plates shifted from frame to frame it would be a jittery mess.



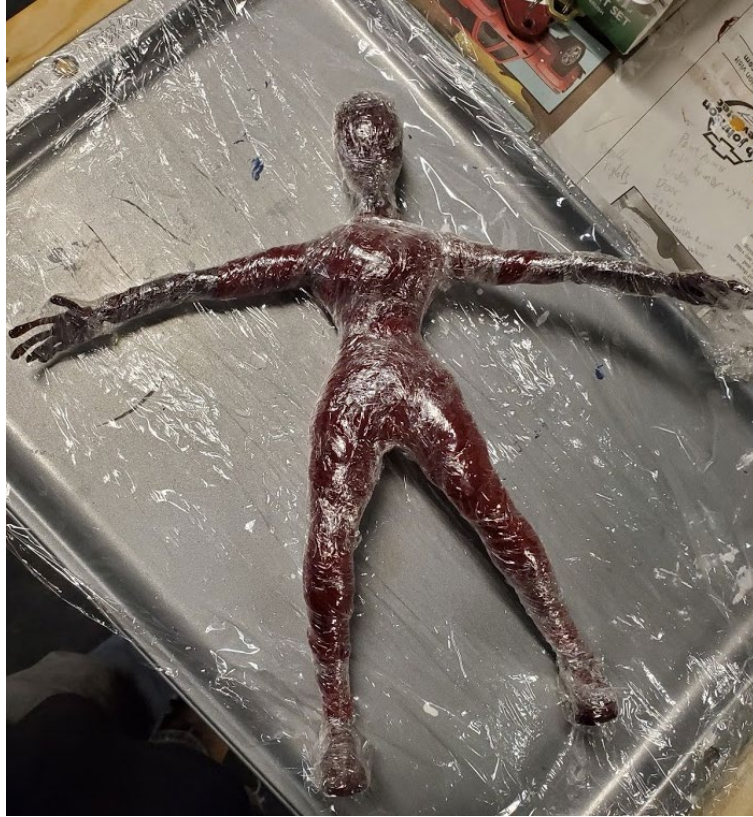


Figure 35: Preparing for creation of perfect-fit armor plates

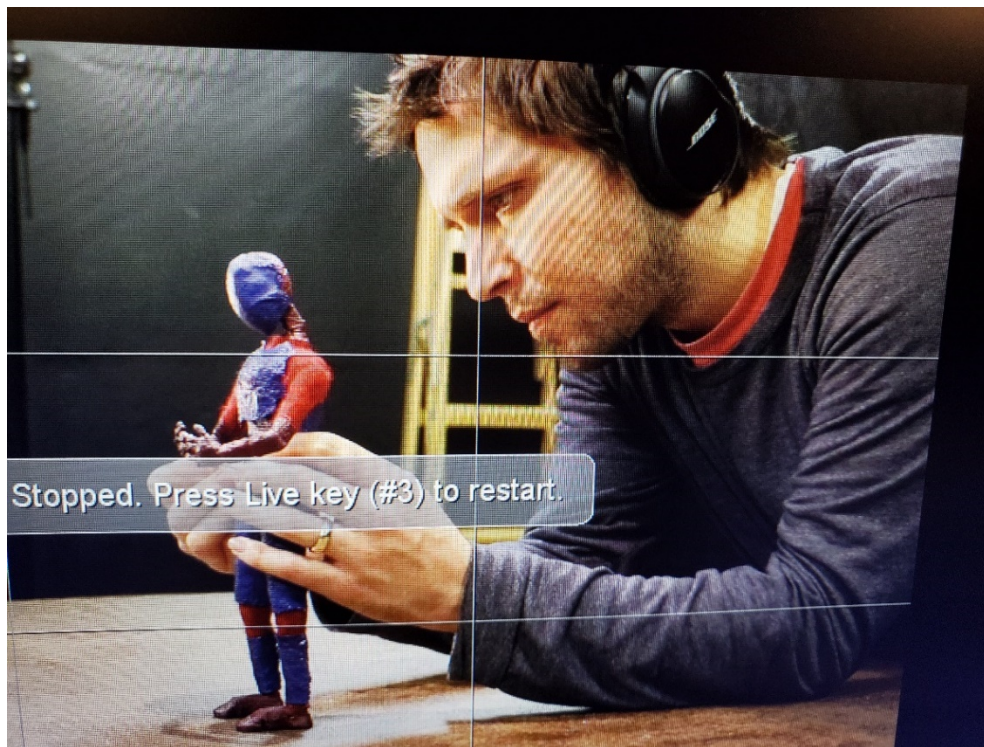


Figure 36: Sewing on the plates, as accidentally caught when Dragonframe froze.



*Figure 37: Layout*



*Figure 38: Kick*

Above are two shots from the final film, to show here what the armor-less main character looks like. I wanted a completely basic form, with no face or eyelines to distract from the body

movement, and indeed no face or eyelines to worry about animating. For this project, I wanted to focus solely on the body. I toyed with the idea of adding eyes, but they made it look so cartoonishly weird. There was something much more innocent about a blank face, and it was one that was easier, in my opinion, to put one's own face onto it while watching. Against what I would typically recommend, somehow for this project an absence of a face made the character more empathetic, and made the subject much safer to approach. A viewer's attention is naturally drawn to the eyes. They would have pulled focus. Furthermore, a lifetime of dance and theater has taught me that body performance alone can elicit any emotional state.



*Figure 39: Fabulously strong, flexible puppet, no rigs needed for even the most extreme poses*



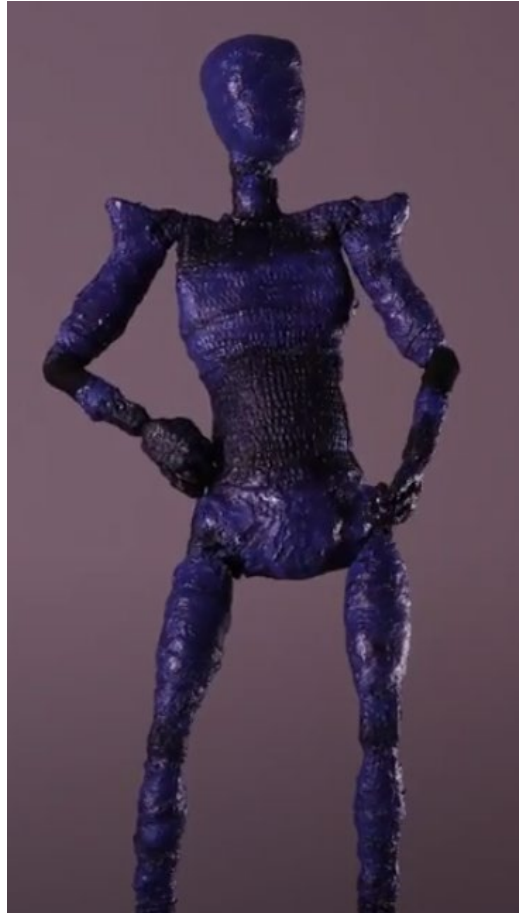


*Figure 40: Male Puppet in progress*

For the “Male Aspect” puppet, or just the “blue man,” I used an armature I built from pieces from an Aardman kit, along with paper mache and wires. I did not have access to silver soldering, and so relied on JB Weld to keep him together. This failed in the end on his left leg,

but I got an okay “zombie walk” out of the mirror with it and it did not cause significant problems.

Over the empty spots shown above I used black vet-wrap painted over with a mix of liquid latex and blue/black paints. This model too was dusted with baby powder to prevent stickiness.



*Figure 41: Blue model in a weight-shift animation test*

He didn't end up as bulky or as “strong” as I had imagined, but thought his rather quasi-emaciated, sort-of-unbalanced look was appropriate.



*Figure 42: Mirror*

Here is the “Mirror Moment” as shown from behind. The mirror was made from wood, foamboard, and Epoxy Sculpt. The strip lights were glued on and ran through a hole I drilled in the table.





*Figure 43: Table and Camera*

The table itself was made from two metal, collapsible saw-horses on top of which I anchored a flat piece of wood, about 5 feet by 4 feet. I sprayed it with a textured paint so as to help hide drill holes, and went over it with a brown wash. Also pictured here is the camera on a manual slider that I used for the one of the first shots with the feet. I used that big wheel on the left to slide it and used a piece of dust on the stage to keep track of how far to move it each frame. To keep the movement smooth, I had to choose something stationary and prominent, so I picked a big spec of dust sitting on the stage floor and used it for tracking. I would “step” back and forth between frames in Dragonframe to measure my movement, thinking of it as using even

spacing to animate the spec of dust to the right, rather than thinking of it as moving the camera to the left. Using this as an anchor point (as opposed to the moving foot) allowed me to keep track of exactly how much the camera moved for each exposure. Each camera move in this film was done manually, and this is a good example of how I went about creating them frame by frame, either with a slider, the geared head, or geared center tripod column.



*Figure 44: Wardrobe*

The final piece of fabrication to show is the wardrobe, complete with animatable doors. It is made of thin craft wood around a cardboard box. The back was left open to allow light to shine through. I had imagined it being lowered in from the ceiling like in a play, but it ended up not working out, so it just kind of pops onto the screen and pops out when it's done. I fed armature wire through the cardboard to achieve the door movement. I used buttons to lean into the kind of surreal doll-feel I had going. It was pretty spur of the moment to be honest, as in: "Here is a jar

of buttons, let's glue one on why not, okay cool I dig it, let's animate." Also pictured here is the stage before I made it brown. I wanted this lighter touch initially because it looked better against the red puppet, but it simply didn't look like a stage, and it was much too reflective for the lights.

## Animation

In general, for the animation process, I used blocking and reference video. For blocking, I would take pictures from pose to pose, dragging out those freeze-frames until it timed out how I wanted, exported it, then used it as a timing-guide for the actual animation. It is analogous to how 2D artists do key-poses or key-frames then do in-betweens. Frequently I also used reference video, including what I had done in Maya, but more often self-reference. I used an app on my phone called Filmic Pro that allowed me to shoot at 24FPS, which matched my project. It was extremely handy to have right there in the studio for impromptu transition needs or adjustments. I would usually place the phone on a plug that jutted out of the wall, back up, and record myself:



*Figure 45: Shooting impromptu reference*





*Figure 46: Closing the wardrobe reference. In hindsight, it was hasty and resulted in "twinning" in this case, which is undesirable*



*Figure 47: Wardrobe Reference continued*



Figure 48: Reference for the CU shot of her hand right at the beginning of the film

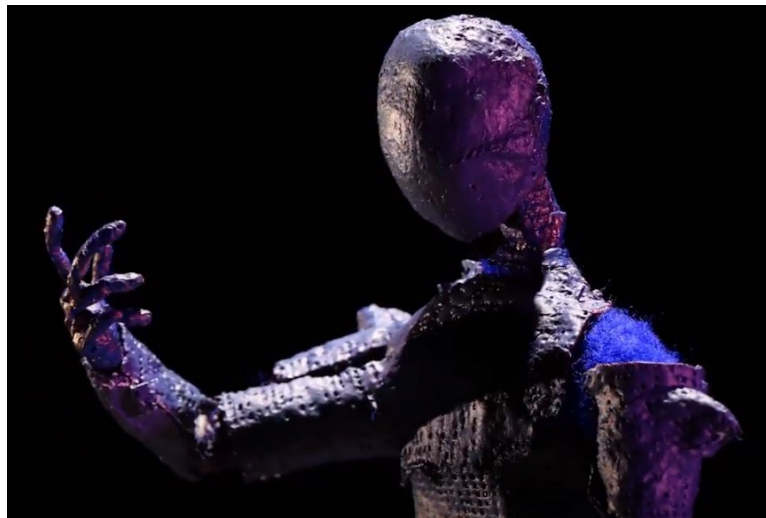


Figure 49: Final shot compared to above reference film

I often used this as a frame-by-frame guide to time things out *just right*. It is not really the same as rotoscoping because as far as I can tell, that is impossible in stop-motion unless you have a puppet whose dimensions *exactly* match the figure in the video. Instead I would trim a section down to a few seconds and play it off to the side over and over again, frame by frame,

noting, when needed, how many frames a subtle action actually took. A final consideration was for moves I couldn't do on my own, such as the aerial flip before the mirror. As with any such move, I found a collection of various takes on an aerial and used them as a guide to time out the sequence as well as the distribution of weight, etc. Most of the reference footage was shot in my apartment, as shown below.



*Figure 50: Shooting more reference video in my apartment*



*Figure 51: Dancing*

As for the style of animation, I wanted to shoot at 24 frames per seconds, on ones. I wanted to try this because it is so difficult, and the results are so satisfying and have the potential to amaze. We are taught, and it is true, that believability trumps realism, but for this project I wanted a way to push the limits of what I could accomplish. I had professional ambitions for pushing myself here as well: Shooting on ones is what they do at Laika, a major stop-motion studio. I wanted to work there some day, so why not try it? For ballet, it seemed more appropriate anyway, and in the end, while not perfect, it was indeed quite satisfying.

It also took much longer than I thought it would. What I've experienced is, the better you get at stop-motion, the faster you get... *but then...* the better you get after that, the slower you get. I will probably get faster again, but in this case I had to slow down to achieve the look I wanted, and I thought I could animate much, much faster than I actually could, based on past films I made at RIT. But if you look at the quality of those animations compared to what I achieved here, you can see a huge difference. In short, my standards rose, and I had to slow down. For example, there is a slow ballet-walk right before the wardrobe appears. I did a similar walk in my first year at RIT that took about two hours. This one took about ten hours if I remember correctly, and is much better.

While my film benefited from the cuts I made, one animation experiment I regret not being able to try was shooting the red and blue figures at different frame rates in the same scene. I was going to have the "Sharen" figure moving smoothly, moving for every 1 frame at 24 frames per second. In contrast, the "Male Aspect" figure would move only every, say, six frames, at least to start, eventually moving on 4s, then 2s, then matching her on 1s. This contrast and all its symbolic implications would have been really effective, as the Sharen figure would "teach" the blue man to move in sync with her as their dance progressed.

Also of note is the rig shown below, a Quantumcat Winder. This animation tool helped immeasurably. In the shot below, I modified the winder so that in addition to moving in its two obvious directional axes, the figure could also spin around in mid-air. I attached armature pieces to make a kind of “arm” that rotated around a ball and socket joint.



*Figure 52: Flip with Winder*





*Figure 53: Wool Wads Animation with rigs, shot one*



*Figure 54: Mirror moment, pre-masking*

The final part of the film, from the mirror-moment onward, was all animated in about two days. I knew a COVID-related lockdown was on its way, so I did whatever I could to come up with a finished film. This meant animating incredibly fast with no time for making reference videos. Everything had to change. I basically relied on my instinct, as shaped by my professors at RIT. I was also grateful in those hours that I had participated in the School of Film and Animation's 24-hour animation contest, "Anijam," which gave me the confidence to *know* that I could tell a complete story in whatever time I had. It may not be how I wanted it to go, but I imagine one could say that about any production, and I am more interested in how I adapted to the new reality than how it might have hindered me.

It was oddly exhilarating to be free of the animatic and approved shots, to instead just turn off any inhibitions and *go*. My tactic was to get as many frames taken as possible, knowing that I could use frame-blending in After Effects to stretch out and retime these moments if it was really necessary. It was a kind of safety net that had the unexpected and arguably appropriate effect of lending the mirror-moment a kind of dreamlike quality. As for animating this sequence, both figures were animated at the same time, mirroring each other. Below is the moment where the blue figure "attacks" the main character. This was not the original plan, which would have involved a reattachment of the individual armor plates, weighing her down, but this was the most efficient way of portraying this part given the new circumstances, and was a convenient throwback to the wool clouds shown at the start of the film:



*Figure 55: Out of the mirror*

### Cinematography, Editing, and Lighting

Every shot and transition had intention behind it, which was a great leap forward for me, who had not given enough consideration to cinematography in previous films. This was also the first film where I had consistent access to a great number of quality lights, so it was a joy to learn about how to use them effectively. Here are several shots and transitions I found interesting and why I shot them that way:



*Figure 56: Alone in a spotlight*

Besides darkness, this image is the very first thing the viewer sees. The camera is far away, and a spotlight slams right down from overhead. She is just waking up on the stage, in complete isolation. Are the shadows oppressive and threatening to push in, or is her light piercing the darkness? She is small and alone, but knows this is her show. I wanted the lights to “look” like theater lights as much as possible. Achieving a spotlight effect with powerful lights on a small stage was difficult, done with many diffusion discs and carefully “sculpted” Cinefoil (which is basically thick, black tinfoil you can use to mask lights).



*Figure 57: Dissolve into the foot moving*

This is extremely subtle, but to me it is important. I deliberately made this dissolve very slow so that just for a second, you see the main character as above. It is right before the big performance, there is no stopping what has to be done. She is nervous and resigned. Given how tiny she appears while superimposed on the now-close-up floor, this is the absolutely smallest you ever see her in the film.



*Figure 58: Transition into Shoulder Roll*

This is after the foot warm-up as the shot dissolves away to reveal the torso: Her shoulders droop then do a warm-up roll. Difficult to get across in still images here, but this transition is meant to show, just for a fleeting moment, her own feet standing on her own shoulders, weighing her down. Then, as the image of her feet fade away, her shoulders drop.



*Figure 59: Before Changing Direction*

In the two shots prior to what is shown in Figure 59 above, she is always moving toward screen-left. Then in this moment, she actually takes a look at what she is doing, and begins moving from screen left to screen right. This change in direction, which happens several times, is supposed to reflect her mood and whether she is going “in the right direction” or not. In other words, just as in reading and in most video games, we are trained to think of “left to right” as “correct” and I played with that in the choreography and cinematography. It is not a “rule” in this film, but it is almost always indicative of what is to come and what is going on inside the character’s mind.

The shots above and below are also good examples of the rim-light, which, at Tom’s suggestion, I covered with a purple gel, of course mixing the two main colors shown in the film.



*Figure 60: To the edge*

The shot above (figure 60) is where the character first acknowledges the edge of the stage. Prior to this she had been feeling good, dancing openly and with moderate enthusiasm, from screen-left to screen-right. Here, she is stopped short, and almost loses her balance, perhaps at the thought of leaving the bedroom, coming “to the edge” of her private space. Like the previous image (figure 59), this is a break in her action that leads to a “decision” to change direction again.





*Figure 61: CU*

Immediately after the previous shot, we have this close-up. It is the first time you get a *really* good look at the “chatter” or “boiling” of the felt from frame to frame. This whole puppet’s body has come to life, but she is fixated on the static face-plate, which causes her to spiral toward screen-left in a series of turns:



*Figure 62: Turns*

I framed the shot this way to show her again as being small, and also to show only just a sliver of the floor, as if there isn't much of anything to stand on. I thought it looked, appropriately, kind of like a balance beam. In this section is a quick cut to her feet crossing mid-step, hopefully to highlight the frenetic action of the spinning as her feet try to find solid ground.



*Figure 63: Turning, Camera cranes down*

This next sequence is difficult to show in stills, but it involves several switch-backs between which direction she is going. In the image above, she is turning screen-right as the camera cranes down slowly in a close-up of her body. The way this is framed is meant to indicate a kind of confidence. We see her whole body, slowly, and it is strong and still, like a column in the center of the frame. She is again starting to feel “right” in her body, and has made a decision. That decision, though the audience doesn’t know it, is about putting her final “masculine” plate away into the wardrobe. It is supposed to be an uneasy thing though, as the shot dissolves and shows her walking to the left.



*Figure 64: Wardrobe, high angle*



*Figure 65: The wardrobe door*

In figure 65, she has taken off her final piece of ‘male armor,’ and the way “left” is blocked. It is not just yet a joyful moment, because once this decision/realization is made, she is afraid there is no going back, which is why the door of the wardrobe creates a sort of “visual wall” closing that path off. The next series of shots involve an attempted low-angle (to make her

look more powerful), but I could only get the camera so low and keep all of her action in frame. So she dances toward screen-right, the music changes to hopeful, and all is well. Then, in a burst of excited energy, she runs right to the edge again. This time, she is confident, perhaps overly-so. After all, more than half the screen is darkness:



*Figure 66: To the edge again*



*Figure 67: Dipping into the darkness*

It is here that the music resumes its melancholy nature, and the action again switches to moving left. The audience might wonder what that is all about. After all, she is still dancing happily, in contrast to the music. It is supposed to be a kind of subtle foreshadowing that the protagonist was perhaps not as successful as she thought she was in ridding herself of the blue plates. There is still *something* that she is not addressing.



*Figure 68: Admiring her work, loving herself, but facing the “wrong” direction*

Her ecstatic leaps come to an end and she faces herself in the mirror, to see the fruits of her labor.





*Figure 69: Mirror moment*

For this shot I attempted a canted-angle, as something truly bizarre is happening. I wanted to be closer in, but I also needed to show the floor-line to help establish this angle. I probably could have pushed this more.



*Figure 70: The Lights are Gone*

In Figure 70, we see that the lights have returned to what they were at the beginning of the film. The difference is that this time, light went away instead of piercing the darkness (as it did when it “flipped on” in the first shot). So now the darkness feels oppressive, the angle is high which makes the protagonist look small, and the purple rim-light is helping define the edge of the mirror. There are also a string of LED lights along the back of the mirror to illuminate the blue man. First, that figure is seen in a kind of darkness, then the LED lights slowly come up as the figure comes to life, supposed to be indicative of the protagonist fixating on the reflection, and the reflection having a life of its own.



*Figure 71: Back to Blue*



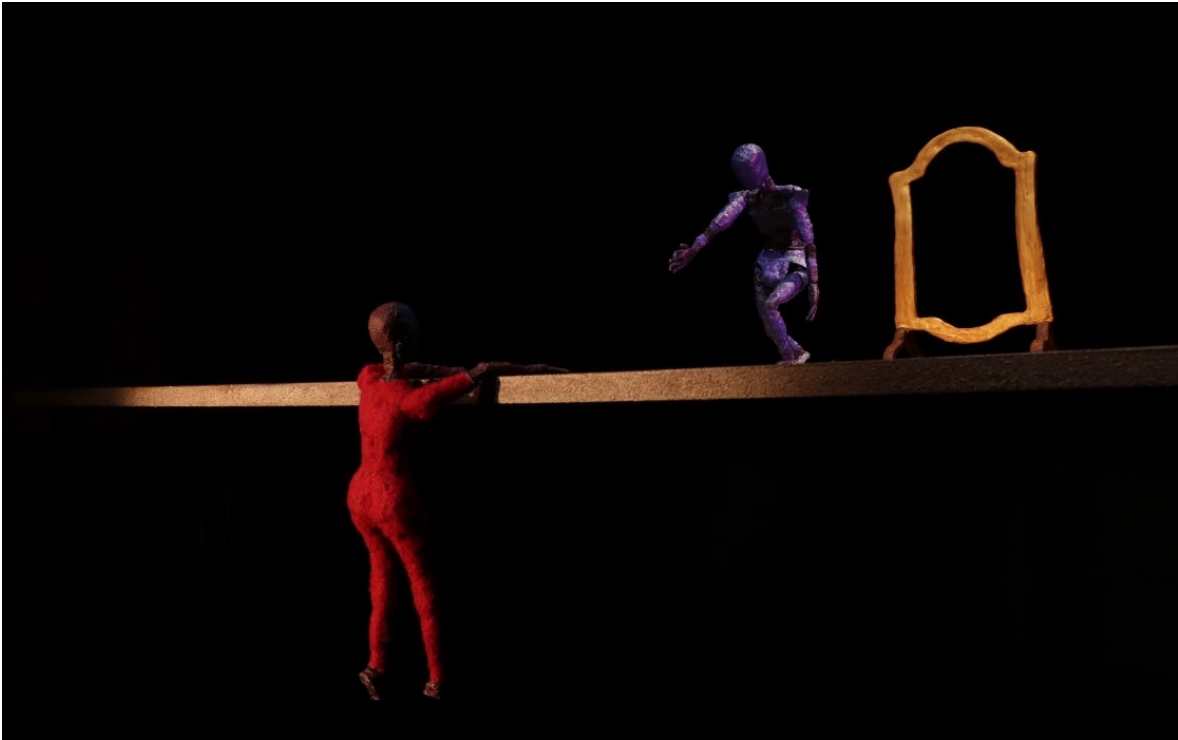
*Figure 72: Back to Blue #2*

In figures 71 and 72 above, she is again travelling to the left, but shot fast and hard this time, to the point of literally hanging off the edge of the stage.



*Figure 73: Blue at his strongest*

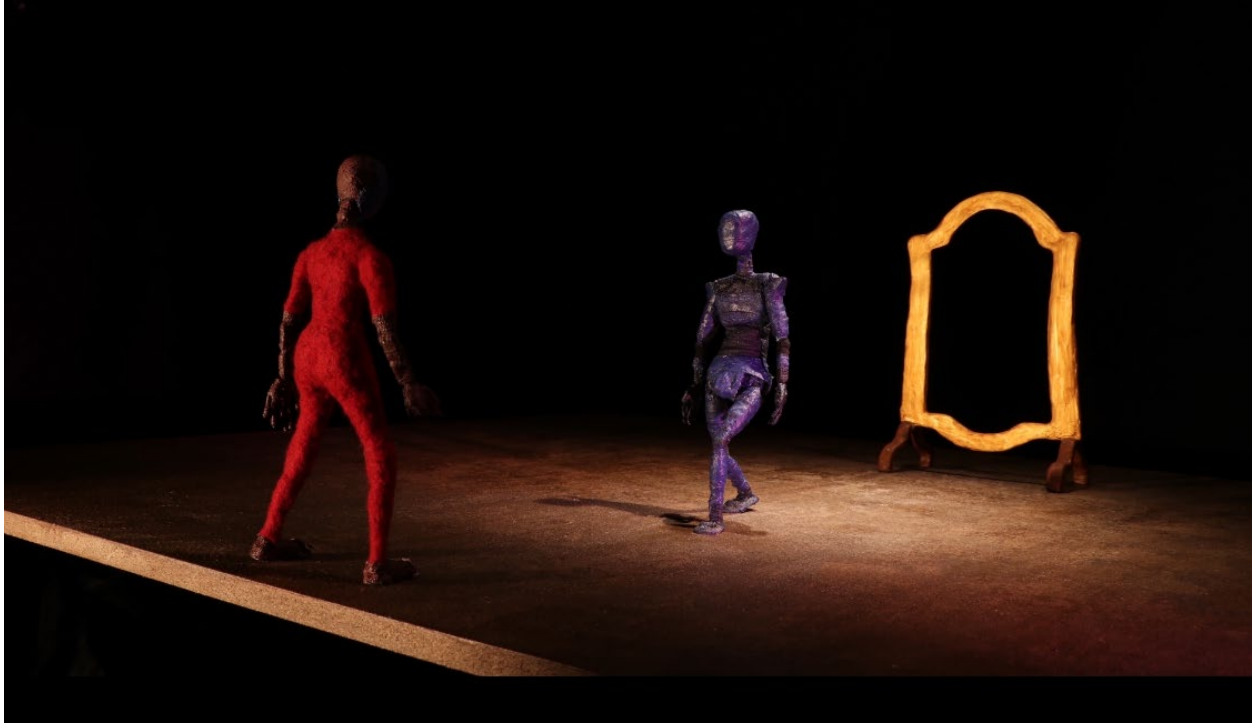
This low-angle shot is supposed to make the blue man look powerful, almost like he is standing “on” the protagonist. We “see” below the stage for the first time, and allow it to act as a dividing line between a firm floor and the abyss.



*Figure 74: Blue has the power*



*Figure 75: Red rises*



*Figure 76: Red has the power*

Due to my new timeline, I had to find a way to get across this sort of “status exchange” as quickly as possible. Therefore, the three images above (Figures 74-76) show an exchange of control, literally by who is higher in the frame. By the end of this sequence, the protagonist has rejected the abyss and takes control over the scene.



*Figure 77: Looking Right*



*Figure 78: Looking Left*



Figures 77 and 78 (above) are my favorite shots in the whole film. As you will see in the next image, they are in fact standing directly in front of one another. But in those two images, they are facing not only the “nothing” of the void, but the very edge of the frame itself. How much distance is between them in that moment? And when the shot changes to Figure 78, they have switched sides, as if talking past each other. Have they hit a wall or blown through it?



*Figure 79: Face to face*



Figure 80: Alone with the Self

The final two images shown above are the end of the film. They are center stage, just as the film began, but they are occupying this space together now. Then, the floor fades away. Why? Because there is no more need for performance in this moment. No performative expression, no imagined audience, no *stage*. The blue aspect is no longer armor plates invading her essence, but a now-separated and whole aspect of her past life that she can come to understand and really *look* at. Something she can meet and acknowledge, to join with or to let go. Yet as the stage vanishes, they stand firmly, eye-to-eye, not floating in some void, but existing in each other's presence: A true meeting of the self.

### Postproduction: Rig Removal, Effects, & Sound

I exported the image sequences, removed the rigs frame-by-frame in Photoshop, and strung them all together in After Effects. I used masks, multiple layers, and color-replacement

effects to fill in places where the blue plates could not cover the red puppet. I painted out the blue man when he was outside the frame of the mirror in the same way I removed rigs.

I used sound effects from Soundsnap and music licensed from Soundstripe. I cut, edited, and mixed all the sound together. I did not choreograph to the music, more with a certain kind of music in mind. I made the music fit to the movement once I found the right songs and mixed them appropriately. I wanted a plain, recognizable piano piece to start the film, something you might hear in a ballet class. Then it is interrupted by the harsh buzzing of the lights turning all the way on, in a startling kind of wakeup call. The main piece of music is appropriately bittersweet, and the music briefly heard in the protagonist's "euphoric" state in the middle of the film is appropriately hopeful.

I added some effects and titles in After Effects, like a smokey mist to sort of mimic the cloud of wool at the beginning. I used the plugin Twixtor to retime and extend moments for automated frame-blending, particularly in the last half of the film. It was my original intention to have everything more "authentically stop-motion," i.e. right out of the camera (except for rig-removal), but I had to adapt to the situation and this is how I chose to do it. For light-dimming effects in the final shot, I took a series of shots with different lighting and essentially just cross-dissolved them one over another until we got to where the stage faded away completely leaving just the figures.

### Technical issues, troubleshooting results

I will briefly discuss my technical issues in chronological order, from what I remember. First, the stage was almost too deep! I drilled a hole and found I simply could not reach it to place the tie-down in the right spot and get it to grip into the threads of the foot. After many

months of pre-production, this caused a moment of near-panic, but hyperextending my arm to a point of real pain and weighing down the puppet with a hand-drill did the trick finally, and I was careful not to place my puppet too close to center-stage after that.

The second *major* issue was that the thin foot-plates of the armature became stripped extremely quickly. I am not sure if this is due to the quality of the plates or the fact that I tied down too tightly for extreme poses, but it was a nightmare until I figured out a way to fix it. It is seen, for example, on the chaîné turns (this is the shot right before the first leaps): For most of that sequence, the puppet is literally balancing on itself, barely tied down at all, sort of leaning on the threaded rod rather than secured to the table. The plates were too delicate for re-threading tools, so what I did was found matching nuts, peeled open the toes for each frame, sandwiched the plate between the nut and the tie-down, then covered it back up and repainted. Things were much smoother from there.

The lights burned out mid-shot a few times, but it was nothing detrimental. There is only one shot, at the wardrobe, where it is noticeable, but it is brief. I was able to take photos of the exact light placement and arrangement of color correction gels and diffusion plates before removing a light to have the bulb replaced.



Figure 81: Light

COVID is the obvious “technical” issue, which bears some consideration in my process. It halted production at the most critical time of animation, which had the unexpected effect of leaving my film at an interesting and exciting place that forced me to come up with creative solutions to finish the film. As it stands, I was able to push it to a place that satisfies the requirements of technical completion, though I had, of course, hoped for more. That said, whether it is really finished to my personal satisfaction or not, and whether it in its current state even merits the lengthy reflection given in this paper, one of my main goals in creating this film was simply to practice a very particular kind of stop-motion animation, which I have done, and I am well pleased with what I learned.

Though the animation suffers in the final minute, the shots themselves and how they are framed greatly interest me, born of the frenzied necessity of the moment. It was exciting to *have* to answer the question, “how can I say more with less? How can I do it *today*?”

One after-the-fact solution that simply did not pan out was attempting to recreate the scene in my apartment, and later, a garage studio. The lighting was too drastically different, I had no space nor ability to recreate the “void” background, and there was simply no way forward. What I did instead is what is described above, barreling toward the end in just a few days and using Twixtor to retime things when absolutely necessary.

Another technical issue that arose taught me a lot about planning. There were two shots I can think of where I was too close in, and had not taken the time to properly block. The result is that the figure started to leave the frame by the end of the action. Seeing this come at you over many hours, frame by frame, but knowing it is too late to restart the shot, is surreal, like staring down a train in super slow motion. It made for a fun challenge and I was grateful that I had a geared tripod head so that I could pan left or right and follow the figure as she traveled.

Other than the above, no major or unexpected technical issues come to mind. Generally, I was well prepared with multiple external drives to backup my image sequences, was always ready with a backup plan in mind, and always had a solution (or training and adaptability) ready for when something would go wrong.

#### IV. Evaluation

I am grateful for the excellent guidance received from Tom Gasek, my thesis Chair, and from John Vincent and Pete Murphey, my thesis Committee members. Tom was particularly excellent at keeping me on track and helping me to make adjustments when it became apparent that I was being too ambitious. Tom graciously met with me every single week to evaluate my status, and it helped immensely. We reviewed my progress in great detail, acted out possible moves, examined and explored various solutions to various problems on a weekly basis. We were able to keep the heart of the story intact while trimming away everything that was

unnecessary. These weekly evaluations were among the best education I received at RIT. Tom also helped me by teaching me a lot about lighting, evaluating my setup and helping me to make appropriate choices. John gave me great feedback regarding fabrication and cinematography, and Pete helped greatly in shaping important story beats, especially at the midpoint evaluation in December. These guys had my back every step of the way and I'll never forget it.

By the end of the Spring 2020 semester, I got my film to a state that satisfied the committee and was given the option of either screening then or taking a free semester in the Fall to keep working. I had at that point realized that recreating my set outside of the studio would be beyond my means, but I took the offer to delay screening anyway, because there was nothing to lose, and remaining a student longer has its financial advantages. Besides, you never know what will change in that time. For instance, it was in that extra time that I added the title, added the bursts of colored mist, fixed the timing of the last several shots, and added Sharen's quote at the end.

I am genuinely proud of much of the animation in the first half of the film, though it is difficult to watch without noticing every little jitter, every bit of poor tracking, every instance of twinning, every pose that should have been pushed further, held longer, just every little thing. But as far as I'm concerned, being able to take objective note of such things is a sign I was taught well. I am also proud of how far I have come in terms of cinematography. In each film I made in my time here, for better or for worse, my focus was less about making a great film and more about making sure I was learning as much as I could about one particular aspect or another about animation or filmmaking itself. Maybe that sounds like a copout, but to my mind it was more fruitful, and I genuinely believe the greater measure for evaluating a student film is not how it is received, but what the student learned in the process. And I am well pleased with what I



learned. I came to RIT knowing basically nothing about animation or filmmaking, and I wouldn't take back a single day of any class.

### Audience Reaction

Screening took place in December 2020 as part of a YouTube livestreaming setup, as in-person was impossible because of the pandemic. A concurrent Zoom session broadcast on the livestream after each film so that thesis and capstone students could give artist statements then receive questions and feedback. This allowed the broader audience to listen in on the conversation. Overall I think this actually worked much better than having the talkback in the dark theater. It felt more earnest and intimate, and allowed those providing feedback to take their time.

I was quite surprised to receive basically unanimously positive feedback. There are three sources below: The written YouTube livestream comments, the written Zoom comments, and of course the live Zoom discussion. I will present them in that order:

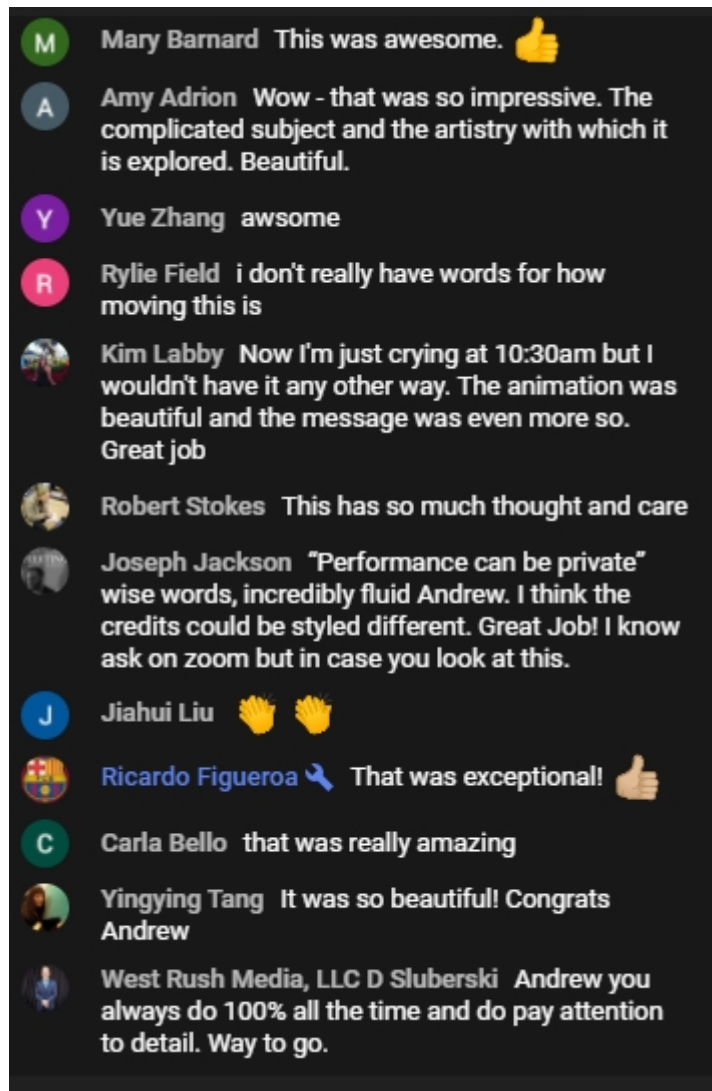


Figure 82: YouTube Live Comments

From Peter Murphey to Everyone: 10:41 AM  
Very insightful and powerful statement, Andrew!

From Tom Gasek to Everyone: 10:41 AM  
It's been very special to have you in our program  
and it's great to have you as a friend.

From Jack Beck to Everyone: 10:42 AM  
Excellent work, very fluid. Love the mirror  
sequences.

From Munjal Yagnik to Everyone: 10:43 AM  
Congratulations Andrew! Very impressive work!

From Flip Phillips to Everyone: 10:45 AM  
Beautiful job. Stop motion dance is really really  
tough and yours was nice a graceful

From Peter Murphey to Everyone: 10:46 AM  
Submit to festivals!!!!!!

From Nathan Sawyer to Everyone: 10:46 AM  
Beautiful film. Animation was stellar.

From Christine Banna to Everyone: 10:48 AM  
Definitely submit to festivals!!

*Figure 83: Zoom Comments*

This all means so very much to me. I had not planned on submitting the film to festivals, but after seeing how well it was received here, I am revisiting that decision.

On the Zoom video conference, I heard from a number of professors in a rich discussion about various elements of the film and generally about my time at RIT as a student. It is naturally harder to document in this paper than the written comments, so rather than transcribe these discussions in full, I will simply document their main comments and reflect on them as a whole.

To be perfectly frank, they were extremely complimentary, thoughtfully so, and it is difficult to summarize in my own words, when the words about my work were so very kind. So I will try to be brief, but honest, and directly quote the main parts of their comments just as they are, and summarize where I can so it doesn't get too long.

John Vincent:

“I just think it’s spectacular . . . The progression in what you’ve created here is absolutely amazing. Your animation is some of the best of any of the students I’ve seen. I think you have a bright future. So I’m very proud.”

Brian Larson:

“Congratulations. First of all, this is a beautiful film, I think you’re aware of that. I always appreciate well-crafted animation. You’ve got subtlety in there, subtlety of movement, it builds . . . So that alone is magnificent.”

Brian went on to note the “beautiful edits” and raised some great questions about the camera work in the latter half of the film (post-mirror), giving me some excellent insight as to how to use the “voice” of the camera in a different way once the narrative shift happens. Basically, “the narrative had a shift but the camera didn’t.” Really interesting point! We also shared a brief discussion about my choice to have elements of the bedroom pop in and out, instead of having the bedroom elements more permanent or obvious.

Kevin Bauer:

“Congratulations. The film itself was so well done. The way that you’ve animated since your first year . . . it’s just been amazing to watch how much little detail you’re able to get, just in that first shot, with the toes kind of tapping, just that little extra motion is just so impressive to see. So really well done as far as thinking about how the entire body moves and not just certain elements of it. It’s

so fluid, it's so smooth. Doing a dance film can be really tough, especially in stop-motion, and you really nailed it and pulled it off. So congratulations on that. Your artist statement was so well spoken and so well said that . . . It was just an awesome experience to go through that.”

Vanessa Sweet:

“First of all, congratulations, Andrew. This is a beautiful film. I can tell the love and absolutely the craft that you've put into it. I really enjoyed the void, and I was waiting to hear your thoughts on it, because seeing her start to fall over into the precipice of that void... It kind of, to me, mimicked the mental state, and knowing that that's exactly what you were thinking, I thought that it was very well done. And I hope, and I know, that you will be submitting this out into the world, and I can't wait to see it and see how it does in festivals.”

Christine Banna:

“Beautiful piece. Really, really touching. Many try and do dance sequences in animation, and I want to say that your stop-motion work is immaculate. The dance has beautiful weight, beautiful fluidity, beautiful follow-through . . . Your lighting in the void was really stunning. I have a couple tiny nitpicks. There was a moment where she almost falls off the edge of the void, and the music kind of pauses. But I think that's a moment that could be leaned into a little bit more, because it felt almost like the music just left its loop and a new song came in, and I think there's maybe an opportunity there to lean into that moment and make it

maybe more precarious, almost like she might fall over the edge. And then, you have some really beautiful extreme closeups throughout-- I think a little bit of a missed opportunity is when she's at the mirror. I was kind of craving a little bit of a closer-in shot of her, maybe really close in over the shoulder, showing that reflection, because it was such a provocative shot, and I do understand why you kept it in the long for a lot of it.. But really, really beautiful, touching work. Really nice work.”<sup>16</sup>

I really appreciated Christine's thoughtful feedback, in part because it is something that I can still implement! It is worth experimenting with anyway, and I agree that I could have held that moment a little longer.

There was some more back and forth on the Zoom conference, thank-yous, private messages of congratulations, that sort of thing, but this sums it all up neatly. I was, and am, genuinely (and very, very happily) surprised at how well it was received. I was so focused on what the latter half of the film “should” have been that I did not think the film as a whole would be strong enough to get through to people. But I wanted to see how the film stood on its own, so I made no mention of my rush to the finish line, how I shot the last couple minutes rapidly before lockdown. And Brian's comments made clear to me that the animation and everything in the first half is apparently strong enough to justify the latter. Come to think of it, his critique regarding the second half didn't even mention the animation or the narrative itself, just some things I could explore differently with the camera work.

Before screening, Dan LaTourette asked me if I was excited for everyone to see it. I told him, and it was true, that I had “spent too much time with it to know if it's any good.” I still have

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<sup>16</sup> This and all the above quotes from: RIT FVASA, “RIT SOFA Fall 2020 Screenings Block 5.” December 4, 2020. <https://youtu.be/0giM8jLdD5o>

difficulty watching it without noticing every little mistake, but I will do as I have done since I got here and try to trust my professors. If they think it's worth putting out there, well, what have I got to lose?

Prior to all of this, I showed the film to Sharen. In a text message, she had this to say:

“It is awesome. Andrew, your film is beautiful. It’s an elegant articulation of what it is like living with dysphoria. Thank you for sharing it. It is amazing. It is more than that. The ending really hits home.”

## V. Conclusion

How we present to the world begins with how we present to ourselves. Most of us, in that single moment upon waking, are not immediately assaulted with doubts about our own identity. We can barely begin to imagine what it is like to spend a life uncomfortable in our own skin, being misgendered, having to learn and unlearn a lifetime of habits, acknowledge internalized prejudice, or confront fears about who we really are. Working on this project has broadened my understanding and awareness of trans existence. I cannot speak in broad terms or claim to know what a trans person is going through—certainly I do not—but I can at least start to imagine, and have learned so much as Sharen and I grew closer throughout the creation of this project.

When I started work on this film, my focus was too broad. I wanted to portray a “day in the life,” but I was missing something critical. There is *so much* in a single moment, *so much* to something too many of us take for granted every single day: simply waking up and meeting oneself. So that is what ended up becoming central to the theme, and is at the heart of this project.



To that end, performance itself is what we do every day, even for ourselves. It is how we navigate the world and how we tell our own story to ourselves. That is all this film is: Someone just learning how to tell that story, and having the courage to tell it right.

Looking back at my assignments and films I made at RIT, I am able to appreciate how much I have grown as an animator and filmmaker while making this project. I can, for example, compare the animation in my second-year film to what I accomplished here, and can say dispassionately and objectively that I have improved immensely. That is precisely what I came here for. I can confidently go forth after graduating knowing every step of the process. Most importantly, I know not only where I need to improve, but how to accomplish doing so. What makes SOFA's program so great is that it doesn't just teach you hard skills, it teaches you how to keep teaching yourself. I have learned from the areas where I failed, and am encouraged by the ways in which I succeeded. I succeeded where I needed to.

I am satisfied that I was able to practice dance-in-animation in such a way as to explore private, performative expression as healthy and necessary. I met my goal of making something meaningful for my sister—the film of course, but more so my broadened understanding of her perspective. And I certainly met the challenge to myself of creating something serious in tone which did not rely on dialogue and humor. Those were my stated goals, and I have met them. I hope to carry the lessons I learned here to future projects. Onto the next!

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Tom Gasek, my thesis Chair. His generous mentorship throughout my time at RIT will shape the animator I will become, and his friendship has been a true gift. I read his book and started working on my application the next day and haven't looked back. Well worth it.

Thank you to John Vincent and Pete Murphey, my thesis Committee members. Genuinely good dudes, they have been trusted advisors to me these three years, masters of their craft, generous with their knowledge, and open with their friendships.

Thank you to Lara Ippolito, my wife and assistant fabricator, and by the way benefactor, without whom I would not have been able to attend RIT. Thank you to Dan LaTourette, my unofficial committee member whose schedule happened to work out with mine so he was by my side through much of the entire process. Thank you to Laiken Hall, Kate Quesada, and Charvonne Tsang, who helped me move my giant stage into the space. Thank you Bill Landers, Kevin Lamark, and Brandi Patten of the Cage, for their kindness and helpfulness in facilitating the space, especially Kevin who, on multiple occasions, went out of his way to make sure my needs were met. Thank you to every single professor I had at RIT. I made it a thoughtful intention to go through every class I took and tried to make sure I applied what I learned in this project.

And finally, thank you to Sharen, who was so generous in sharing her story with me.

## Appendix

This appendix includes the Artist Statement I delivered after my film screened, the title and the credits as they appear in the film, and my initial thesis proposal.

### Artist Statement

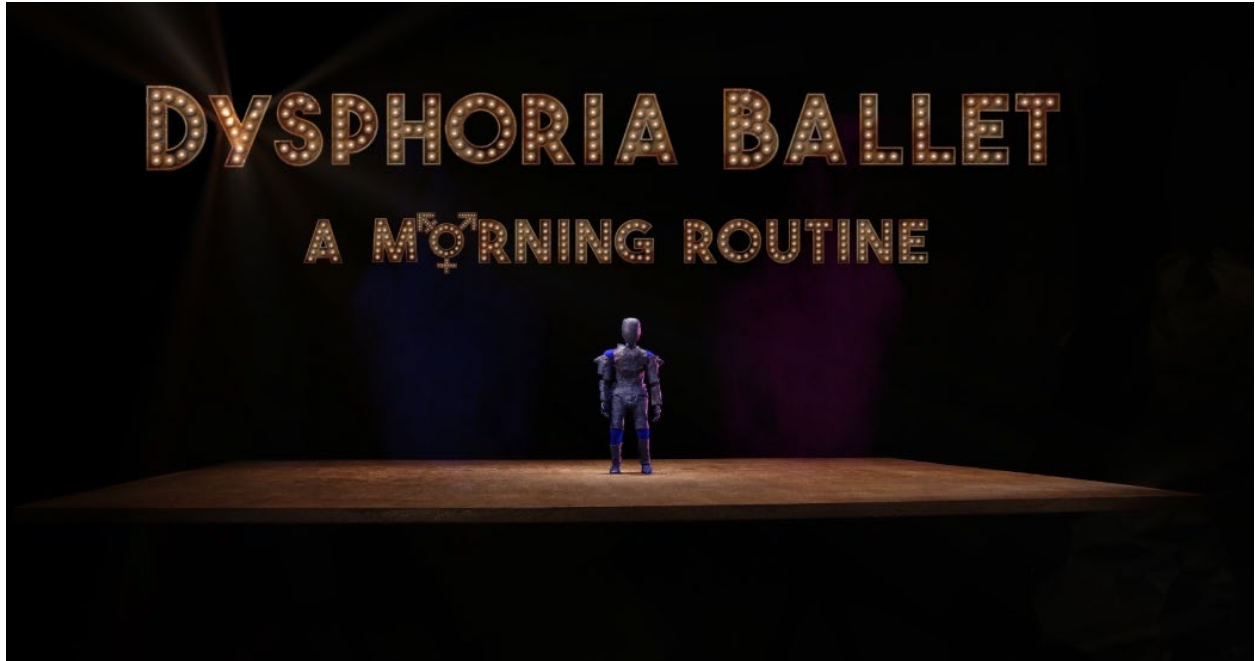
I wanted to make a dance film, and I wanted my sister to be involved. We've been performing together our whole lives, and to my mind, this was no different. When she came out to me as trans, I was happy she trusted me and felt safe enough to talk about it. So we talked about it, and, with her enthusiastic participation and support, a year later I ended up proposing this film, which is basically a deconstruction of a series of interviews I had with her.

I focused on how she described encountering herself and shedding compulsory male armor, how it's so easy to let go of in one moment and impossible to escape the next. Driving all of it is exploring this idea of performative expression—a phrase which usually carries a lot of baggage—instead seen here as something positive, private, and essential. In talking to her I learned about a tension between accusations of but ironically also *expectations* of the often transphobic idea of so-called “performative femininity.” So when you examine that tension and dig a little deeper about what's behind that kind of anxiety, you realize that we need to reevaluate hang-ups about performative expression in general. Is performance artificial? We do it all the time, every day: It's how we tell ourselves to each other. It can guide one's own personal narrative, it can be helpful—I think necessary—and performance can be private, how we tell ourselves to ourselves. So Sharen, regarding this tension—she says so what—as you learn who you are, you show who you are. That's all performance is. And that's all this film is. And when one is vulnerable, exposed and self-conscious, the bedroom itself becomes a bare stage.

That's part of why I chose stop-motion, which so easily lends itself to this kind of Brechtian-lite alienation and awareness of the material, forcing the viewer to acknowledge artifices, but also admit it is undeniably alive and authentic.

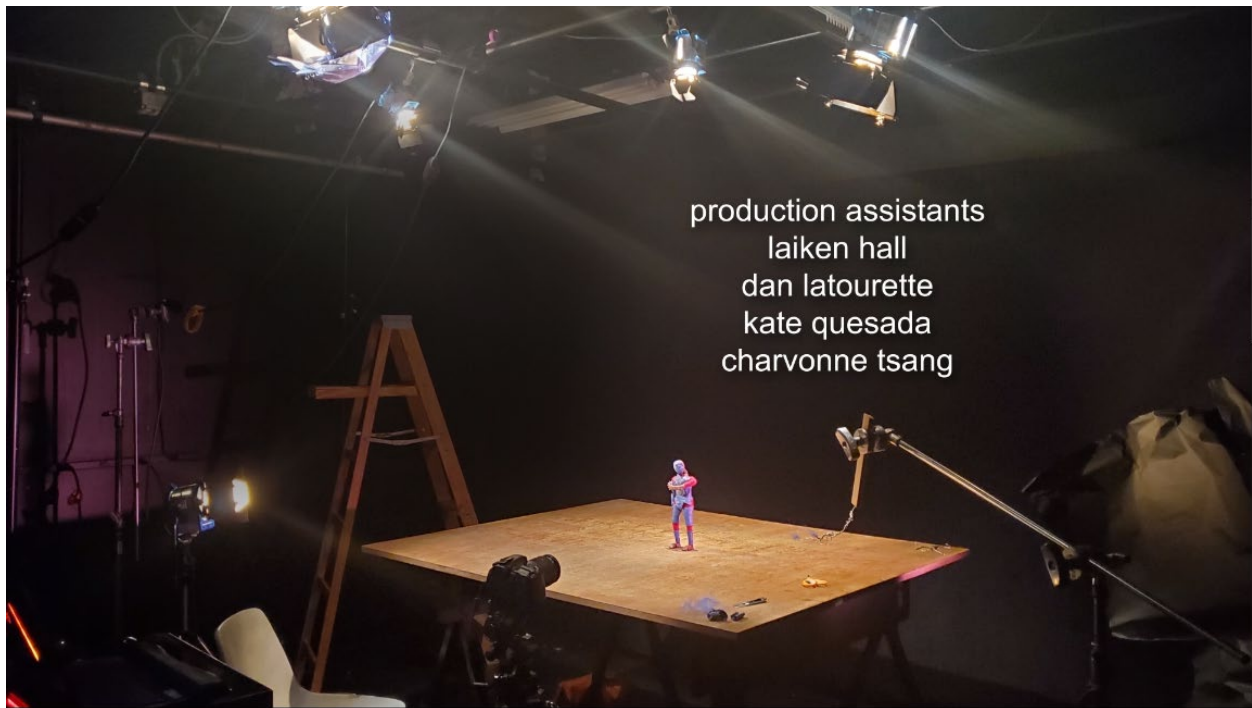
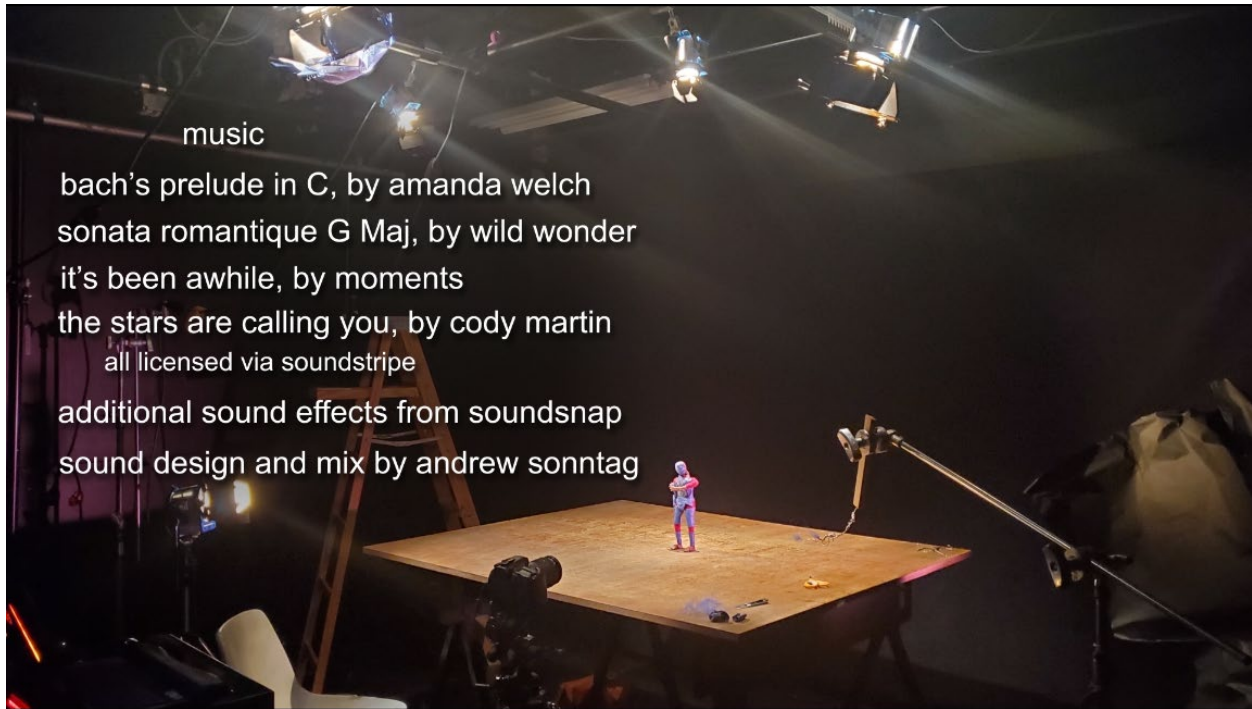
I also took this as an opportunity to try something new, as I'm much more comfortable doing comedic work. But this time around, I got to focus solely on body movement, with basically no set or dialogue or jokes to hide behind, which forced me to grow as an animator, and it also freed me up to experiment with other elements like lighting and cinematography, to which I had given less consideration in past films.

Finally, thank you. If you've had me in class, you know I do my research—RIT wasn't just my first choice, it was my only choice, it was the right choice, and I wouldn't take back a single day of any class. I made a concerted effort to use something from each and every course I took in this film. So thank you, each one of you. Thank you Sharen, since I was a kid you've been my hero and greatest advocate, this turn is for you. And thank you to my committee, Pete and John, for your guidance throughout this process but also for the last few years, you guys are super double cool. And thanks to my chair. Tom, you've gone above and beyond for me since day one. Thank you.



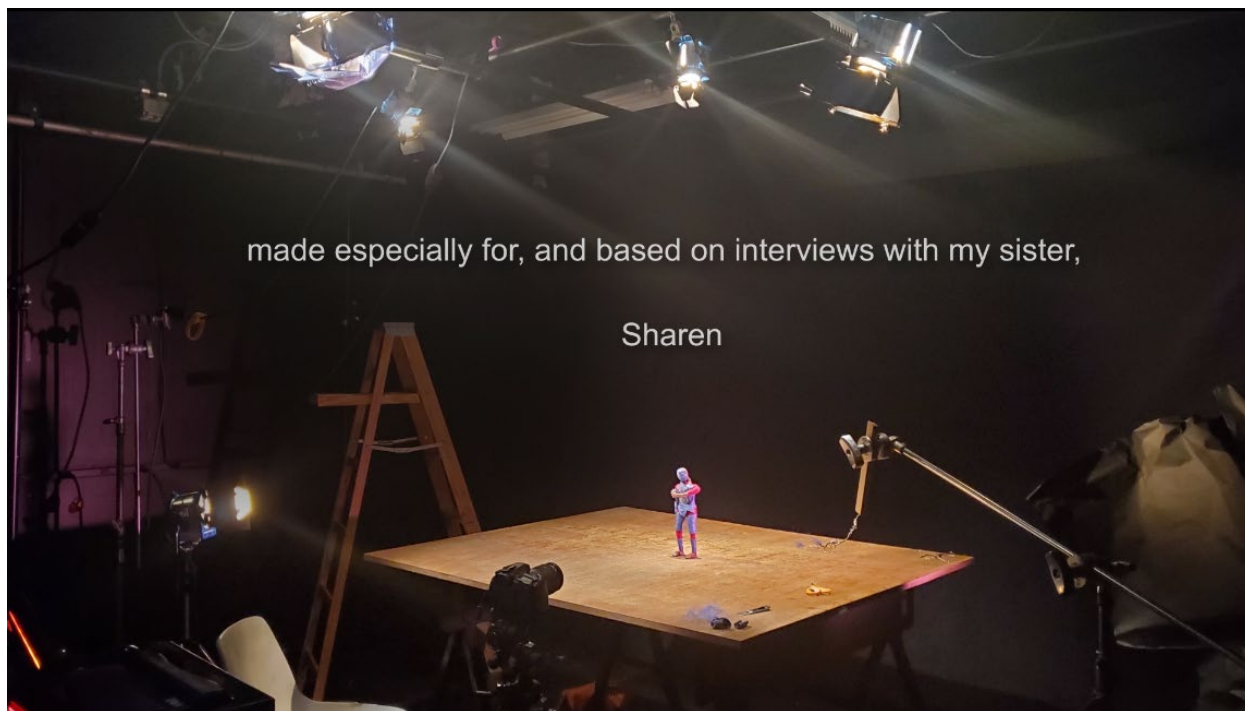
*Figure 84: Title as it appears in film*











made especially for, and based on interviews with my sister,

Sharen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the MFA degree in the  
School of Film and Animation  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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# Dry

A film by Andrew Sonntag

Thesis Proposal  
MFA Film and Animation  
School of Film and Animation  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY

Approved for submission by:

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Tom Gasek, Thesis Chair

Date

## I. Premise

Our greatest oppression comes from within, an internalized image of authority and terror that pins us under our fears and unseen illnesses. By exposing ourselves *to* ourselves, we are able to take a step toward the freedom this oppressor has made us afraid of.

## II. Logline

A woman walks across a desert toward an oasis, only to be confronted by a terrible, tempting monster.

## III. Synopsis

A woman—a stop-motion puppet—stands alone in a desert. She sees an oasis in the distance. On her journey toward it, she is confronted by a disembodied, gloved human hand. The Hand, through kind gestures (blocking her from the sun, cradling her so she can rest, etc.), lures the woman into a false sense of security before dragging her underground. Realizing she is in trouble, the woman tries many tactics in trying to negotiate getting past The Hand. The Hand eventually exposes the woman to herself by pulling a mirror out of the ground. She sees nothing but her own armature/skeleton in the mirror as The Hand gloats, thinking it has won. The woman rips open part of her puppet body to reveal the armature inside, realizes what is at stake, and accepts it. Bit by bit she gathers the Hand into herself and holds it inside. She closes her eyes, and when she opens them she is back in the desert, closer to her destination. Eyes narrowed, she takes another step toward the oasis.

## IV. Treatment

The sun beats down on a sandy, rocky desert. Sand blows in a rough, hot wind. A woman, whose puppet body exterior has the appearance of being made of paper, stands alone in the desert, unprepared, dressed for a walk to work rather than a dangerous journey. In a daze she looks around,

wandering this way and that, before her eyes come to rest on a beautiful oasis in the distance. She tears off a piece of herself and “origamis” it into binoculars for a better look. Between her and the oasis is an expansive desert wilderness. She tosses the binoculars aside as they burn into sand/ash. The burnt pieces skitter away ahead of her. She tears off a piece of herself to fashion a scarf to block the wind and sand. The music is otherworldly, droning.

The woman begins walking in the direction of the oasis. She tears off a part of herself to create a rope. Using the rope, she climbs over rocks and slides down dunes. She leaves it behind as it burns away in the hot sun. The burnt pieces again seem to skitter away, as if they are gathering somewhere. Throughout her journey we see her from odd angles, as if from the POV of something watching her out of little caves and crevices. The woman climbs up to a plateau. She gets stuck, tears off a piece of herself to make a pick, and works her way to the top. She reaches a rocky clearing. Like a recluse spider, a

disembodied, gloved human hand forms out of scraps of paper and skitters and crawls out of a cave, startling the woman.

The woman hesitates. She has nowhere to hide. She moves the left and then to the right trying to get around the Hand, but it mirrors her movements and blocks the way. The woman points to the oasis. The Hand makes a “no, no, no” gesture. It points to her legs. The woman stretches and indicates, in agreement, that her legs are indeed sore, and torn. The Hand picks up a rock and spins it, metamorphosing it into a chair. It invites the woman to sit in the chair. She sits with relief. The Hand pats her head. The woman blocks the sun with her hand. She gets up to leave, dragging the chair toward shade. The Hand puts her back in the chair and then uses its body to block out the sun. The woman starts to nod off, but jerks awake, shaking off her grogginess. She sees the oasis in the distance, nods to herself, and starts to stand up.

The Hand moves away quickly, catching the woman’s eye. It playfully invites her to a game of hide and seek. It leads her in circles. The woman looks toward the oasis, as if trying to remember where she was going. Her eyes dart back and forth and she looks at The Hand with suspicion. She starts to walk away, and the Hand appears, making a wall of itself, like the “stop” signal from a crossing guard.

The woman pushes against the hand, but is unable to move it, her feet sliding backward. The Hand flicks her away and she tumbles backwards. The Hand “walks” on two fingers over to her. She rolls out of the way, gets up, and runs.

The woman runs, still in the direction of the oasis, toward the other side of the plateau. From the POV of the Hand we see part of the chase, as the woman stumbles over rocks and plants while looking back over her shoulder. The woman makes it to the other side of the plateau but realizes too late that she is at the edge. She slips over the edge and begins to fall.

Mid-fall, the Hand snaps its fingers and appears in front of her. The camera has pulled out and we see the woman is dangling from a stop-motion rig. She flails and scrambles, trying to remove herself from it. She is finally successful but falls into the waiting palm of the Hand.

The Hand cradles the woman, rocking her back and forth. She finally gives in, no longer panicking, and curls up. The Hand rises into the air. The woman sees the oasis. She hits the hand and points toward it. But then the Hand abruptly drops straight down, crashing through the ground, bringing the woman to an underground cave. On the way down, the camera passes the edge of the

animation stage and we see it exposed. The Hand places the woman on the ground and gently pats her head. The Hand's lair is grotesque, with strange rocks and dead trees. Stranger still is the appearance of hand drills, a box of spilled screws, and piles of sawdust.

The woman looks up to the hole in the cave ceiling that was created when they crashed through. Confused and afraid, she pleads with The Hand. The Hand puts on a show, little magic tricks and making some music, trying to entertain the woman. She rolls her eyes. It grabs a rock and metamorphoses it into a bed, inviting her to lay down. The woman counters by tearing off a scrap of herself, spinning it into the shape of a hand that points upward (ala Trnka's "The Hand"). She likewise points upwards. The Hand gestures "no," and instead turns her creation into a pillow for the bed. The Hand then makes some other trappings of a comfortable home: A television set, a lamp, etc. The Hand then lays seductively on the bed, beckoning.

After a moment of indecision, the woman rejects these "gifts" and decides to fight back. She turns her back on the Hand, who crawls toward her with curiosity. She tears off a piece of herself and fashions a long handle that she uses to pierce a rock in front of her, completing a crude hammer. She spins around while raising the weapon overhead and smashes the Hand. On impact, the weapon breaks.

The Hand is stunned, but quickly shakes it off. It pulls back, and as it does so, sheds its white glove to

reveal a black one. It forms a fist, slamming down on the woman, just missing as she runs. It tries repeatedly: Between each hit, it sheds its glove (white, then black, and so on, ala Trnka's "The Hand"). The music rises in intensity. The woman runs, diving and rolling out of the way as the Hand continues its assault.

The woman looks up toward the hole in the ceiling of the cave. We see that the passage is like an inverted funnel, narrowing at the top. The woman tears off a piece of herself and quickly shreds it into a number of spikes that she plants on the bottom of her feet. She runs along the side of the cave wall, gaining momentum and height. The Hand flies up in pursuit. Finally she kicks off the wall, lands on the Hand, and jumps off it, flying straight up toward the surface. At the peak of her jump, she appears to be swimming upward. She swims up toward rays of light while the Hand slowly reaches for her. It grabs her by the legs. She desperately reaches up, but finally goes limp. The Hand drags her down and puts her on the ground, making a "stay" gesture. It grabs a dying tree in the cave and spins/transforms it into a screwdriver. The Hand screws the woman in place through the top of her foot. It holds the end of the screwdriver under her chin, then throws it aside.

The Hand reaches into the ground, rubble and rocks giving way easily. It drags up a standing mirror in front of the woman. It gestures for her to take a look. She looks and sees her skeleton in the reflection, an armature. She waves and tests the reflection as it mirrors her every move. She panics, trying to move her feet but she is locked down. The Hand gloats—sound and gesture indicating a kind of laughter. It starts to build what could be a coffin around the standing woman.

The woman looks at herself in the mirror, then down at her body. Slowly, she tears open her puppet body, revealing the armature beneath. It is painful. She indicates some kind of understanding of what is at stake. With this final torn piece, she folds and transforms it into something that only she sees in her hands, which glows, and she smiles faintly. Then she closes her eyes, and the Hand wraps its fingers around her. She pulls the Hand into herself. Darkness. The sound of memories and music, voices, building in intensity, a cacophony. When she opens her eyes, she is back in the desert, alone, in sudden silence, and quite a bit closer to the oasis but not quite there. We start to hear the water from

the oasis bubbling. She retains her tears and scars. She reorients herself, tucks the object she created into her exposed armature, and after a moment, narrows her eyes and steps forward with determination. As she goes, we see the shadow of a hand following her, we hear it skittering. Perhaps she hears it too, and it is always with her, but she walks.

## V. Rationale

As this is inspired in part by Jiri Trnka's stop-motion masterpiece "The Hand," I will address that first.

In this piece, part of my aim is to 'subvert' Trnka's subversive film, turning it inside out. The goal is to adopt and adapt his metaphor to dig deeper for a modern audience whose needs are different. I do this in the following ways:

- "The Hand" is about oppression from without. My film is about oppression from within.
- "The Hand" is set in a familiar place, the protagonist's home. My film is set in an alien place, far from home.
- "The Hand" is too explicit in its imagery and meaning (images of dictators, statue of liberty, the scales of justice, etc.). My film will be *informed* by specificity, but with symbolic instead of literal representation.
- The hero in "The Hand" is destroyed by the oppressor and dies. The hero in my film is destroyed by the oppressor's influence and her own actions, but endures.

Though intentionally open for interpretation, this film is about addiction, namely alcoholism. It is inspired by own experience working with alcoholics and addicts, and by my experience with family members suffering from the disease. More specifically, it is about a part of recovery that is not often addressed directly in media: crossing the desert between being merely dry and being truly sober. It is about those first few weeks of withdrawal when a person in recovery experiences a conflicting sense of unreality and hyperawareness (hence the alien landscape and exposing the armature). Whatever one's inner-oppression is, the proverbial desert between the choice to get better and the first concrete action in recovering from a hopeless state of mind and body is universal.

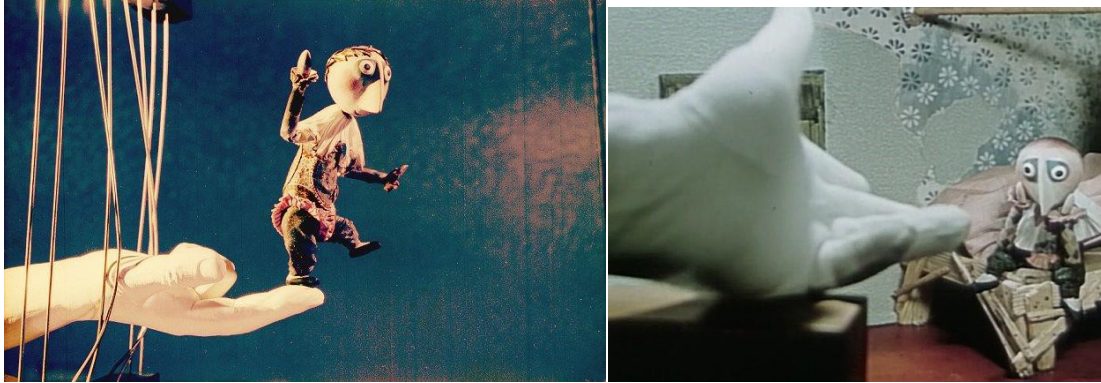
When this period is shown in media, it is almost universally perverted by clichés and misrepresentation. The sufferer is shown as irrational, erratic, and unstable. To the contrary, I believe that during this time is when a person is in fact most capable of heroism. They are truly alone, and that is when their agency is most remarkable—able, perhaps, to overcome the choiceless choice of compulsive behavior.

On the surface, it is a simple story: A woman is suffering in the desert from heat and thirst. In the distance, an oasis. In the middle of her journey, a monster tries to stop her. She negotiates several ways of escaping or destroying the monster, each failing until her epiphany: The "monster" is inside, part of her. Whatever power it has is by her own making. By accepting this, she stops fighting it, stops *feeding* it, and is able to continue her journey toward the oasis.

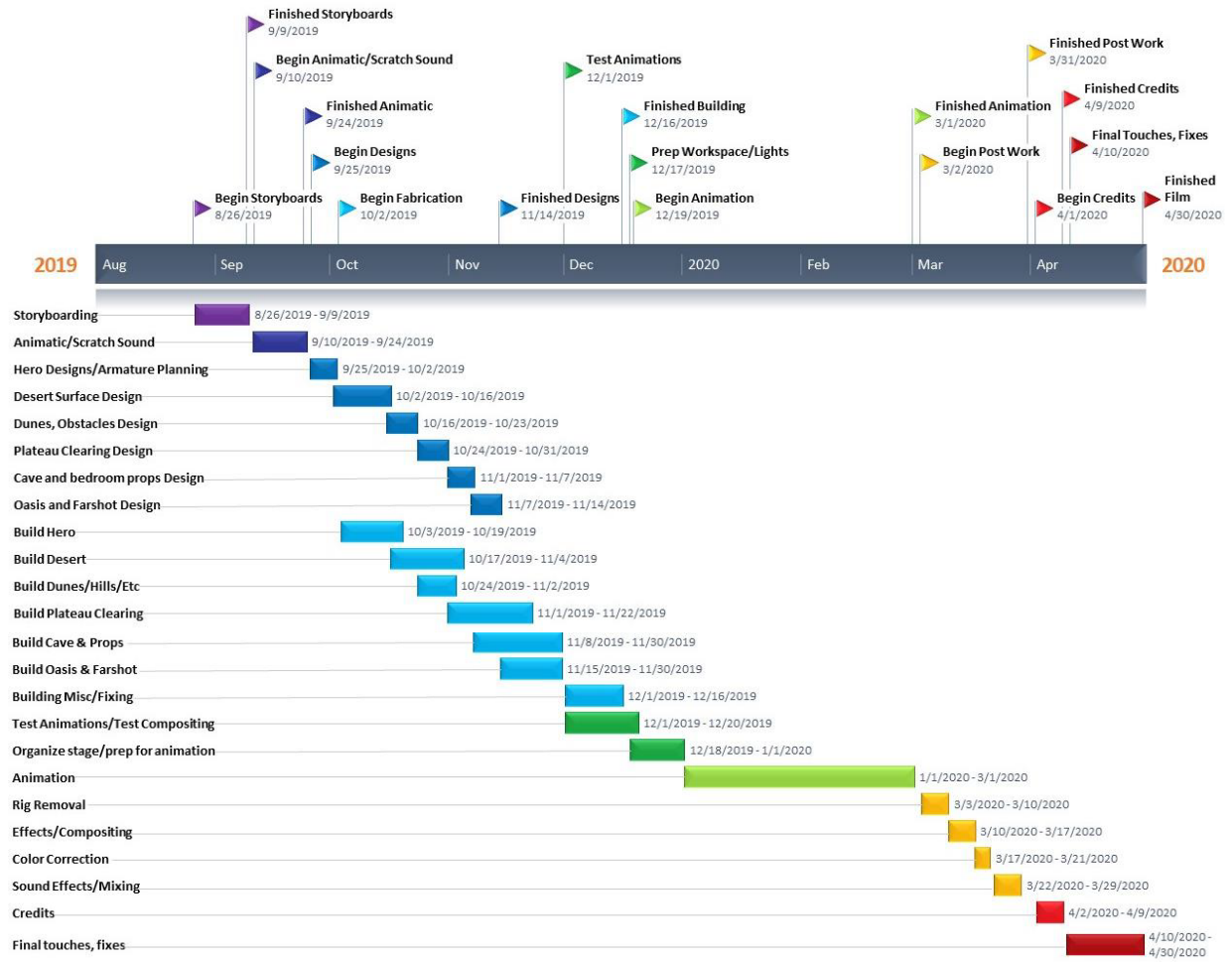


## VI. Reference

The following images are from Jiri Trnka's "The Hand."



## VII. Timeline



## VIII. Budget

Summary: Subtotal of about \$1359 with \$500 contingency, for a total of about \$1859.

<b>"Dry" Budget</b>						
<b>Andrew Sonntag MFA Thesis Stop Motion Animation Film</b>						
		Rate	Units	Amount	Notes	Subtotal
<b>Production Team</b>						
Director, Producer	Andrew Sonntag				in kind	
Assistant Everything	Lara Ippolito				in kind	\$ -
<b>Script</b>						
Writer	Andrew Sonntag				in kind	
<b>Art &amp; Animation</b>						
Production Design	Andrew Sonntag			\$ -	in kind	
Storyboard & Animatic	Andrew Sonntag			\$ -	in kind	
Animator	Andrew Sonntag			\$ -	in kind	
Fabricator	Andrew Sonntag			\$ -	in kind	
Assistant	Lara Ippolito			\$ -	in kind	
<b>Sound</b>						
Music	Soundstripe.com Sub			\$ 15.00	Monthly subscription, need only one month, everything fully licensed. This method was tested in Fall Film.	
Downloaded Effects	Soundsnap.com & Freesound.org			\$ -	in kind	
Recorded Effects	Andrew Sonntag			\$ -	in kind	
Post Editing & Mixing	FL Studio, Andrew Sonntag				in kind	
Zoom Recorder w/ Shotgun Mic Attachment				\$ -	in kind	
						\$ 15.00
<b>FABRICATION SUPPLIES</b>						
Super Sculpey		\$ 16.92	3	\$ 50.76		
1/8th inch wire		\$ 5.78	5	\$ 28.90		
1/16th inch wire		\$ 5.99	5	\$ 29.95		
Liquid Latex		\$ 11.99	2	\$ 23.98		
Cardboard		\$ -	15	\$ -	in kind	
Wood Burner/Foam Sculpting		\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Styrofoam		\$ -	15	\$ -	in kind	
Plastcine		\$ 5.99	10	\$ 59.90	mostly in kind but might need more, this is a very high estimate	
JB Weld		\$ 6.45	5	\$ 32.25		
Hammer		\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Air brush & paint		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Paint brushes		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Clear Museum Wax		\$ 10.00	1	\$ 10.00	Quakehold brand	
Drill		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Glue Gun		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Glue Sticks		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Construction Paper		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Sand		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Gloves		\$ 20.00	4	\$ 80.00		
Plaster		\$ 15.95	1	\$ 15.95		
Cinefoil		\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Apoxie Sculpt		\$ 22.95	3	\$ 68.85		
ProPoxy 20		\$ 10.42	5	\$ 52.10		
Paint		\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
						\$ 755.20
<b>Lights, Camera, Stage, Other</b>						
Lights				\$ -	in kind	
Gels				\$ -	in kind	
C-Stands				\$ -	in kind	
Rigs				\$ -	in kind	
Geared Tripod Head				\$ -	in kind	
Sandbags				\$ -	in kind	
Tripod w/ Geared Center Column				\$ -	in kind	
Laptop				\$ -	in kind	

Chicken wire	\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Winder	\$ 80.00	1	\$ 80.00	Quantumcat Winders	
Ball & Socket Armature	\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Fabric for clothes	\$ 50.00	1	\$ 50.00	Bundle from Goodwill	
Green/blue screen	\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Screws	\$ -	1	\$ -	1 box, in kind	
Sewing Machine & Thread	\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Square brass tubes	\$ 45.00	1	\$ 45.00	pack of multiple sizes	
Elmer's white glue	\$ 5.60	1	\$ 5.60		
Old newspapers	\$ -	20	\$ -	in kind	
Green build-up body foam	\$ 30.00	1	\$ 30.00		
Rubber cement	\$ -	1	\$ -	in kind	
Super glue	\$ 15.98	2	\$ 31.96	comes in packs of 4	
Wire cutters	\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Round needlenose pliers	\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Sculpting tools	\$ -		\$ -	in kind	
Homasote	\$ 25.00	2	\$ 50.00		
Lazy susan	\$ 10.00	1	\$ 10.00		
Dragonframe			\$ -	in kind	
Canon 80D			\$ -	in kind	
External Harddrive			\$ 64.99	Seagate	
Stage Supports			\$ -	in kind	
					\$ 64.99
<b>Postproduction</b>					
Adobe CC			\$ 240.00	Estimated 12 month subscription at student rate	
FL Studio			\$ -	in kind	
Effects			\$ -	in kind	
Lip Sync			\$ -	in kind	
Compositing			\$ -	in kind	
Final Sound Mix			\$ -	in kind	
2D elements			\$ -	in kind	
Color Correction			\$ -	in kind	
					\$ 240.00
<b>Festivals &amp; Online Distribution</b>					
Festivals, various			\$ 200.00		
Vimeo			\$ 84.00	"Plus" annual subscription	
					\$ 284.00
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>					\$ 1,359.19
<b>CONTINGENCY</b>					\$ 500.00
<b>TOTAL</b>					\$ 1,859.19

## Bibliography

*Balance*, directors Christoph Lauenstein and Wolfgang Lauenstein. Material-Verlag, 1989.

*The Hand*, directed by Jiří Trnka . Kratky Film Praha, 1965. <https://youtu.be/CTV1To1e5w8>

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[https://www.ted.com/talks/lee\\_mokobe\\_a\\_powerful\\_poem\\_about\\_what\\_it\\_feels\\_like\\_to\\_be\\_transgender/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/lee_mokobe_a_powerful_poem_about_what_it_feels_like_to_be_transgender/transcript?language=en)

*The Red Shoes*, directed and produced by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. 1948, United Kingdom. “Ballet Sequence” as viewed on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/ktv3-1JTspc>

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Various anonymous authors on various trans forums (subreddits), including but not limited to: r/GenderCynical r/lgbt, r/asktransgender, r/truscum, and r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnns. Reddit, accessed circa January 2019 to September 2020. [reddit.com/r/\[nameofsubreddit\]](https://reddit.com/r/[nameofsubreddit])